The Cadence of Part-time Poets
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/30652973.

Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

Relationships:
Sirius Black/Remus Lupin, James Potter/Lily Evans Potter

Characters:
Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, Lily Evans Potter, Mary Macdonald, Marlene McKinnon, Minerva McGonagall, Lyall Lupin, Severus Snape, Regulus Black, Dorcas Meadowes, Original Characters

Additional Tags:
Alternate Universe - Boarding School, Alternate Universe - Rock Band, Band Fic, Marauders Era (Harry Potter), Marauders, wolfstar, jily, POV Remus Lupin, Muggle AU, Recreational Drug Use, Bisexual Remus Lupin, Gay Sirius Black, Lesbian Marlene McKinnon, Hurt/Comfort, Angst with a Happy Ending, Alternate Universe - Muggle, Boarding School, Aromantic Mary Macdonald, Mental Health Issues, Coming of Age, Remus has undiagnosed BPD/Bipolar II Disorder, And experiences intrusive thoughts, But it does not take over the entire fic, Slow Burn, It's a slow burn. Slow fucking burn. Please take this to heart I mean it, But Remus is taller

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of The Cadence Opus

Collections:
fav wolfstar fics of all time, Marauder ff, best wolfstar, International

Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, Ongoing fic, wolfstar fics but like also any other fic that sounds mildly interesting, i am lonely and sad: a colection of fics that could cure my depression, do i wanna be them or do i wanna be with them? wolfstar edition, Reading, wolfstar and other marauders, wolfstar fics that are good soup (may include other ships), always crying about wolfstar, marauders <3, marauders favorites, All about those gay wizards from the 70s, dryadisque's absolute favourites, ficsreadin2022, wolfstar >>>, A Collection of my Favorite Fics, ForeverFavesThatMakeMeGoArgh, Fics I would read in Alexandria, these fics are better than literally anything in the universe, moony wormtail padfoot and prongs :), my marauders era tbr, Favwolfstar, To read when completed or when I have more mental stability Wolfstar and Jily edition, Finished Fics, Best Music Fics, maraudersfics, Harry Potter Fics!

Stats:

Published: 2021-04-13 Completed: 2023-02-24 Words: 979,792 Chapters: 108/108

The Cadence of Part-time Poets

by motswolo

Summary

“They’re… chaos,” Remus said firmly. “And chaos is—”
“Rock and roll.”
He looked at Sirius sharply, and for once, matched his grin.
“Yeah.”
“Maybe that’s my excuse then,” Sirius said. “I cause a bit of chaos now, and maybe one day, it’ll turn into rock and roll.”

After losing his mother at age eleven, Remus has spent the better part of the last four years bouncing from school to school or else running around London and pretending as though he wasn't the kind of well-bred boy his father brought him up to be. Now, with his chances all run out, Remus is sent to Hawkings Independent School as a last-ditch effort to clean up his act. There he meets the very people who will set up the rest of his life, and is forced to confront the pieces of himself he'd long thought had been lost.

(genuinely not apologising for the slow-burn in this fic anymore. You've been warned <3)

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: The Cadence of Part-time Poets [tradução] by r_moonpie
- Translation into suomi available: The Cadence of Part-time Poets (käännös) by tundrapersikka
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- Translation into Français available: The Cadence of Part-time Poets by peopleswatchers

Chapter 1: Tomny and His Boys

Chapter Summary

Please be mindful of any tags that might be triggering for you. All Content Warnings will come at the beginning of each chapter. I do not endorse JKR or her transphobic views and wholly support the entirety of the LGBT+ community. Please be kind to yourself and others.
C/W for this chapter: Mentions of drug-use, smoking, and 'f' slur, though used in a smoking context. There is also quite a bit of slang speech used in this first chapter (forgive my early writing), but that does not persist throughout the fic.

My username on tumblr and tiktok is also @motswolo. I'd love to chat about all things Marauders and Wolfstar <3

Final note: this fic is a life story, not a quick look in on one. Characters age, change, and learn new things about themselves and the world around them. They make mistakes, learn from them, and love so much that it hurts. Please keep this in mind while reading. I cannot wait to go on this journey with you.

Chapter Notes

We have a Cadence podfic now! Huge thanks to Lana @imsiriuslyreading for putting it together. All hail Lana x

Spotify Playlist for Year 11 here.
Playlist for Year 12 here .
Playlist for Year 13 here .
Playlist for Gap Year here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Magically bored,
On a quiet street corner;
Free frustration,
In our minds and our toes;

Quiet storm water,
M-m-my generation;
Uppers and downers,
Either way blood flows;

Inside outside, leave me alone,
Inside outside, nowhere is home;
Inside outside, where have I been?
Out of my brain on the five fifteen!

- "5.15" The Who, 1973

Monday 1st September 1975

The flat only had two bedrooms and certainly housed more than two bodies, but somehow Remus still woke up alone. It wasn't his room of course, but he felt more at home there than he had anywhere else in a long time.

Like most summer nights in the flat, he'd been sweating in his sleep and his t-shirt was plastered to his back, outlining a skinny frame and a boney spine in the mirror that leaned up against the closet doors. At some point during the summer a small crack had unceremoniously appeared in the corner of the mirror. No one had said anything about the crack, probably because there was nothing to be said; even if the mirror had bestowed a curse of seven years of bad luck upon one of them, it wouldn't matter. The boys would just split the bad luck between them until it was nothing more than a few rainy days, and those were common enough in London.

Remus blinked in the bright morning light that peeked through the broken blinds. He'd fallen asleep with one shoe on, apparently, and came to the conclusion that he'd lost the other somewhere in the flat as he collected his belt and remaining sock from the floor. Both the flat and the bed he'd woken up in belonged to Tomny, which should've been a cause for alarm, but really only meant that the older boy had most likely followed some bird elsewhere for sleep and other machinations. Probably Cheryl or Donna. Just because Tomny was always inviting people over didn't mean they had to stick around his place.

He found his other shoe tucked up under Doss' head in the flat's shabby living room. It was still early hours as far as the London East End boys were concerned, but Remus had other issues to contend with apart from the lateness of the morning and the nauseous feeling in his gut. Lyall was going to kill him, if Giles didn't beat him to the punch.

The only other person up with the larks was Seesaw, so named because he was blind in one eye. It was thanks to that, that he didn't

notice Remus until he'd stepped right in front of him in the kitchen.

"Mornin'," said Seesaw, as he nursed his cup of coffee-and-whisky.

"Mornin'," Remus mumbled, almost wishing he'd had time for a mugful himself. He and Seesaw had never been particularly close, but had lent each other a few quid or a spliff here and there and they'd always been good for it. "Tomny around?"

Seesaw shook his head. "Had summink to do early. Said he would be back soon to see yeh off though."

Remus ran his tongue across his teeth. His mouth tasted terrible. "He don't need to. He saw me off last night."

"Headin' out then?"

"Yeah, got sumwhere to be." *Should've been there last night, really.*

"Well," Seesaw said, raising his mug, "cheers."

"Cheers," Remus said, before shoving his hands in his trousers and walking out the front door of the dodgy little flat.

He didn't regret not saying goodbye—they'd said plenty of goodbyes the night before while hopped up on God knows what. Generally it was just a lot of messing around while they dared each other to do stupid things like dangle from the third floor balcony by their thumbs or play a round of chicken that involved setting an apple atop one's head and letting your mate throw a dart at it. Remus almost always got off easy thanks to Tomny, but even he wasn't immune to shotgunning a beer or getting pantsed. Sometimes it wasn't all that bad to be fifteen.

The closest phone to Tomny's flat was three streets away and more often than not had a bum sleeping inside. Laces still untied, Remus made the trek on his own as he always did, though he was lucky this morning; no bums. He put the change in the meter, trying not to wince when the dial tone made his already present headache throb even harder. Remus always carried enough shrapnel on him to make a call or two, and more than once he'd been jumped for the couple of quid. That had stopped happening since others had started to notice him hanging around Tomny. Going along with a group like his meant he didn't have to worry about anyone eyeing him up in the street like a bag of meat. That would change though—East End reputations were only maintained as long as people saw you out and about. By the time

he returned next June, he'd be bottom of the barrel again. Less, if Tomny didn't welcome him back.

Though, Remus couldn't imagine why he wouldn't.

Giles always picked up on the third ring, except this time the phone clicked and hovered over open air. He might've thought that the call had been dropped completely if he didn't hear the shallow breathing on the other end.

"Alright, where are you?"

"Mornin' to you too, Gil," Remus mumbled, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Come pick me up?"

"You've really gone and done it this time, lad."

"Yes, what time *is* it?"

"Just tell me where you are, little buggar."

"Meet me at the usual." Remus hung up the receiver and rubbed his face, letting out a shallow moan. It was bleeding hot in the booth and he still felt sick from the night before but a quick check of his pockets told him that he still had his cigarettes at least. He'd just lit one of the fags off his last match when a slam came from the booth's door behind him. Nearly dropping the cig, he spun around, ready to give whatever dickhead hell for picking a fight so early in the morning, but when he saw just who's ugly gob was staring back at him, his shoulders relaxed.

"Orright, Lu?" Tomny called, squinting at him through the scuffed glass.

Remus waved him back and pushed the door open, stepping out onto the street corner. "You're such a wanker."

Tomny grinned back at him, blue eyes squinted in the early sun. He reached out and plucked the cigarette from between Remus' lips and took a deep drag, even though he already had one of his own tucked behind his ear.

"Where's it ya think yer goin'?" Tomny said, speaking around the smoke.

Nibbling on his bottom lip, Remus looked down and pulled out

another cigarette. Before he could even check his empty matchbox Tomny produced his own metal zippo and clicked the flame to life, holding it out for him. Remus inhaled and let the smoke drift up between them before he spoke.

“You know where. I got to go home. Should’a been back already.”

Tomny nodded casually. “But yer not.”

“Only because I listened to you.”

“All the best stories start out like that anyway,” Tomny said, grinning. “Doesn’a mean you could jus’ up and leave without sayin' goodbye.”

Remus raised his eyebrows pointedly. “You weren’t at the flat when I woke up. And we already said goodbye yesterday.”

“Pish. Who was on the phone?”

“No one. Jus’ home. The usual.”

Tomny just eyed him. “Hm.”

Remus returned the look. *“Hm.”*

That earned him another smile, and after breathing a bit of smoke out of his nose, Tomny turned away and crossed the pavement to a low retaining wall. He turned and perched himself on the edge and after a moment of staring, Remus joined him.

“Awful hot today, innit?” Tomny said, squinting up at the August (now September, Remus realised) sky. A few dirty-blonde curls dropped across his eyes as he looked up, and he brushed them away before itching his nose.

“I don’t got no dosh on me,” Remus said.

Tomny looked back to him, smirking. “What’s that?”

“You always turn to the weather when you’re tweaking, ya nob.”

Tomny smirked, crinkling the corners of his eyes. “Gotten predictable, 'ave I?”

“Nah,” Remus waved, “s'jus' me.”

“That’s right,” Tomny said, pointing at him with his cigarette, “can’t

get nothin' past you. S'because you *see* things, Remus Lupin. You see people. Must be the height, I swear's you grew half a foot in the last month."

Unable to argue with that, Remus just took another drag of his cigarette, the familiar taste of the cheap tobacco burning his throat as he smiled to himself. He couldn't help being a tall, lanky git, and seeing people was easier than knowing them, but it wasn't hard to know Tomny Armstrong.

Born 'Thonas Daniel Armstrong', after his own mum misspelt 'Thomas' on his birth certificate whilst strung-out on oxy's, Tomny lived everyday like it was his best friend. Barely a man and already with a terrible candy habit himself—not that it ever seemed to slow him down—he made the East End his palace, and every one of the bums there, his subjects. He made trouble when it suited him, and good when it didn't, and he took care of his own.

"The boys were glad you came last night," Tomny said around his cigarette, flipping up the collar of his jacket to keep the sun off the back of his neck.

"Oh yeah?" Remus said, looking down at his lap as he swung his scuffed trainers against the wall until they bumped into the cement. "S'pose you were livid, then."

"My cheeky Lu," Tomny said wryly. " 'Course I was happy. This mornin' I practically ran out of Burrin's to see yeh off, little git. I was lucky to catch yeh as yeh snuck off."

Burrin was a patron—a boss Tomny considered closer than blood after all the years spent running around the East End for him before any of the boys had even known him. It had been Burrin who bought the flat in the first place, though it had been in Tomny's name for years now.

"I wasn't sneaking," Remus pointed out, " 'cause of you I missed my train. I'm likely to get skinned when I get home."

"Might help with your lip. But I s'pose that's the swot school's job. I know yer excited." He wiggled his eyebrows cheekily.

"I'm not!" Remus snapped. "And I'm not goin' 'cause I wanna. Dad jus' got this work-out. It's this or he'll really have me done up. After last time's run-in with the cops I thought he'd actually leave me on ice." And Lyall might have, if the thought of '*Minister's Son Lands Himself in the Bin*' or '*Lupin Serving Her Majesty's Pleasure*' plastered across the

front of *The Daily* didn't sound so unappealing.

"I don' blame yeh none, Lu," Tomny said, briefly slipping into the Scottish-brogue he'd used in his early youth, before his mother had brought him from Dunoon to London. Sometimes he switched between that and his usual East End slang just to pick up girls.

"Not jus' everyone gets a ticket out of this place, ya know?" Tomny continued. "I understand. Though I admit, it helps some to think of one of my own boys, heading to some poncy place." Tomny clapped Remus on the back and he nearly dropped his fag between his legs. "What'cha say the place's name was again?"

Remus' stomach clenched. "I didn't. Just some toff's school s'all."

"Well, I'm sure you'll like it soon 'nuff."

Doubt it. "Got nothin' in common with toffs."

"You speak like 'em."

"I do not!"

"You do!" Tomny laughed. "When you're tired, or drunk, or high, you always slip back into that gentry-posh. You might be able to fool the rest of the lads, but not me, Lupin ol' John. You've got good RP, bet yer mum's real proud."

"I should've never told you my middle name," Remus grumbled. "You sound ridiculous."

Tomny's eyes glittered. "You called Doss, 'pet' last night."

"I did *not!"*

"Did! You's were making fun of 'im but still. And then Cheryl got yeh to kiss 'er hand."

Remus groaned and covered his face, embarrassed. That was the trouble with alley juice, that real cheap sort of liquor. One second you were completely coherent, entirely in control of your actions, and the next you were plastered and face-first in someone's lap.

"It really was very charming," Tomny said, shouldering Remus lightly until he dropped his hands. "Cher wanted to give you a kiss in return, but then you threw up in the bin."

Remus grimaced. “Yeah, charming.”

Tomny turned his smile toward the other side of the street, past the dingy phone booth. The retaining wall where they were sitting faced west and left their backs open to the sun. People shambled past, heads down, collars up, withdrawn completely. It was bad business, making eye-contact with strangers on streets like these. Not that he had to worry much when he was with Tomny. While together, Remus could afford to be distracted by things like the way the summer sun lit Tomny’s dirty-blonde curls up a golden colour. His own hair didn’t do that—it was too much of a muted brown—and he stared as Tomny knocked his heels against the cement wall and began humming a tune out of the corner of his mouth. Remus recognised it immediately; “Hello, Goodbye”, by The Beatles.

He could’ve socked him.

They sat there for a good, long while, just side by side—Tomny humming, Remus sulking—each taking their time. Giles wouldn’t be at the regular spot for a while anyway. Like an average cabbie, he refused to go most places in the End out of fear that some chav might so much as breathe on his precious Rolls-Royce.

While they sat Tomny just kept humming, content to sit in peace against the background of the slum’s noise. That was the nice thing about Tomny: he never hurried. Never let others hurry either. Tomny was a ‘stop and smell *each and every* rose’ sort of guy, and if there weren’t any roses, Tomny would smell the rubbish on the street corner and tell you that it smelt of sunshine and bloody rainbows. If anyone had tried telling Remus a year ago that he’d still be running with the biggest walking-contradiction of an eighteen year-old possible, he’d have probably pressed a cigarette between their eyes for trying to take the piss. Back then Remus had thought that to be hard you had to be the worst one on the block, the biggest and meanest; but that wasn’t Tomny. Kind and ruthless, stony and soft all at once; Tomny wore his heart on his sleeve like a banner of pride. If he had any faults at all, it was the drugs and the way he got rattled both while on and off them. But Remus could hardly blame him for that.

Born on it, with a mum barely conscious for most of his childhood, there was little for boys like Tomny aside from the streets. After leaving school at ten he’d spent his childhood running for the other dogs of the End until he’d saved up enough favours to warrant his own tiny spot at the top, and he was never not generous. Tomny offered his past up like party favours; *one secret for you, a sob story for*

you—but if you pity me even a little I'll knock you one.

If Remus had been given his own choice of story-favour, he'd have asked how Tomny got that scar on his upper lip. The one that made him look like a Bond villain in low light rather than a greaser. A fight, he imagined, but with who—and was it just a split lip that had healed badly, or was there some slashing involved? What did it feel like to run his fingers over the little ridge there? Or to kiss a girl? Would she feel it? Would she find it mysterious and intriguing and spend as much time thinking about it as he—

"Got summink on my face, Lupin?"

Straightening up suddenly, Remus looked away and fumbled for his cigarette; but he'd let it burn down to nothing while daydreaming.

"Fuckin' waste," he grumbled, flicking the stub away and reaching for his pack. Tomny held out his hand, and Remus stuck another tab between two of his fingers without a second thought before tucking another one between his teeth.

"Here."

Tomny reached over with his own lighter and cupped his hand around Remus' cigarette. His own was already lit, and he puffed smoke out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on getting Remus' to come to life. They were close enough now that Remus could smell the sour scent of left-over liquor on his clothes. There was a mole too, he noticed, just below Tomny's right ear, on the edge of his hairline.

"C'mon, Lupin. Suck in!"

"Sorry!" Remus squeaked, inhaling deeply as the cigarette came alight. He pinched it with two fingers to get a good draw and Tomny leaned away, his zippo snapping shut with a satisfying click.

"You seem wound up, Lu," Tomny observed.

Remus blew out and shook his shoulders, trying to loosen them up as he watched a gent move down the street opposite to them, wearing a suit that had more patches than material. "Jus' thinking about having to leave."

"Don't think too hard. You'll get used to being gone soon 'nuff."

"Don't wanna get used to it," Remus muttered. He felt a knock to his

elbow, and turned to find Tomny staring at him with that familiar wry expression.

“You’ll do fine.”

“S'not about that.”

Shrugging, Tomny kicked his feet out in front of him before letting his heels knock back against the wall. “Well, if you really struggle, you’s could always find yerself a lady. Then you can whinge and whine to her about how unfair it all is.”

Remus snorted. “Tosser.”

Tomny leaned in very close and Remus felt something in his throat flutter. “I hear those private school girls are actually all closet freaks.”

“And just *who* did you hear that from?”

“I got my sources.”

“Hm.”

“All’s I’m saying is there must be a good part—what’s it they call it? A silver—”

“A ‘silver lining’.”

“Ha! You are posh.”

“Oh, shove off, wanker.”

Tomny chuckled and shook his curls, clutching the edge of the wall between his legs and leaning back to stare at the blue sky. “A ‘silver lining’,” he mused finally. “Sounds like a good thing, don’t it?”

Remus followed his gaze upwards. “Should, I s’pose.”

“Do me a favour, Lu? Don’t forget this.”

Remus’ eyes snapped back to Tomny, but the other boy was still looking up.

“This place,” he said, softly, “the scum and slime—the bums and bleeders. The smokes and the boys and the bends and the cracks. The weeds and dust and dinge and…” Tomny trailed off like he’d run out of words, but Remus understood.

“I won’t, Tom.”

Tomny’s soft expression broadened into a contented smile, then a grin. Finally he looked back down. “You're a good’un, Lupin.”

“Git.”

“Yeah, that’s me, Tomny the Git! And you're Lu, all knobby knees and lanky limbs and posh-talk. You’ll remember. You—”

“LU! TOM!”

Turning their heads at the same time, they spotted a small group of boys, waving as they made their way up the street. Tomny’s face sank back into an easy smile as he lifted a hand to his brow to squint in the mid-morning sun.

“Here’s some of the tossers now,” he said, before calling out to them. “Orright, boys?”

“Orright, Tom!” They called back in unison.

“That Flacky wit’chu?”

“ ‘Course!” Flacky called, waving his short arms as he and the other boys approached; Doss beside him in his bovver boots with Lee bringing up the rear, hands in his pockets.

“Thought your mum iced you for liftin' from Bailey’s shop again?” Tomny asked with a pleased smile.

Flacky grinned, showing a missing front tooth. He was only thirteen, younger than Remus, but he’d been running with Tomny for just as long. “She jus’ boxed my ears a bit,” he said. “I escaped out the window!”

“Good lad.”

“What you lot doing up so early?” Remus asked, nodding at Doss. “You were passed out on top of my shoe this mornin'. Wagered you were dead, actually.”

“Seesaw woke us,” Doss said. “And I’m not dead yet, wanker.”

Tomny pushed off the wall beside Remus and clapped his hands together. “Then you’ve arrived just in time, my friends,” their leader said, audaciously, “to wish our lil' John a tearful goodbye. 'Course

though, we won't be the ones cryin'."

Hand shooting up to the sky, Tomny whirled around and pointed directly at Remus. His eyes were happy, his expression cheeky. "Lads, sick 'im."

With grins like devils, both Lee and Doss ran forward, and before Remus could so much as turn back to the phone booth, they had him by the arms, hauling him off the wall to hold him between themselves.

"Let go, you nobs!" Remus shouted, but he was laughing because it was all good fun anyway, just Tomny's idea of a show.

"Our boy, Lupin 'ere, is leavin' us!" Tomny exclaimed. "He's being sent far, *far* from our kindly corners. Yes, awaitin' him is nothin' but green pastures, bleedin' narks, and—I'm sure—several fine poshy mares."

"Boo!" Flacky yelled.

"He would leave *us* for *them!* For the poncy, well-heeled, upmarket—"

"Careful Tom, or you'll run out of adjectives," Remus said pertly, still pinned between his two friends.

"He'll leave us for them's who knows what an 'adjective' is!" Tomny cried, stifling laughter.

Remus twisted the arm Lee was holding and flourished his cigarette. "S'not my choice! You know my dad—"

"Excuses," Tomny cut in. "It's nearly heresy."

"Treason!" Doss shouted in his ear.

"Sedition!" Lee added, which surprised Remus, who would've assumed that the boy had no idea what the word meant.

"It's an offence of the highest degree, leaving behind grimy ol' London to become some Fat Cat swot." Tomny popped his own cigarette into the corner of his mouth, smoke puffing out his nose like a dragon. Remus dropped his head, fighting the small smile on his lips.

"Then what," he asked, wrenching his body around in Lee and Doss' grip for good measure, "would you have me do? Give you a kiss goodbye?"

Tomny's smile widened. "No, nothin' so sweet. We're not here to impede your education, Lu. We're jus' gonna teach you a lil' lesson s'all. Doss, give him a taste of the ol' barley-sugar, eh?"

"Oh f—no!" Remus wailed, but Doss simply twisted his arm behind his back, nearly popping out his shoulder. A moment later and Lee was wringing his other arm out like a dishcloth, burning and pinching his skin while he cackled.

"Rest assured Lu, that this is only a small taste of the pain we feel knowing we're about to let you go forever," Tomny called, before finally stepping up and ushering both boys away, freeing Remus from his school-yard torture. He was tempted to point out that a single school year was hardly forever—and that was only as long as he didn't get himself tossed out like all the rest— but instead he just shoved both of his friends away for good measure and made to swat at the older boy. Tomny caught him by the wrist with a smug expression and gave it a slight squeeze. Held in place, Remus returned the smile and Tomny pulled him in for a sudden hug, patting his back and locking both arms around him with enough force that he was nearly lifted onto his toes. Over his shoulder, Remus got a good look at the other boys' faces, each one marred with dirt, freckles, or little white scars, but happy anyway.

It was going to be hell to be without them. He would miss these boys no matter where he was going and he was going toward a future nothing like the summer they'd shared, a realisation that made it all the worse.

"Orright," Tomny sighed, pulling away but keeping a strong hold on the back of Remus' neck. His fingers felt warm, and when Remus met his gaze, something in his stomach flipped. "You're gonna do good," he said, firmly. "You're gonna show those swots what a dirty London boy can do."

"You're smart, Lu," Doss called.

"Yeah, and if they're smarter, jus' set their homework on fire," Lee added, helpfully.

Tomny chuckled, squeezing the back of Remus' neck a bit. "That's not a bad idea." From his pocket, Tomny pulled out his zippo and held it up between their faces. "To remember," he said, before tucking it into the front of Remus' t-shirt. He patted the pocket a bit, right over his heart, before finally dropping his hand and stepping back to join the

other boys on the pavement, leaving the cracks in the cement to divide them.

“I’ll be back,” Remus said, feeling a lump rise in his throat. “They’ll probably have me out on my rear by Halloween.”

“That’d be a new record,” Tomny said, in that way that could’ve made anyone think he was holding all the cards, "but don’t rush it.”

Lee shrugged. “Or do.” Doss shouldered him for it.

“We’ll still be here,” Flacky added, as he reached up to pluck the cigarette from behind Tomny’s ear. He let him of course, and pat the top of the boy’s head fondly. When Tomny finally looked back to Remus, he gestured sharply with his head; *go on*, and winked.

It wouldn’t have mattered if Remus was late for his own funeral, he would take this moment to look his friends up and down and imprint their bittersweet smiles into his memory. When he’d run out of smiles, Remus slowly nodded his head and turned away. The walk to the next corner felt unbearably long, but he forced himself not to look back. A small voice said that if he did they might already be gone, and he couldn’t handle that, so he forced himself to keep going until he’d turned a corner. After a summer of running up and down the dirty city streets his trainers were barely more than a bit of rubber and the glue that held them together, but never had his feet felt so heavy.

Chapter End Notes

Hello friends! This is an idea I've been working on for a while and I'm so very excited to share it with you. The fic features a lot of OC's of mine, including Tomny, and when finished it will be quite long, though for now I am unsure how many chapters it will be. For now, please feel free to hit me up in the comments and enjoy Remus' journey from year 11 and beyond.

And of course, rock on.

Slang notes:
'Spliff' is slang for marijuana cigarette.
'Shrapnel' is slang for loose change.
'Swot' is slang for nerd/teacher’s pet.
'Dosh' is slang for money.
'Zippo' is another word for pocket lighter.
'RP' [received pronunciation]—the 'Queen's English', a “posh” British accent typically correlated with good education.

Chapter 2: A Man's Word

Chapter Summary

Remus returns home to the Lupin Estate.

Chapter Notes

CW for 'f' slur used in a smoking context. Other than that, it's mostly just a complicated father/son relationship.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In restless dreams I walked alone,
Narrow streets of cobblestone;
'Neath the halo of a street lamp,
I turned my collar to the cold and damp;
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light,
That split the night,
And touched the sound of silence...

- "The Sound of Silence" Simon & Garfunkel, 1964

It was customary that Remus meet Giles at the junction between Fenchurch and Leadenhall in Aldgate, the symbolic start of London's East End. Even if the old chauffeur had been less adverse to navigating the slums, Remus would've still insisted on the long walk to the boundary line. The further away the better, really, as long as he wanted to keep the conditions of his birth a secret from the rest of his friends, something he'd somehow miraculously managed to do for the better part of three years. Remus might've bragged of the feat, had he had anyone to brag to, but that was part of the game; keep both lives separate so no toes would be crushed apart from his own.

By the time he was finally approaching the historic Aldgate Pump, Giles was already parked on the curb, drumming his fingers along the '67 Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow's steering wheel. Remus had just lit his third cigarette of the morning, and feeling it a waste to throw it away, he paused to grind out its tip on the bottom of his shoe and tuck it back in the carton.

"Have I not waited on your sorry arse long enough?"

When he glanced up, Remus found Giles standing on the road, dressed up in the same black suit he always wore, though the buttons had been looking more strained around the middle in recent years.

“Sorry, Gil,” Remus said casually. Apologising was easier than explaining just why he’d been dragging his heels all the way from the end of the End.

Sighing heavily, Giles came around the car’s boot and opened the door for him. “You smoke any more of those a day and you’ll pop your clogs early.”

Remus shrugged indifferently and ducked into the back seat as the door fell shut behind him. The driver returned to his seat in front, turning the engine over and pulling away from the curb.

“Where is it you reckon you’re going to be able to get those once you’re away at school?” Giles asked, looking at him in the rearview mirror. He liked to nag about the cigarettes and the alcohol, but Remus never paid much attention. You’d have to be completely frigid to run with lads like Tomny and resist those kinds of highs.

“You worry too much, *Mum*,” Remus drawled, staring out the window as the car pulled past a trolley full of early-morning Londoners. Beyond that, a milk float wheeled past, off on its morning deliveries. It had taken some time, but he now had a decent stockpile of Embassy cigarettes, his personal favourite among middle-class tobacco for weeks. Players No. 6 were good too, but secretly Remus disliked how common they were among other teens.

The stockpile might’ve been enough for someone else, but—as Giles pointed out—at the rate he smoked, he’d most likely be running low before Halloween. Alcohol and the rest he could probably live without, but the cigarettes were a deal-breaker. The habit started when he began using them as a crutch to get his foot in the door with Tomny and the rest, who tended to smoke communally or else use them like currency. One smoke was a favour owed until you returned it with interest.

“Your father is livid,” Giles said.

“So he’s home?” He’d be in his office then. If the British Minister for Agricultural Welfare wasn’t *at* the office, he was in it.

“Home *and* livid.”

“When is he ever not livid?” Remus said, leaning his head back against the seat. Wisps of whitening hair escaped from beneath the driver’s cap, resting on the rolls at the back of his neck. Remus could still remember when the driver’s entire head was as stark-raving red as his nose and cheeks, but that had been some years ago now.

“He let you run around London with those barmy boys all summer because you agreed to go. Now you’ve missed the train and your first day.”

“It’s just move-in,” Remus replied indignantly.

“There’s an expectation, lad. I’m not always going to be around to bail you out.”

“Am I to take this as your resignation then? Guess it was about time you retired.”

Remus couldn’t see the smile in the mirror, but the corners of Giles’ eyes crinkled and he shook his head. “Never. Couldn’t leave ya. Don’t have a son of my own to badger anyway.”

Remus looked down at his hands. His nails were chipped and dirty, and his clothes were worse off. It was a miracle Giles had let him in the Rolls at all, looking as filthy as he did.

“I don’t want to go, Gil.”

“Don’t matter. You should’a thought about that when you socked that science teacher of yours last term.”

“He deserved it.”

“They always do, don’t they Remus?”

Turning his shoulder to the driver, Remus set his head against the edge of the window. London flew past, bright and busy and full. “So when do I leave?”

“Tonight. I’m taking you to the station myself.”

“You’re going to see me off then? Knew you loved me.”

“No, I’m going to make sure your arse bloody well gets there. Though if you want a fat kiss goodbye I could always ask one of the kitchen ladies to come with us.”

Remus bit the inside of his cheek to stave off a smile. “Oh, shove off.”

* * *

Homo homini lupus est.

A man is wolf to his fellow man.

Remus had always hated seeing those words on the wrought-iron front gates of his family’s estate. They taunted them every time he came home and every time he snuck away. If the gates could say more, they would’ve said, *Vos non lupus es.*

You are not a wolf.

Coming or going, Remus always flipped the gate the bird for good measure.

After Giles pulled up along the front drive of the manor-house, Remus opened the door and started up the stone steps. As he went the sound of barking dogs carried across the estate’s acreage from the ‘dog house’, where his father housed, bred, and trained his precious coonhounds. Not a single raccoon to be found along the entirety of the British Isles, and yet there they were, a foreign breed kept as little more than a pastime. It was almost laughable that the head of department for the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Welfare—both farm and wild alike—raised hunting dogs for sport.

Remus passed the great columns he’d hated less than the gates but more than the gaudy front doors, and stepped inside, half-herded by a butler he didn’t recognise. The sounds of the dogs were drowned out the moment the doors closed behind him, and he paused to take in the silence. That was the thing about Lupin Manor, it was always deadly still. No chatting, no singing, no music. No noise at all. It was a dead, empty husk of a home, made with gilded railings and marble steps.

When Lyall Lupin’s only son and heir walked into the manor office he still looked and smelled like a dingy London alleyway. In contrast, the office was immaculate, with luxurious velvet curtains drawn back over the windows that looked over the estate’s immaculate front lawn, and paintings of various bits of landscape and scenery decorating each wall. Framed certificates and diplomas were scattered about the room, showcasing Lyall’s various achievements, ones Remus was expected to live up to. It might’ve been a more unreasonable proposition if Remus

didn't actually enjoy learning. The problem wasn't with his brain—that was perfectly capable when he tried—it was his attitude.

That and his aversion to doing anything his father asked of him.

"You've missed the train," Lyall said in that aloof, pragmatic voice of his, not even so much as bothering to look up as he scribbled across some document with a gold-plated biro. One of those pens could buy at least a month's worth of fags, but Remus wanted nothing from his father on a good day. He could keep his bloody golden pens.

"So I've heard," Remus said, rubbing the sole of his trainer into the floor to pass the time.

"Don't scuff the floor."

Rolling his eyes, Remus looked up at his father. They didn't look all that alike, even if they shared the same taupe-coloured curls. The single similarity was pure coincidence; where Remus' hair was unruly and in constant disarray, Lyall's was perfectly manicured and slicked back against his skull.

"You're to take the next available train this evening," Lyall continued. "Your things have already been packed and sent ahead."

"Without me?"

"You would've been joining them, had you arrived home when ordered."

Lyall drew an aggressive line across the paper he was scribbling on, as though he were crossing something out. Finally, he set down the pen and looked up. Remus straightened a bit, if only to make himself appear bigger in the shoulders. He was at least five feet from the front of his father's grand oak writing desk, but Lyall Lupin remained larger than life.

Like a beast, he'd had once heard some stuffy politician's wife whisper to another, when they thought no one was listening. *A bear of a man, always so gruff and forthright. How he wooed a woman so delicate I'll never understand.*

"This was the last one, Remus," Lyall said, lowly. "You've exhausted every school of premier quality in London. You've run about the city making a mockery of yourself and a fool of me. I told you to make this one work."

Remus felt his lips purse sourly. “Are we not jumping the gun a bit, Dad? They haven’t tossed me out yet.”

“And they won’t,” Lyall spat. “Because you gave your word. I’ve had enough of the whiney, miserable brat act. You’re a Lupin, act like it.”

“That’s a tired line,” Remus said cynically, “I think the threat of it wore off when I was twelve.”

“Then you’re duller than I thought.”

Remus’ next thoughts mirrored the words he’d heard his mother shout when he was barely old enough to understand what they meant. They’d been arguing, Hope and Lyall, in the same office he was standing in now, and he’d been left to cower outside the door as his mother screamed and threw things about the room. *You should’ve put me in a home then! Anyone else would have, but not you. If you had, who would be left to share in your fucking misery?*

Remus clicked his tongue. “What’s that they say about the apple and the tree?”

Lyall’s eyes narrowed. “Watch your mouth.”

“Funny that’s what sets you off.”

“You’re a child.”

“*Your* child?”

“Enough!” As Lyall rose very suddenly from behind his desk, Remus had to fight the urge to step back. He was very tall, taller than Remus, with shoulders like a boxer and a disposition meaner than any dog’s. “You gave your word, and then broke it when you failed to show up. Without his word a man has nothing. And since you broke your word, *you* must have nothing.”

If Lyall Lupin could see through people, he might’ve noticed the way his son’s hands fisted behind his back. If he could read minds he might’ve known how Remus pictured putting those same fists through the nearest window. But he could not and Remus did not. Instead Remus stayed quiet, glowering at his father as his mirror image.

If there is a silver lining in any of this, he thought*, it’s that I’ll be far, far from you.*

Satisfied with the fright he knew he'd given him, Lyall slowly dropped himself back down behind the desk. "You will be on the train tonight. Giles will take you. Until then, I have no need of you."

No need.

No need of a rebellious teenager who had no interest in behaving like the well-to-do son of a good house; of a boy who behaved worse than an untrained dog. At least dogs knew to fear their masters.

"So we're done then?" Remus drawled. His father kept that sharp, measuring gaze on him before finally dropping his head back to his papers. He waved, the signal for Remus to clear out and leave him in his stewing peace, and that was it.

Slamming the office door, Remus set off for the foyer as fast as his legs could carry him. His mangled shoes banged on the oak floors like thunder and every portrait, plant, rug—every bleeding piece of furniture—mocked him as he went. The manor was endless; it went on forever, built upon several acres of land and boasting a vast array of outbuildings including two garages, a tack house, full stables, and a greenhouse. All his life Remus had lived there—he'd been *born* there—and yet for months all he could picture was some beast just waiting to open its great, gaping maw and swallow him whole.

He passed by the piano room, shut up and quiet as always. Remus had no memory of actually seeing his mother play—he'd been too small and then she'd gotten too sick—but he sometimes thought he remembered whispers. Never a full song, but maybe a melody, or a few sad notes. Recalling her voice was getting hard these days, but the memories were still there;

Oh what did you see, my blue-eyed son?
And what did you see, my darling young one?

That was a poor memory, one of the worst. It always followed with his own squeaky voice;

"I don't have blue eyes, Mummy."

Then Hope would chime in, as kind and as gentle as always;

"You did when you were born. You were my perfect little blue-eyed angel."

And now his eyes were brown.

Remus made it to the grand entryway, nearly shouldering a maid he didn't recognise carrying fresh towels—his father must've rehired again. Nodding at her in apology, he swallowed a scowl and swung himself up onto the stairs, taking them two at a time until he'd come upon the second level. By the time he made it to his bedroom Remus' hands were shaking, and he had to shut the door with both hands before collapsing back against it. Not even two years ago the door had dwarfed him by more than half, but since then he'd shot up like a weed. Even still, it felt safest to lean against the bedroom door, guarding it against entry; not that anyone would attempt to follow him.

Breathing heavily, Remus tried to force the music room memory from his mind. Thankfully, he didn't have to try too hard; a great weight socked him in the stomach and he doubled over as a full-grown Bluetick coonhound threw itself at his middle.

"*Oof*! Bloody hell, Dusty," Remus gasped, before his face split into a wide-set grin. The speckled dog leapt up again, slobbering across the front of his shirt and Remus shoved him down, laughing.

"Eugh, c'moaaaan, Dusty," he moaned. "What? That bastard keep you locked up in here all day again?"

Remus knelt down in front of his dog and began to rub the soft folds of his face before moving to scratch in the crook of Dusty's neck the way he knew the dog liked. Dusty let his long pink tongue drop down happily, and Remus found himself thanking his stars for a friendly face. Though no one would know it now thanks to his size, Dusty had been born just one of the unfortunate runts of his father's litters. The puppy might've been put down, had a seven year-old Remus not begged his mother to let him keep him and raise him in the house. He'd even named the dog 'Dusty Rider' after a racehorse, like his father did for every dog, though Dusty Rider had never actually won a respectable race.

It hadn't taken much to appeal to his mother's kind nature, but she'd at least been stern enough about it; *He'd be your responsibility. You'd have to look after him. Feed him, clean up after him, make sure he is well cared for.*

As he continued petting Dusty up and down, Remus suddenly felt very guilty. He'd spent most of the summer running amuck around London, and now he had a count-down to a departure he couldn't avoid. The dog deserved better, and he'd given his word then too.

“I’ll ask Giles to look after you,” Remus told him. “I’ll be back at Christmas. Maybe earlier…”

Dusty gave him that same dopey look he’d been giving him for the better part of the last six years and Remus sighed, shaking his head.

“Right. Good boy.”

Dusty barked.

Pushing to his feet, Remus moved away from the door with the friendly hound trailing closely behind him. His childhood room at the estate had never felt particularly ‘homey’ or full, more like a showcase for another smarter—better son, but the last few months had made for a distinct emptiness as Lyall prepared to ship him off for the school year.

Remus had tried to add to the decorum since coming home from his last boys school half a term early, but the maids always took down any posters he hung and he could never keep the place dirty enough for it to feel as comfortable as the London hovels Tomny sometimes took him to. Instead the room was just big—with a huge four-poster bed, heavy emerald curtains, and a lone porcelain bathroom that opened up just off the far end. There were several wardrobes lining the walls, each of them packed with formal overcoats and fine slacks. Most were untouched, as walking around the East End in a velvet frock and shining Oxfords wasn't much different from plastering a sign on your back that screamed ‘mug me’.

Now the wardrobes were empty. Any clothes that had not been chosen to accompany him to Scotland had been most likely packed away. Remus' desk had been emptied too, along with several of the bookshelves that lined the walls beyond it. The vacant room had become emptier than empty; it'd become a shell.

There was one thing though, that Remus knew his father’s maids wouldn’t have dared touch.

Abandoning the desk and wardrobes, Remus approached his bed and dropped to his knees beside it, pulling back the heavy bedskirt. Dusty immediately tried to fit himself underneath, curious, and Remus had to haul him back before he could reach for what it was he was looking for. It took a moment of fumbling before his fingers brushed that familiar surface, but with a short grunt and sharp tug, he managed to pull out a single white-leather trunk, complete with pretty brass accents tarnished from age and lack of care. It was only about half the

size of a normal travelling trunk and was covered in a fine layer of dust that seeped into the cracks in the leather like disease. Secretly, Remus was pleased. At least this way he knew the maids hadn't been bothering with it.

Spinning the trunk around, Remus slid his fingers along the smooth brass fastenings, then the lock. It was the only thing within the entirety of the Lupin Estate that no one else ever touched, but Remus never kid himself. If his father let him keep it, it was only because he couldn't be bothered to remember that he had it in the first place.

Jumping up from his knees, Remus returned to his desk, opening the bottom drawer and feeling for the false bottom. It was something he'd discovered when his father brought the desk home from another estate sale—apparently it had belonged to a nearby baron, who had obviously coveted a few secrets of his own.

Feeling for the tiny ledge with his fingernails, Remus tugged the plank up and revealed his stash of cigarettes, stowed along with a few precious spliffs Seesaw had lovingly rolled for him as a going-away present. Pushing the cigarettes aside, he began feeling around the bottom of the drawer until his pinky finger brushed a single brass luggage key. It twinkled across the bottom of the drawer before Remus was able to fish it out and return to the trunk, and by then Dusty had already busied himself with gently gnawing on one of the trunk's edges.

"Dusty, it's not food!" Remus hissed, shooing the dog off. After fitting the key into the lock, he turned until the trunk popped its top. The sound made something in the pit of his stomach squirm. It was the first time in months he'd even let himself begin think about the contents, but these were precious. They couldn't just be left behind. Even if he resented her—even if he *hated* her—that didn't mean he wanted to forget. And for whatever else, these were memories.

Remus lifted the trunk's lid. Inside he found records; just a handful of the ones his mother had saved for him. Everything from Miles Davis to the Byrds. There was country, doo-wap, American jazz, Latin pop music—and of course the Beatles. Hope Lupin had *loved* the Beatles.

Gingerly—like he was disturbing a dead body—Remus started sifting through the albums, trying to recall his favourite track off of each. It was harder than he remembered. The records hadn't been played since he was eleven, when his mother's continuously poor health had rapidly started to decline. Back then Hope would have him play music

while she laid motionless in bed, too exhausted to even hum along. After she was moved to the hospital permanently the turntable had miraculously vanished. Fearing the worst, Remus had shut the records away and told himself they could play them when she came home again. Only, she hadn't.

Hope had loved the Beatles. Remus too, but... he had his own favourites. The Who were paramount. Together he and his mother would sit together, listening and singing along until the record had run out of words to play. Remus could still remember the day they'd moved that little television set into her bedroom. He'd never seen music on TV before, and from then on it was all over for Remus.

The television gave him the chance to see music really come alive on stage. There he could see more bands than just what was played on their British radio. In the beginning it was The Rolling Stones and The Beach Boys, then The Kinks and Dusty Springfield—even a bit of Jimi Hendrix when Hope was feeling wild enough. Later it became darker; moodier. Remus had lost it over bands like Black Sabbath and Pink Floyd, while Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple dominated the air waves. By the time he was ten, America had invaded with acts like such as the likes of Iggy Pop and Bob Dylan, but through it all The Who remained on top.

The first time Remus had seen Pete Townshend smash his guitar and Keith Moon knock over his drum kit, he knew he was in *love*.

Hope appreciated all of the bands—any band—perhaps just because music was about the only thing they could share between her ever-revolving doctors' visits. She wasn't perfect—she was still a *mum*—and couldn't seem to understand why musicians like Townshend would destroy their instruments for a few cheap laughs. Should they not have been sacred? Was the stage not consecrated ground, meant to be blessed and revered?

But Remus understood. He understood perfectly.

This—was rock and roll.

Now, in his bedroom shell, Remus thumbed through the rest of the records, counting them off on his fingers as though he were going down a list. *Blue Hawaii, Highway 61 Revisited, A Quick One, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club, Pet Sounds*—each one was a memory. A piece of her he'd forgotten; and that might stay forgotten otherwise.

Inside something ached.

Oh, don’t be sad, darling.

Shall Mummy sing to you?

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?

Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?

Remus pulled his hands back and shut the little trunk with a click.

Chapter End Notes

The song Remus is remembering is Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" (1963).
Slang/Dictionary:
A milk-float is a dairy delivery truck.
A biro is just another word for pen.

Chapter 3: Chocolate and Train Stops

Chapter Summary

> Remus arrives at Hawkings after taking the over-night train to meet a friendly face.

Chapter Notes

> CW: 'f' slur used in smoking context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don't do this and don't do that,
What are they trying to do?
Make a good boy of you;
Do they know where it's at?
Don't criticise, they're old and wise;
Do as they tell you to,
Don't want the devil to,
Come and put out your eyes…

- "School" Supertramp, 1974

Remus slept badly. The train carriage was dim and his head kept knocking against the window. It wasn't until he thought to ball up his jacket and use it as a pillow that he was able to make himself comfortable enough to try for a lick of sleep, but even then the train felt like a furnace. Sweat was running down his back and past his belt, and he couldn't so much as crack the window for a bit of breezy relief—the latch was broken. He was stuck in coach, surrounded by many more unhappy overnight travellers, including the man to his right who was currently grumbling about burning a Sunday roast in his sleep. If he had made his train the morning before Remus would've probably had his own carriage, but that was a privilege better off forgotten under current circumstances.

Giles had been quiet most of the way to the station, but once they'd got there he'd preened over his charge—making sure he had all his school papers, reminding him to shave downwards and not up, and not to spend every lesson with his nose stuck in a book—until Remus had finally had to snap at him to stop.

“You call if you need anything,” Giles ordered. “And no more punching teachers or I’ll have to drive up to the Highlands to whoop you one myself.”

“Not sure how the Rolls would do on dirt roads, Gil,” Remus had teased. It made Giles smile, and he sighed a bit before clapping him on both shoulders affectionately.

“Be good,” he said, “and if you can’t be good then be smart.”

They’d separated on the station platform just before midnight, and Remus had taken the last train to Scotland alone and feeling distinctly sorry for himself. Now, several hours later, he spent the morning’s wee hours awake and wishing he could’ve had a cig, but the train car didn’t allow smoking and his trunk was tucked up above him on the shelf along with his fags, a few books, and his mother’s small collection of albums. Even if he could’ve had one without facing retribution from the attendant or other passengers, Mr. Sunday-roast was so thick round the middle that even as skinny as he was, Remus doubted he would've been able to fit past without saying something first. And that of course would require conversation, which he was too irritated to consider.

So sleep didn’t come, and Remus was forced to watch as the great English countryside rolled by in the dark. He’d be at his new school in the Scottish Highlands soon, where supposedly, countless rich and well-to-do British families sent their youth to grow and flourish under the finest education money could buy. For those looking to get into a good university, Hawkings Independent School was step one; for Remus, it might as well have been another prison. The closest village to the school’s grounds was four kilometres away, and even then the Scottish township of Craigtyre had little to offer, if the school’s guidebook was anything to go by.

After a near half hour of biting his fingernails down to the quick, a heavy jostling from the tracks awoke Remus’ seat partner with a start. The man snorted rather grotesquely, and blinked around himself as though he couldn’t remember where he was. Remus avoided eye contact, turning his chest toward the window, confident that the low-light of the carriage would discourage any conversation, but that didn’t seem to matter much to the man. He reached over and tapped Remus on the shoulder.

“Coffee cart come by?”

Remus shook his head, thumb nail still stuck between his teeth. The man sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Just as well, really. Makes me awfully gassy on cross country.”

At Remus’ expression of horror the man chuckled.

“Just having a laugh. Nervous traveller?” He gestured to Remus’ fingers, now red and bleeding in some places.

“Not really,” Remus muttered, tucking his hands under his legs and turning back to the window, just hoping that the guy would take the hint.

“Ah, but rail's still better than flying,” the man said jovially. “I got on my first aeroplane two years ago—me and my ex-wife, we were heading to Ibiza. Nearly thought I was gonna pass out during lift-off. Friendly island though. You ever been?”

Remus scrunched a little lower in his seat. “No.”

“Ah well, you’re young. I’m sure you’ll go lots of places in your time. Life’s like a train, you know. All about stops, it is. Sometimes people—like my ex-wife—get off, and others get on. S'all about deciding where tis’ *you* wanna go. Though, I bet that advice's cheap coming from some old codger on a business trip.”

The man chuckled and Remus let his head fall against the window. His fingers hurt, and he was chewing on the inside of his cheek now. If the sodding oaf didn’t shut up soon he was positively sure he’d shred himself to pieces.

“I can tell you’re not feeling so good,” the man continued, keeping his voice low so as to not wake any other passengers who had been lucky enough to be able to fall asleep. “Might have something here for it.”

Before Remus could assure him that he didn’t want anything he could offer, he’d ruffled through his jacket pockets and produced a full bar of chocolate. He smiled, and snapped the bar clean down the middle, offering a half to Remus. “It’ll make you feel better,” he promised, peeling back the sweet's wrapping and snapping off a square with his teeth.

Remus might’ve asked just how long the chocolate had been sitting in the stranger’s breast pocket, but at the moment, the urge to busy his hands and mouth was too great. Biting into the chocolate, his shameless sweet tooth was instantly comforted. He’d spent too long

smoking cigarettes, which were almost cheaper than chocolate on the street. It had to be at least twenty-five degrees in the carriage so the chocolate was soft, but it was comforting.

His seat partner smiled at him as he relaxed back into his chair. Remus returned the gaze, eyebrows up. “Got the time?” He asked, between chewing.

The man glanced down at the watch strapped to his barrel-wrist. “Half past three in the morning.”

Remus fought a grimace.

“Cheers.”

* * *

Hawkings Private School might’ve been nice, if Remus could just find his way around. The school was a bloody maze, and he hadn’t even made it inside a building yet.

After a driver had met him at the train station they’d embarked on an hour-long car journey to Hawkings’ grounds. There was no smoking permitted in the car so Remus had made the driver wait until he’d smoked at least one cigarette down to pure ash. The driver seemed annoyed with the waiting and grumbled something under his breath in a thick Scottish-brogue, but Remus was in no hurry to get back into another vehicle after a nine-hour train ride anyway.

They drove in silence, which Remus was grateful for, with only the scratchy radio for noise. The disc jockey had some taste, so Remus couldn’t complain; even if the radio did cut out during the Doors’ “Light My Fire”, making him miss the last half of the song. The car puttered along on mostly dirt roads, with Remus staring at the Scottish countryside and humming along to the music until its signal finally cut out and left only static.

Near the end of the drive, the man pointed to a small cluster of buildings off in the distance from the road. Craigtyre, he explained, where the school got most of its supplies including food and shopping. The village had a post office, a tailors, a market, a pub, and a single corner-shop. Had its own school too, for the local kids, but not much else.

Remus had only grunted in response, and the man chuckled darkly.

“Not in London anymore, laddie.”

And he wasn’t. Hawkings School was anything but. In London—or at least east of Aldgate Pump—people would’ve given him a wider birth. They would’ve been wary of meeting his eye, and he wouldn’t have met theirs at all. At Hawkings, Remus couldn’t get people to *stop* staring. And that wasn’t even the biggest problem. Out of his entire audience, not a single one came up any higher than his ribs.

He was surrounded by children. Everywhere he looked some kiddie popped out to get a look at him. Most were dressed in normal, every-day shirts and slacks, but some were dressed in smart little maroon and grey uniforms. Remus, still wearing his favourite trousers with the hole in the left knee and dirty steel-toes (though he had changed his shirt), probably looked like a complete yob. Though, he suspected, that just made him strange in the world of well-to-do kiddies, not scary. He trudged along carrying his trunk with a small line of six year-olds following him like a train, and was almost resolved to let them until one of the little shits got ballsy and ran up to wipe something on the back of his shirt.

“Oi!” Remus barked, as the kid squealed and took off out of his reach. He turned his eyes on the others, maybe a dozen of them, but the kids only took a few steps back and snickered.

After walking up to the wrong building for the third time, Remus was becoming especially frustrated. Finally, he turned back to the kids and dropped his case onto the stone walkway with a loud thud. “Anyone know where Godric House is?” He snapped.

The kids scattered, either not expecting Remus to actually say something to them, or frightened off by his irritated expression. Remus watched them go, stifling a groan.

“Doesn’t work as well when you yell at them,” a voice called from behind him.

Spinning around, Remus came face-to-face with a girl. She was at least a head shorter than him, with a face full of freckles and some of the reddest hair he’d ever seen. Her arms were crossed over her chest, though she had a friendly expression. He might’ve mistaken her for another kid if it weren’t for the tone of authority in her voice.

“I didn’t yell,” Remus said.

“Well, you didn’t ask very nicely, now did you?” She uncrossed her arms, flapping a fistful of documents she was carrying. She was also wearing a uniform, though hers was distinctly more grown-up, with a smart-looking navy blue vest over a dress shirt and a grey skirt and leggings. It was almost applause worthy to be dressed in full uniform in such heat.

“You lost then?”

Remus blinked. “Er… yeah.”

She raised her eyebrows and gave him the once-over. “Where are you heading?”

“Godric House,” he answered, and she smiled.

“Yeah, I already heard.”

“Then why ask?”

She shrugged. “Just making conversation. Godric is one of the secondary dorms, on the Eastern half of campus. You’re on the Western side right now—the primary half?”

That explained all the kids. Damn driver, he’d dropped him off on the *wrong* side.

Fighting to keep his face from heating up, Remus bit down on the inside of his cheek before speaking. “I’m new.”

She smiled broadly this time. “I gathered that too. I’m Lily. Lily Evans.”

Lily stepped forward and extended her hand, palm open wide.

“Remus Lupin,” he said, dropping the handshake after a single up-and-down and pressing both hands into his pockets.

“I can take you to Godric House, if you like,” Lily offered. "My dorm’s only a few doors down—Rowena House. All the dorms are named after a Hawkings founder or scholar. The same goes for most of the buildings actually. Is there a reason you’re so far from—”

“Lily!”

Looking up beyond Lily, which wasn’t hard at all considering how short she was, Remus watched as another boy rushed up to them. He

was red-faced, with a long nose and matching hair that fell down over his head like a limp rag. Unlike Lily's, his expression was sour, and he looked at Remus like he was old gum he'd just scraped off the bottom of his shoe.

"Sev," Lily said happily, "this is Remus. Remus, this is Severus."

Severus glanced at Remus once more, before deciding to ignore his presence all together. "Your brats are out of control again," he said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder behind him. "You need to come straighten them out."

The corners of Lily's mouth dipped like she'd heard the same thing many times before. "I told you not to call them brats, Sev. How are you ever going to get them to listen to you if you're just putting them out?"

Severus looked indignant. "I have you to do it for me."

"Well," Lily started, suddenly enthusiastic again, "not today. Sorry, but I've offered to show Remus to his dorm. He's new."

Lily spoke like he was a shiny new toy, but Severus' gaze made Remus think that he'd rather have him tossed under a trolley than play with him. "But—" he tried, but Lily just shook her head, pressing her fist full of papers into his chest and stepping back toward Remus.

"Sorry Sev, just ask Hannah for help! I'll see you later for dinner, okay?"

Raising his head back out of a hunch, Severus huffed and shot a nasty look in Remus' direction before finally stalking away, presumably back to the kids he had failed to round up the first time.

Lily turned to Remus. "Shall we be off?"

Chapter End Notes

A 'disc jockey' is just the term where 'radio DJ' is derived from.

Chapter 4: Room 4A

Chapter Summary

Lily escorts the newly-arrived Remus to his dorm, where he has his first introductions with his new roommates.

Chapter Notes

No trigger warnings for this chapter!

NOTE: There is an alternate POV (Sirius) of this chapter available here .

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'll be there if you want me to,
No one else that could ever do,
Got to get some peace in my mind;
Monday morning you sure look fine,
Friday I got travelin' on my mind...

- "Monday Morning" Fleetwood Mac, 1975

"You used me to escape."

"No," Lily scoffed dismissively, leading him away from the primary buildings where she'd found him. She walked briskly, as though she enjoyed burning holes in her shoes. "You were lost, I couldn't just leave you. Unless you'd rather Sev take you to the dorms?"

She raised her red eyebrows at him and Remus thought back to the scowling boy. He doubted they'd have made it more than ten paces before one of them took a swing at the other.

Satisfied with his silence, Lily smiled. "Where are you from, Remus?"

"London."

She looked him up and down. "And did your parents send you here? Or was it something else…?"

"What else would it be?"

“Oh, never mind,” she said quickly, before pointing down. “You have a hole in your shoe, you know.”

Remus looked down and wiggled his big toe, which poked through the top of his trainer. He shrugged, nonchalant;

“Yeah, I know.”

Lily looked amused, and eyed the small white case. “Is that all you brought with you?” She had already tried to make a grab for it before they’d set off, surely just to be helpful, but Remus had swiped up the handle before she could reach it. Lily, to her credit, hadn’t flinched, only rose back to her full height and smiled innocently. Remus couldn’t imagine a girl like her would appreciate finding out what was inside and he couldn’t afford to lose his stash on the first day.

“No,” he answered, sheepishly. “Most got sent ahead. S'just some other stuff.”

“Ah, guess that makes sense if you missed move-in. Well, trolley’s this way.” She put a little skip into her step as they rounded one of the primary buildings. Remus blinked after her; *trolley?*

There was, in fact, a trolley. Hawkings’ grounds were so vast—over two hundred acres, he remembered—that it only seemed to make sense to have a small tram to make sure students got to their lessons and meals on time. There were also bikes available to be taken around, according to Lily, but those had to be signed out at head office. The trolley itself was a nice ride. The windows were dropped open to allow a nice summer breeze to pass through and the driver was a young guy Lily just called ‘Stan’, who had acne that could’ve rivalled Lee’s but was definitely older than nineteen or twenty. He said nothing as they got on despite Lily’s cheerful hello, only tipping his head as he tugged the trolley’s doors closed behind them, several coffee stains on the front of his uniform and a cigarette poking out of the side of his mouth.

“We’re allowed to smoke in the cab?” Remus asked, following Lily to one of the middle rows and sitting down.

“No, never,” Lily said, appalled. “But if you rat on Stan he’ll purposely drive past you next time you’re late for lessons.”

Looking back to the front of the bus, only six or so rows ahead, Remus found Stan staring back at them in his mirror and quickly busied himself by looking out the window. A few other kids turned their

noses up to stare, but Remus did his best to ignore them too. As they went Lily continued to ramble, pointing out each different building and giving them a name;

“That’s the Atrium, and there’s Le Fay Hall, the drama building—it’s got the amphitheatre. Down that path there you’ll find the gardens and greenhouses. Scamander Garden is where the year twelves and thirteens get to apply their botany lessons—it’s an elective. The Agrippan Block has the language arts classrooms, and just behind that is Flamel Block, for modern languages. And of course there’s the Priori Block…”

On and on she went. Remus forgot most of it instantly, too aware of how close Lily got while trying to reach over him to point out the buildings. Eventually she sat back in her seat, swinging her feet out ahead of her and pointing her toes, which were bound up in her shiny new school shoes. They had the trolley to themselves, but Lily had waved to a few people as they drove down the lane. Plenty of other students were out and about enjoying the last precious hours before school started the next morning. Some were in uniform, others not, but none looked as rough as Remus’ preferred garb.

Glancing at Lily while she called out to a couple students walking on the pavement, Remus briefly let himself wonder what kind of money the Evans family came from. Surely something fine and posh like politics or finance; Lily had that smartly-air about her. Or maybe she had a great-uncle who was a Lord or something.

When they finally reached their stop, Stan rang a short bell and Lily hopped up from her seat to make her way off the bus. Trunk bumping along the sides of the trolley’s seats, Remus stepped down the pram stairs after her.

“Thanks, Stan,” Lily called, before the driver rang his bell again and pulled the trolley away from the curb.

“This way,” she told him, moving up the road ahead of him. He followed, too lost to be anything but obedient. The Eastern side of the college appeared much like its primary counterpart, but with more rolling hills and trees. Great brick buildings rose up on one side of the street, emblazoned with various House crests, and a thicket of trees along the other.

“This is House Lane," Lily explained. "That's Dorset House, a girls dorm, and next door is Crowley House—boys. Piaget's the white one

on the very end, but you said you were in Godric House, yes?"

"Yeah," Remus said, switching his trunk to the other hand. Walking along, following Lily's prima shoes and up-beat attitude, Remus suddenly felt himself getting antsy seeing all the buildings up close. Up until that moment he'd allowed himself to believe that all of it was just temporary—that he'd be back with Tomny and the boys by Halloween. Despite the nearly eleven hour journey and the horrible knot that had sat in the base of his stomach the entire way, it had felt like all the other schools. Now, Remus realised, he really was stuck. He'd lived on campus before, but nowhere he couldn't escape from. In London all it took was one open window and he was running amuck again. At a school with its own tram-system, far, far beyond any other hint of civilization, where was there to go? No smokes, no yobbo-boys, just uniforms, lessons, and prissy brick buildings.

"I don't much like the look of Finch House myself," Lily was saying, "reminds me too much of—"

"Why are you helping me?" Remus blurted, rudely.

She paused and turned around. He was behind her a ways, having lagged behind while he'd sunk deeper and deeper into his own head. "Oh," she popped, "it's my job."

"Your job?"

"Yeah, I'm a prefect. One of a prefect's responsibilities is to help new students settle in. You should've seen me yesterday. Must've clocked a million steps getting everyone to their places."

Remus felt like he'd been socked in the gut. She wasn't showing him around because she wanted to, but because it was her *job* . Instantly he was bombarded with images of past professors, teachers' aids, school counsellors, all the people who'd 'helped' not because they wanted to know him, but because they were paid to do it. Lily definitely didn't earn anything of monetary value for picking up strays, but the principle was the same.

"That's what I was doing when we met," Lily continued, walking back down the path toward him. "The primary kids take a little more settling in than the older kids, and there's always more of them. We don't usually get new kids as old as you—oh! I never asked what year you were in. I'm in year eleven, but I came to Hawkings in year seven, so you don't have to be worried about coming in late. Lots of people __"

Remus stepped past her, tossing his trunk up over his shoulder, elbow to the sky. “I’m fine from here, thanks."

Lily blinked, but recovered quickly, rushing up from behind until she was next to him, nearly skipping just to keep up with his full strides. “If I said something rude I’m really sorry,” she tried. “I still can show you to Godric.”

“No need.”

“Remus…”

“I got it.”

Lily sighed, pressing her lips into a thin line. “Just let me walk with you then? I promise to clear out after!”

Clearly she took her role as prefect seriously. Remus turned to her, before nearly flinching and stopping dead in the road. Lily was looking at him with an expression so akin to a kicked puppy that she could’ve played a starved orphan in one of those BBC adverts.

“Bloody—alright!” Remus said, immediately looking away.

“Great,” Lily said, pleased. She seemed to recover instantly, and fell into step with him properly, leading the way once more. Albeit grudgingly, Remus lessened his strides. Lily swung her arms as she walked, and eventually began to hum a cheery tune. By the time they made it to Godric House, he was sure she’d composed an entire song in her head.

“It’s a griffin,” Lily said when Remus stopped in front of the dorm’s plaque. “It’s your House animal—like a mascot. Seems perfectly ridiculous to me, having a mythical creature as your subject of House pride. Rowena’s animal is a raven.”

“Sensible,” Remus muttered, which Lily seemed pleased about. She nodded her head and continued up the rest of the dorm’s stone drive. The outside of the building was just as fine as any of the others at Hawkings, with bright red brick and grey trimmings. Lily, clearly not one to stand on ceremony, Remus was realizing, walked straight up the last of the steps to the dorm’s front door and opened it, pausing on the threshold to wait for him.

“Are you coming?”

Remus tipped his head and dropped his case off his shoulder, following her in. “Didn’t think a girl could go into a boys dorm.”

“Oh, we can, just no boys in the girls dorms. And besides, I’m a prefect.”

“Right…”

Remus looked around himself. If the outside of the dorm was grand, the inside was truly posh-tacular. The front door let off into a common area, which was outfitted with leather sofas and scattered rugs. A massive, unlit hearth sat in the far corner with a couple of students already scattered around it playing cards. Light trickled in through open windows, supplemented by lamps placed amongst the sofas on desks and tables. Half of the room was covered in oak shelves, stuffed to the brim with books of all shapes and sizes. Like at home, paintings covered every wall, but unlike the dull, grey-toned still-lifes that decorated the Lupin Estate, the paintings in Godric House were filled with rich colour and life. From flowers and beaches to beautiful goddesses and dirty martyrs, the paintings were piled on top of each other from floor to ceiling, and each seemed to move on its own in the warm light of the common room.

But it was none of this that caught Remus’ eye. Opposite to the fireplace was a single television set with a group of boys sat before it, watching some comedy sketch show and laughing with one another. Next to that, quiet and unassuming, was a turntable, outfitted on its own table. A stack of records were piled up lazily besides it, nothing of substance—mostly just church hymns and orchestral symphonies, even a few Christmas records. Still, it made Remus a bit giddy.

“Cosy enough for a boys dorm,” Lily supplied, after she’d caught Remus staring. “Though rarely quiet.” She said this last bit with a hint of distaste. “There’s a small kitchenette too, just through there. In case you want to make tea or something.”

Remus pulled himself from his daze and nodded.

“We only get television privileges on the weekends and holidays,” Lily explained.

“Mhm,” Remus nodded, "and the turntable?”

“Oh, they let us play music, but not after nine.”

Remus resisted a shudder. Curfew.

“What was your dorm number again?” Lily asked, chirpily, waving at another student from across the room. She seemed to know everyone.

“Oh, um…” Remus set his trunk down and reached beneath the coat at his waist, into his back pocket. He felt the cool shape of Tomny’s lighter, but beyond that, a folded scrap of paper. He’d gotten it out of the folder Giles had handed him before he’d boarded the train in London. The folder had everything; a copy of his school records (decent marks, piss-poor attendance), known health concerns (none, unless you counted the occasional bouts of insomnia, but all of his doctors agreed that was self-imposed, the bastards), past records with authority (nothing official, thanks to Dad, just a few ‘disagreements’ here and there), his timetable, instructions for meal times and extracurriculars, and of course, his enrolment papers and a letter from the Headmistress welcoming him to Hawkings. No map though, go figure.

One of the papers had the dorm’s address and his room number, along with the initials of his supposed roommates; *S. Black, P. Pettigrew, and J. Potter* .

“Room 4A,” Remus said, re-reading the bit that explained how students could earn and lose House privileges. The phone, the telly, afters—it was like a bloody prison. They’d probably revoke shower rights too if they didn’t think teenage boys would just stop bathing all together.

A little stunned that Lily had gone longer than thirty seconds without saying anything, Remus looked up from the paper to find a very queer look on the ginger girl’s face; like she was trying to serve tea to guests with a pin stabbing into the bottom of her foot.

“Lily?”

“Yes? Oh, your room. Well—er… you said 4A, so that’ll be the fourth floor, last door on your right. The stairs are just down that hallway. You’ve got your key, yeah?”

Remus felt for his other pocket. “Yeah.”

“Brilliant, well I actually better be off now. Gotta make sure the kiddies didn’t ruin poor Sev. It was so nice to meet you, Remus!”

Lily turned and walked very quickly out the front door of the dorm, her school shoes squeaking loudly as she went. Only slightly bewildered, Remus hefted up his trunk and headed for the stairs. It

was a little discouraging to find out his room was up four flights of stairs, but perhaps that just meant more privacy. Or at least as much privacy that could be had while sharing a room with three other blokes. He still had ill memories from the last live-in school, where his cigarettes always went missing, along with his socks and the postage stamps Giles sent him to write to Lyall. Not that he'd ever missed those much.

The top of the stairs emptied out between dorms '4E' and '4F', meaning that his room would be on the end just as Lily had said. Remus walked down the hall, which was trimmed with fancy yellow lights, gold and maroon wallpaper, and a carpet that was certainly more pristine than it should've been in a boys dorm. Each room had its own door plate with a room number and beside it, four other plaques detailing its inhabitants' names.

Standing outside dorm '4A', Remus was more than disgruntled to read 'R. J. Lupin' on the wall. It felt silly, but now he knew for sure that the other three knew he was coming. How long had they been discussing him? Been staring at his delivered luggage and wondering who was going to walk through the door? And now he was walking through the door late.

Wanting rather to rip off the bandage than stew in the hallway where anyone could pop out of a doorway and see him, Remus reached for his key and opened the door. Inside, he was immediately met with the strong scent of spices. Despite the assault to his nose, Remus' stomach rumbled. He hadn't had breakfast.

"That you, Black? You better have not bollixed it all up."

As Remus stood on the threshold a handsome boy came around another doorway, cleaning a pair of round-rimmed glasses on the front of his shirt. He stopped and put the glasses on, eyes widening. "Oh, you must be—"

"You're *huge!"*

Remus' head snapped to his right where he found another boy he'd scarcely had time to notice sitting on a four-poster with a spoon of dripping, orange curry halfway to his lips.

"Pete, what happened to 'hello'?"

The boy called Pete puckered, before shoving his spoon into his mouth. Giving Remus a tight smile, the other turned and ushered him

further into the room.

“Sorry about that. Don’t think he meant you were *huge,* huge, just you know—tall.”

"I get it," Remus said, letting the heavy door fall shut behind him.

“We were wondering when you were going to show up,” the boy confessed. He had warm brown skin and matching eyes, and his hair seemed to stand up in every direction like he’d spent his childhood sticking forks into wall sockets, whereas Pete was more slight and fair-haired, with blue eyes the colour of the sky after it rained.

“Mix-up with arrival,” Remus muttered.

He nodded, as if it happened all the time. “Well, I’m James, and that’s Peter.”

Peter waved his hand in the air.

“Remus Lupin.”

“Right,” James nodded. He was flexing his hand like he wasn’t sure if they should shake or not, but seemed to decide against it. “Well, that’s your bed over there.” He pointed to the empty bed closest to the doorway he’d just come out of. “Normally we give Pete the bed closest to the bathroom, but figured we’d be gracious since you’re new and all.”

“S'not my fault all liquid goes right through me,” Peter said, clearly put out.

“Maybe try a few less fizzy drinks right before bed then.”

“Doesn’t matter to me what bed,” Remus said, and Peter leapt up from his current spot on the corner bed.

“Brilliant! Trade ya then!” Peter rushed over to the other bed and sat down, still carrying his lunch. Remus watched him before glancing at the bed Peter had been sitting on and tossing his case on top.

“Rest of your stuff is there,” James said, pointing behind him to the stack of cases next to Peter’s new bed. “So… where are you from?”

“London,” Remus said, his back to James as he let his fingers trail over the case’s edge.

“Us too! Do you play any football? Got a favourite team?”

Remus’ hands paused on the sides of the trunk. That was by far one of his least favourite questions, mostly because he didn’t have an answer. Lee and Doss talked plenty about football back home but he’d never paid enough attention. Tomny didn’t care much for sports (it was one of the things Remus loved best about him) but no one ragged on him for it. Lee had a favourite team though, it was…

“Southampton?”

“Oh yeah?” James asked, leaning against one of Remus’ bedposts. “They’re quite good. Channon was the league’s top scorer last year. My dad thinks they’re in the running for the Cup this time around.”

Remus nodded along. “That right…”

“So you play? I’m a forward.”

“James is captain of the school team this year!” Peter added, making James smile bashfully.

“We’re having try-outs soon. You should come out! I bet you’d be great with those legs.”

Remus flexed his hands at his sides stiffly. “Well, no I—”

The bedroom door burst open, nearly taking out poor James who fell back a few paces as another body flew into the room.

“JAMES!”

“Bloody—*what?!”*

The other boy, slightly shorter and outfitted with a full-head of raven-black hair, stepped over the threshold teeming with enough energy to kill a jackrabbit. He reached for James with one hand, the other crossed over his chest as he bent forward and laughed.

“Those gits—those stupid bloody tossers! You should’a seen them, the way they—”

Remus, still standing tall over his traded bed and trunk, fell eerily still when those grey eyes found him. The face they belonged to went quiet instantly as the boy dropped his arm to his side, losing his eager smile after realising that his friends were not alone. He pressed full lips into a thin line and arched a single perfect eyebrow, looking him up and

down. There was only one word to describe a person like this; *pretty* . Pretty in that damned, un-trying, but knowing, sort of way. He was wearing a uniform, or half of one, with his dress shirt tucked in on only one side, his tie pulled loose around his neck. He had a gold hoop in his right ear that Remus only noticed because his long hair was tucked up behind it with a pencil as though he'd forgotten about it. This boy was the kind of person who could draw anyone to them like a magnet; people would hang off their every word and fall over themselves for even the slightest bit of attention. Remus had only witnessed it a few times himself—Tomny had had some pretty girlfriends—but every time he'd tried to understand the way Tomny had looked at them he'd only grow more and more envious. Pretty people were the worst, but damned if they weren't the *best* to look at.

The boy kept looking Remus up and down like he was taking stock, then clicked his tongue like he'd found his answer.

"Well fuck me," the pretty one said, bitterly.

Remus blinked, but before he could react James dropped a heavy hand down on his friend's shoulder, nearly tugging him to the floor.

"Sirius," he offered, "meet Remus."

Chapter End Notes

> And we now have all four Marauders together—though it'll be a while before anyone is calling them that :')
>
> Year 11 is the UK equivalent of grade 10 respectively. The kids will be aged 15-16 this year, 16-17 in Year 12, and 17-18 in Year 13.

Chapter 5: Warm Welcome

Chapter Summary

Thus begins a very stilted first day in the dorm of 4A. Remus is a bit of a home-sick sop in this one.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking and the 'f' slur used in a smoking context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maybe I'll be there to shake your hand,
Maybe I'll be there to share the land;
That they'll be givin' away,
When we all live together, we're talkin' 'bout together, now…

- "Share the Land" The Guess Who, 1970

Sirius Black, did in fact, know who he was. Or rather, Remus got the feeling that he knew a lot more about him than just what could be pried out of the 'R. Lupin' plaque outside the door. James, seemingly the eternal gentleman, had swooped in easily to introduce the both of them, but Sirius just looked Remus up and down with tight eyes and nodded his head. It was the same look you got walking around the East End on your own; it said, 'I see you, and if you try anything I'll gut ya', only on Sirius, with his swooping black hair, untucked dress shirt, and shined shoes, Remus saw more of a conceited prince than a scrappy alley-boy.

"Don't normally get new kids in year eleven," Sirius said, like an observation. He seemed to end every sentence with a brow-raise. It made Remus think of the stuffy ministers that visited the Estate all the time on business with his father.

"So I've heard," Remus answered. He stepped back and gave the boys an open stance with his shoulders back—the way Tomny used to do when he and the group used to stare down trouble. It was a display of dominance, but it had always worked for Tomny. To Remus' surprise, a corner of Sirius' mouth quirked up, though he still hadn't moved any further into the room. James kept his eyebrows knitted together in the centre of his forehead while Peter fit his spoon back into his mouth.

“Where you from?” Sirius asked.

“He’s from London,” James supplied for him.

“London,” Sirius said without much enthusiasm. “Champion. Three out of four now. Must feel so lucky.”

So not him, Remus thought. He didn’t have the vibe of it anyway. Remus had known Sirius Black for less than two minutes, and already he was already pretty sure he’d placed him. Most likely old money with familial pride, maybe even a distant cousin to the crown a few times removed. That’s what schools like Hawkings were filled with, right?

You see people, Tomny’s voice echoed in his head. It made him want to ring the older boy by phone or by the neck; both of which were equally as unrealistic when Remus considered the fact that he was hours from London and Tomny didn’t have a telephone.

“And you?” He asked, drumming his fingers across the top of his trunk. “Where’s your family from?”

Sirius dropped his smirk, and Remus saw a tendon in his neck flex. James, sensing the sudden mood shift in his friend, grabbed Sirius by the shoulder and nudged him gently. “C’mon, Sirius, tell me what happened with Reg and his lot.”

“Yeah…” Sirius started, still staring at Remus.

“We’ll leave you to get settled in, Remus,” James said, helpfully. “You coming Pete?”

Peter scrambled up off of his bed, setting the empty bowl of curry aside. “Coming!”

James turned his friend toward the door, and Sirius shoved his hands into his trouser pockets, tossing his dark locks out of his eyes with the flip of his head. “Pleased to meet you, Remus,” James called, opening the door and walking out with Sirius ahead of him.

Peter reached for the door handle after the two boys and smiled. “Feel free to just shove my stuff aside, Remus. I’ll trade you bed covers later. See you!”

Remus waved goodbye to be polite before the door shut with a heavy click and he was finally left alone. The room itself was spacious

enough and made up of a large rectangular shape with four dark walls and hardwood floor. The beds were set up across from each other in a square, with red rugs spanning the aisles between. The bathroom was decent too, with all white fixings and clean tile, though the only two windows in the entire space were on the far wall, away from his and Peter's beds.

The room itself was already scattered with various things belonging to the boys; a robe on the floor, new textbooks left in piles, trainers thrown haphazardly under the beds, pens and paper scattered about on side tables. It wasn't complete chaos, just the kind of organised mess that came with move-ins; the little upset that happened before everything found its place. One of the boys had already hung up a few football posters between the posts of his bed. Remus only vaguely recognised the name 'Arsenal Club', but the fit man displayed on the poster, caught mid-kick with a football, was completely unknown to him. He guessed the bed was James', which meant the other had to belong to Sirius.

Deciding that it was best to stake his claim before he completely lost out to his new roommates, Remus tugged his trunks (both generously labelled, 'R. J. Lupin' in gold embossing) over to his bed in the corner and began replacing them with Peter's things. Luckily it seemed as though the other boy hadn't much interest in unpacking, as the only things pulled out of his trunks were a pair of (hopefully clean) socks, a school timetable, an old bomber jacket that even Remus had to admit looked pretty wicked, and a half-eaten bag of crisps.

Tossing all of this into Peter's opened trunk, Remus dragged it and the others back across the room. The third one was particularly heavy, and he briefly found himself wondering if Peter had a rock collection he'd yet to unpack and put on display.

When the trunks were all righted, Remus crossed the room to the nearest open window and flipped the latch, sliding it upwards. The window didn't stick like the last dorm he'd been in, but that room hadn't been even half the size of this one, and its windows had only stuck because they weren't *supposed* to open. Not that that kept the boys from prying the glued edges up for a quick fag or an easy escape.

Remus stuck a cigarette between his teeth and lit it, feeling the smoke fill his lungs as he finally got his first moment of peace since leaving London. The room faced the dorm's front lawn and drive and as he smoked he got more than an eyeful of a couple who were sitting on

the grass next to one of the stone griffins. He watched innocently enough until their affectionate cuddling turned more serious and he had to turn the other shoulder to avoid staring right at them, opting to glue his eyes on the trees across the road. When he'd smoked the tab down to ash, he reached around to the edge of the window and tapped it out lightly on the building's brick before going to the bathroom to flush the evidence. A quick glance in the bathroom mirror afterwards told him that he'd been walking around the entire day with half his hair pressed completely flat to his skull. It was probably a side-effect of those few hours he'd managed to sleep on the train.

Wetting his hair lightly, Remus combed his fingers through his tan curls before sighing. All he could think about was the textbooks he'd had all summer but hadn't touched, or the brand new pair of Oxfords that would surely be a bitch to break-in, or the fact that he'd have to stand next to James or Sirius' bed every time he had a cig or a breather. The only real clothes he had were a sporting grey and cardinal red uniform (Godric's 'House colour', meant to 'promote school and House pride while connecting students across years and levels in an uplifting show of fellowship'). According to school regulations he was to keep his trousers pressed and his marks up, and if not his father would hear of it. The new reality was that he'd traded dingy London street corners and old men who acted more like mothers than chauffeurs for arithmetic and curfews, and unless he found a way to get himself out of it he was going to spend the next ten months well and truly sorry. But for now at least, feeling sorry for himself was about all Remus could do.

Bending over the sink again, he splashed water over his face, wincing at the cold before pushing his hands back over his head and squeezing tightly on his neck. Maybe, he thought sarcastically, if he pinched hard enough he'd wake up in Tomny's flat to find it was all a bad dream.

In the end, all Remus ended up with was a bruise.

* * *

The other boys returned the same way Sirius had appeared; quickly and with much enthusiasm. It was nearly half past six when they did, each of them with their shirts rolled up to their elbows and grass stains on their trousers like they'd been tossing about in a field. Remus sat up quickly on his bed when the door was thrown open, trying to

make himself appear busy by fiddling with the papers he'd left on his bedside table.

"Pete, mate, you gotta take your dishes out," James said. "It smells like my mum's undhiyu in here."

"I'll do it," Peter promised, walking in with a tray between both hands. He smiled when he saw Remus, and turned toward him. "Hi ya Remus, brought you some dinner."

"We thought you might be hungry," James said, kindly, walking backward to his bed. It was indeed the one covered in football posters. Sirius entered last, his hair tousled like the rest of them with a smug and contented smile on his face.

"Thanks," Remus said as he swung his legs over the side of his bed and Peter set the tray down on his side table.

"No problem," Peter nodded, returning to his bed and only glancing at his stained curry bowl before scooping up a small toiletries bag and disappearing into the bathroom.

Dinner was bangers and mash with tiramisu for afters and a coke to drink. Remus gently lifted the tray up off the side table and onto his lap, digging in as the boys went about the rest of their unpacking. Seemingly already sorted himself, Sirius opted to cross to James' bed and tug one of his trunks open. Remus watched silently, popping the tab on his drink and half-wondering if Sirius was about to start folding his friend's underwear for him. The inside of the trunk was stuffed to the brim with school clothes and shoes, all of which Sirius pushed aside to uncover a large black box. He smacked its top eagerly, earning himself a metallic thrum as though it were hollow.

"Hey Pete, you got them?" Sirius called, sounding almost giddy.

Peter answered from the bathroom; "Yeah I got 'em, just hold on."

"You didn't damage any of them did you?"

"No, I didn't *damage* any of them."

"Good." Reaching past the metal box, Sirius pulled some sort of briefcase out of James' trunk and lifted it up and onto the top of his wardrobe hutch before returning to the trunk. "Blimey James, did you have to pack it with your football boots? Bloody reeks."

“Not my fault the thing weighs half a ton,” James said from his bed, where he was casually flipping through a football magazine. “You’re lucky I brought it back at all.”

Scoffing, Sirius lifted the box out of his friend’s trunk and spun around to his hutch again. As he did, Remus caught sight of several dials and knobs and finally caught on. Unable to help himself, he swallowed his mouthful of mash and called out to him; “That a stereo?”

Sirius stopped halfway to his bed, holding the hi-fi to his chest and staring at Remus as though he’d completely forgotten he was there. “Yeah,” he answered tonelessly, before turning his back and placing the stereo onto the hutch along with the small case, which turned out to be a turntable he’d outfit as a small trunk. There was some rustling, and then Sirius began sorting out several wires, connecting the hi-fi’s speakers to the turner and looping each chord behind the hutch to the wall outlet.

“You’re going to start a fire one day,” James commented, pushing his bed curtains aside so Sirius could plug-in.

“We’ll blame it on the ancient bedside lamps,” Sirius quipped. “You got the posters?”

“Yup.” Tossing the sports rag aside, James slipped off of his bed and reached into the pocket on the roof of his trunk, pulling out several sheets of folded paper. Most were dingy—stained yellow on the back and tattered at the corners like they’d been torn down and tacked up again countless times—but Sirius just took them and sorted through, biting his bottom lip over a grin. Tucking most of them under one arm, he dropped open the biggest one, revealing the black and white image of Mick Jagger wailing into a microphone.

“Missed ya, Mick,” Sirius sighed wistfully.

“Just snog him why don’t you,” Peter said, emerging from the bathroom.

Sirius dropped the top of the poster down to fold in half. “You’d like that wouldn’t you Pete? Sorry to say you gotta pay for the full show.”

Peter snorted good-naturedly and reached for his trunks, tipping the heaviest onto its side and cracking it open. “Come get ‘em then, Black,” he called, and setting the posters aside, Sirius streaked over to his corner and began digging through the trunk.

Remus stared in his curiosity, before his eyes slid to James, who was also watching with a small smile. Catching his eye, James winked before lifting up his leg and resting his chin on his knee. A little unnerved, Remus looked back to their other roommates and then, before his very eyes, Sirius began pulling out album after album after album. He dragged an entire collection out of Pete's trunk—just a whole stack of records, right there in the open, some so clean they might as well have been straight out of the wrappings. It was none of the drab violin melodies or doo-wap that had been down in the common room, but bands like The Animals, Pink Floyd, The Sweet, Led Zeppelin, some Remus hadn't heard of. Sirius was almost vibrating with glee, and this time he took Peter's advice—planting huge smooches right over albums like *Transformer* and *Physical Graffiti*.

"An addict with his fix," James observed and Sirius fanned himself with another LP.

"It's ecstasy for the soul, Potter."

Remus was almost gnawing on his fork out of jealousy by the time Peter caught him staring. He sauntered over, quite content to let Sirius have free-reign of his trunk, and sat on the foot of Remus' bed as though they'd known each other for years.

"They always do bangers and mash every Tuesday," Peter said, gesturing to Remus' dinner. Casually, Remus sat up a little straighter in bed, jutting his chin toward Sirius and speaking quietly so only Peter would hear.

"Didn't think they'd let you have a set up in the rooms."

"Oh we're not supposed to, but no one snitches on us. Last one who did got every pair of knickers displayed on the school's flag post."

Remus raised a brow. "You strung some bloke's underwear up a flag post?"

"Yeah. It's all good fun, but most of the lads like Sirius' music anyway, and he really only plays it loud the first week."

"Why just the first week?"

"Stop gossiping back there, you jessies," Sirius called. He'd carried a fat stack of albums over to his bed and was now taking stock. Peter shot Sirius a rude gesture and turned back to Remus.

“Between you and me, it’s pretty intolerable, but just put up with it for a few days and things’ll level out.”

“Put up with w—”

Suddenly the room was filled with an immense scream of reverb as Sirius’ hi-fi began belting out a fervid guitar riff. The music was loud enough to have raddled every door from Brick Lane to Whitechapel. Peter clapped his hands over his ears and James leapt about a foot off his bed, but Sirius only grinned as he dropped his head back toward the ceiling as the the lead singer screamed;

'1—2—3—4!'

Raising his arms like he was holding a guitar, Sirius air-strummed along to every note in the opening riff.

“WELCOME TO HAWKINGS!” Peter shouted, as symbols crashed and Slade began what had to have been their loudest in-dorm performance ever.

'I don’t want to drink my whisky like you do,
I don’t need to spend my money but still do,
Don’t stop now a c'mon—
Another drop now c'mon—
I wanna lot now so c’mon—
That’s right, that’s right!
I said Mama but we’re all crazy now!'

Still half-stunned, stuck between appreciating the song—*it's Slade! It's bloody Slade in our bedroom*—and horrified by its volume, Remus looked down to find that he’d up-ended his tiramisu across his dinner tray.

Chapter End Notes

> Undhiyu is a vegetable dish from the region of Gujarat, India. 'Hi-fi' is just another term for a stereo.
>
> The albums mentioned are Lou Reed's 'Transformers' (1972) and Led Zeppelin's 'Physical Graffiti' (1975). The song at the end is Slade's "Mama Weer All Crazee Now" (1972).

Chapter 6: Day One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life's the same and it always will be;
Hey! Hey! Hey!
Easy picking foxes from a tree;
Hey! Hey! Hey!
I can't get no satisfaction,
All I want is easy action, baby!

- "Solid Gold Easy Action" T. Rex, 1972

Wednesday 3rd September 1975

Remus fell asleep to the Doors and woke up to T. Rex. The record player had barely stopped spinning since it had been unpacked the night before and it seemed as though Sirius was determined to play every single album he'd pulled out of Peter's trunk before he was satisfied. It might've been nice, had Sirius known there was a different level of volume other than *LOUD*.

More surprisingly, James and Peter didn't seem to mind. Remus had figured that after the third replay of *In Rock* one of the boys would've cracked; but nothing. They all went about their evening like there wasn't a rock concert in the centre of their bedroom. They showered, cleared out their dishes (or rather, Peter did), and continued shovelling books and clothes away into their respective homes before climbing into bed. It was as though not acknowledging the music was the key, but Remus was so bewildered by the whole thing that for the first several hours he'd actually forgotten to be angry about it. Sirius did have good taste—even if his affinity for Bowie had started to make Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane feel like a fifth and sixth roommate.

The music had plunged on and on even as the summer sun dropped below the trees outside their window and disappeared. Remus mostly kept to himself on his bed, fiddling with his history text and letting his head bob along to the songs that he knew. Sirius never so much as spared him a glance when he knew Remus was watching, but more than once he'd had caught the other boy peeking over the tops of his

knees as he laid back in bed. Each time their eyes met Sirius would turn away sharply, and usually the next song that played would be slightly louder than the last.

To his credit Sirius did turn the hi-fi down a few notches just before ten. The boys had all changed and washed by then, Remus making sure to take his turn during a particularly rough acoustic pop-rock number just so he could put a closed door between himself and the music. When he'd emerged from the bathroom, wearing his standard-issue Hawkings night pants and a grey t-shirt, James was putting in ear plugs. He caught Remus staring and flashed a sorry smile, before twisting away to reach for something on his nightstand. Looking back, James mouthed 'catch' over the music and tossed him his own pair of rubber ear plugs before flashing a thumbs up, taking off his glasses and clicking off his bedside lamp.

Making his way back to his own bed, Remus glanced at Sirius who was still in his day clothes, laying half-on and half-off his bed as he sang along to the album. He was off, lost in the song the way music could do to you. Peter padded past in his pyjamas to get the lights, sandy hair still damp from the shower, wearing winter earmuffs to block the noise. "Night, Remus," Remus thought he said, before the light was gone and the dorm was left in noisy darkness.

The earplugs didn't stifle all of the noise, but they were better than nothing. Remus had always considered himself to be a bit of a night owl, but after spending a night out with Tomny and the rest and the following on a cross-country train, he was ruined. Tomorrow he'd be expected to wake up and attend his first day of lessons, which meant uniforms and timetables and professors he'd have chewed up for a midday snack not six months prior. Just as he'd resigned himself to get up and toss the bloody stereo out the window—he couldn't listen to another round of *Slayed?* again, he couldn't—the record clicked off, and the dorm finally fell into a staggered silence. Remus squinted up at the top of his bed's roofing, waiting for the creaking sound of floorboards that signalled Sirius' changing—or even worse, replaying—of the album, but nothing came. Sirius had fallen asleep, still in his clothes, just after 2AM.

He'd been foolish enough to take the ear plugs out after that, which left him shooting up in bed at 7AM to the sound of T. Rex shouting *'HEY! HEY! HEY!'* across their dorm room. A record was spinning on the turntable but Sirius' bed was empty and James was already dressed, sorting through a bag of football equipment while Peter remained little more than a lump beneath his covers. Remus groaned

and rubbed his eyes, which burned from that familiar lack of sleep. Irritated because—damn it, he *liked* this song—he snatched up his pillow and tossed it at James' feet, making the boy jump and look up.

"WHERE IS HE?" Remus shouted, over the noise.

"BATHROOM!"

He wasn't even in the room to listen and still he tortured them?

Tossing back his covers and crossing the room, Remus lifted the needle from the spinning record and instantly the blaring rock music was cut off.

Peter sat up from his bed, rubbing his eyes, ear muffs askew. "Is it over?"

"Yeah," Remus said, "it's bloody over."

James gave Remus an uneasy look, which he ignored, but Peter only beamed. "It's a new record."

He might've asked what he meant, if the bathroom door hadn't opened revealing Sirius, hair combed and all done up in his full Hawkings' uniform. He stalked out and stopped right in front of Remus, staring him down with those grey eyes. Sirius was shorter, obviously, but Remus got the distinct impression that his height wasn't much of a deterring factor. Sirius was like a panther—or maybe a cobra; taunt and ready to strike. Remus thought he might do it too, and prepared to knock him back if the other boy decided this would be more than just a stare-down. But Sirius didn't hit him. Instead he only looked from Remus' face to the record player, to his four-poster.

"That's my bed," Sirius said, his eyes falling back to Remus.

Remus glanced back briefly without moving his head. "Yeah."

"You're in the way."

"Sorry," Remus shrugged, not moving.

Sirius' long mouth lifted, but it wasn't a smile. "Then move."

Remus pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek, before relenting. He was too knackered to have a go at him, even if Sirius deserved it. He stepped aside and Sirius stalked past. He went to the player, but mercifully turned the hi-fi off rather than reset the needle.

The tense mood was broken by James, who clapped his hands together while grinning like a maniac, probably just relieved that none of them had started throwing fists on their first morning together.

“So, breakfast?” He asked, as a plug fell out of his ear.

* * *

Remus walked to the dining hall next to Peter, a good distance away from James and Sirius, who were whispering furiously back and forth. A trolley existed to shuttle students to breakfast and back again before lessons, but it ran on a set schedule and by the time Peter had found his dress pants at the bottom of one of his trunks they were running late. The walk wasn’t bad; they followed a path that cut through the small crop of trees separating the street of upper-secondary dorms from the rest of the campus, probably created after countless years of students coming and going long before their time.

Peter was chittering away about his summer—he and his family had been visiting cousins in America, and apparently New York was *much* more interesting than dreary old London—a conversation that continued through breakfast. Sirius made no objections when the four of them sat down together—Sirius and James on one side, Peter and Remus on the other—though Remus still had the feeling that he had yet to say everything he’d wanted to.

Well, tough, Remus thought. *I didn’t want to be here either.* It really was just his luck to get stuck in a room with a git more wound up than Tomny after a bad trip. No one had bothered them over the noise just as Peter had said, though Remus was pretty sure there wasn’t a corner of the whole dorm where you weren’t able to hear the music.

The boys compared timetables over breakfast with the dull roar of the endless dining hall behind them. Peter was disappointed to find out he did not have forms and registration with James, but it was only the first day of lessons anyway, so forms were passed up in favour of letting students settle into their new schedules, giving them an extra hour for breakfast. Hawkings’ kept to their own sort of timetable, Remus was realizing. Five periods a day instead of the usual six, thanks to forms or Tuesday and Thursday’s Holy Communion taking up the first hour of each morning.

As they were eating, Peter leaned over to get an eyeful of Remus' schedule. "Who you got for forms, Remus?"

"Buchanan," Remus said over a mouthful of porridge.

"Oh, same as Sirius."

Both boys made eye contact from across the table. Sirius looked as though he might snap his spoon in half. Remus felt similar. Luckily, before their second staring contest of the day could come to a head, a voice chimed next to their table.

"Alright, boys?"

Remus looked up to find a pretty girl standing next to him. She was looking at Sirius, but as Remus leaned back her dark eyes shifted to him and she smiled a little, reaching up to finger one of her tight, black curls.

"Alright, Macdonald," Sirius said, brazenly. He was smirking, a thumb to his mouth as he looked her up and down. All sense of animosity for Remus was gone.

"It's *Mary Macdonald* to you, Sirius Black," she warned, looking however pleased. "I see the brotherhood has reformed."

"You know it." James clapped a hand on Sirius' back while Mary crossed her arms.

"Good summers, then?"

"Pete went to Florida," Sirius offered, pointing at his friend with his spoon.

"*New York*."

"Brilliant," she surmised. "And yourself, Black?"

"Robbed a bank. Just the usual, really."

She giggled quite hard, but Remus didn't really think the joke was that funny.

"So... heard from Evans much this summer, Macdonald?" James asked, in what was probably meant to be an innocent voice. It earned him a stern wave of the finger and even a 'tsk'.

“Nice try, Potter, but you know Lily’s not interested.”

James instantly deflated, while Sirius clasped him over the shoulder loyally. “Aw, don’t you think this game is getting a bit old, Macdonald?” He cooed. “I mean, whatever you gals think Potter did, it really couldn’t have been *that* bad, could it?”

“Lily disagrees.”

James threw his hands out. “Well, if she’d just *tell me*—”

“Shouldn’t have to. Just because you’re a bloke doesn’t mean you have a pass on being thick.”

“Aw, come on, Macdonald!”

”Yeah, you’re breaking the poor man’s heart,” Peter added. “You’d think Evans would’ve cooled off by now.”

“Yeah!” James exclaimed. “It’s been a whole summer. What could we have—”

Mary silenced James with a simple wave of her hand. “My lips are sealed.”

After locking the corner of her mouth with an imaginary key, she turned to Remus, who had been mostly picking at his breakfast while keeping to himself.

“You’re new,” Mary said. “I would know you, if you weren’t.”

“You mean you’d have snogged him already,” Sirius sniggered. Mary pinched him for it.

“Ow!”

“Nose out, Black.”

Remus lifted his cup of orange juice to his lips. “Yeah, I’m new.”

“Fun.” She leaned one hip onto the edge of the cafeteria table. “Feels like we never get new kids anymore.”

“Yeah, he *knows*,” Sirius drawled, locking eyes with Remus again. Across from them, Mary sighed.

“Well—gotta have something interesting pop up once in a while. You

four are getting horribly boring."

"Liar. You love us."

"I love *Peter*," she corrected, blowing Peter a kiss that turned his face into a cherry tomato. "Potter here is on the outs by default—sorry, love—and you, Black, are officially on my 'do not—"

"Mary!"

They all craned their necks to find a group of girls, Lily and two blondes, waving Mary over. Lily looked furious, but when her eyes found Remus she softened and flashed a sympathetic smile and a little wave.

"My ladies await," Mary said. Then she turned to Remus and grinned. "Bye, new boy."

After ensuring that he was suitably uncomfortable, Mary turned and flounced off to join her friends. Ready gossips, the three girls quickly gathered round her to whisper, shooting the occasional glance toward their table, before promptly leaving the hall arm in arm.

"Jesus. I can't believe you're still on Evans' black-list," Sirius said to James, who looked crestfallen as he stabbed his fork into a bowl of mixed fruit.

"I tried talking to her during move-in, but she just ignored me and went off with the other prefects. Hell, how am I supposed to apologise for whatever it is I did if she won't even talk to me?"

Like a scorned bachelor, Peter sighed; "Women."

Sirius swallowed a mouthful of toast and clapped James on the back for the second time that morning. "Chin-up, mate. She's just playing hard to get."

Peter raised his mug. "Since when did 'playing hard to get' mean the same thing as 'hating your guts'?"

Without pretense, Sirius delivered a sharp kick under the table and Peter spluttered, spraying his face with orange juice. James instantly began to laugh, which made Sirius snort too—and soon enough they were all laughing, even Peter.

Head down, Remus finished his porridge.

* * *

No forms first thing meant period one began at nine-thirty. As students starting year eleven they'd be expected to complete several exams at the end of the year, making forms invaluable study time. Not that it mattered much to Remus. Somewhere between listening to Peter go on about how the Statue of Liberty "really wasn't all that tall" and making his way to his period one class—Geography—he had steeled himself that he was not going to last longer than Halloween.

Plotting an escape kept his mind busy at least. Maybe he could just make a run for it in the middle of the night and find a way to hail a car, or else tell Giles he'd been kidnapped by his driver. It didn't matter if he left behind his things, let the others have them. All that was needed was his mother's trunk and a train ticket back to London. Selling his stash of Embassys might garner him enough cash, but how long would that take? The only people Remus knew were Lily and his barmy roommates. He supposed he could just walk off into the woods —there were plenty of that around Hawkings—but that was probably just the cynic in him talking.

Peter did not have Geography, and instead was taking supplementary maths courses—his worst subject, supposedly. This left Remus with no choice but to follow James and Sirius to first period, his leather rucksack banging into his knees broodingly. It was still summer outside, which meant he was sweating under his collar again. The whole Hawkings uniform felt unbearably stuffy, but because it was the first day everyone was dressed in formal wear as per regulation. Sirius, of course, looked every bit the gentleman in his school jacket and grey slacks. Remus hadn't seen anyone else with hair as long as his, but he supposed that was just another rule Sirius bloody Black was immune to.

James looked good in his uniform as well, with the shoulders of an athlete and legs to match. Remus tried not to stare, but it was hard when he insisted on lagging behind. The handsome pair could've been on the cover of *Popswap*, what with their spiffing collars and silver cufflinks. James had indicated with his head more than once for Remus to catch-up and join, but he'd stayed back, content with following rather than swap glares with Sirius. Besides, from this angle Remus was able to pretend that his uniform fit him in the same way it did them, rather than falling short at the wrists and ankles by several

inches. Clearly whoever had put in the order for his school clothes hadn't taken in account his summer growth spurt.

"Remus!"

He'd barely made it into the door of the geography classroom before Lily appeared at his elbow.

"You've got Geography first too?" She asked hopefully.

"Er—yeah," Remus answered, feeling gangly and awkward in the doorway. Meanwhile Sirius had already strode to the back of the class, dropping his bag on an empty desk with a dramatic flourish. James though, had stilled when Lily called out Remus' name. Clearly stunned, he'd spun around to stare at them while Lily pretended not to notice. The obvious exchange made Remus feel instantly guilty, despite not having done anything wrong.

"Sit with me?" Lily offered. "Professor Durrin doesn't assign seats."

Remus glanced dubiously between the two, wishing for a way out that didn't involve him choosing. Across the classroom, Sirius was watching like he'd just discovered a new favourite primetime drama.

Finally, Remus relented.

"Sure, Lily."

Exstatic—though perhaps laying it on a bit thick—Lily took his arm and guided him down the row of desks, right past James.

"You're pretty tall, so it's probably best we don't sit at the very front," she said, as they strode toward a pair seats in the centre of the room.

Already the classroom was filling up with other students, eager to claim their spots for the term. Sirius and James ended up near the back by the windows. Remus could feel their eyes boring into the back of his skull as he pulled out his school things.

"… Shit."

"What's wrong?" Lily asked, flipping open an organizer.

"Forgot my textbooks." He'd been flipping through each while trying to drown out Sirius' music the night before, and left them in a pile at the foot of his bed.

“Oh. Well, you can always share mine.” She reached into her rucksack and pulled out her geography text, resting it on the desk between them. Then she scooted her chair closer, and Remus imagined James banging a gavel and announcing him guilty of betraying the brotherhood.

“Er… Might not need them anyway. ‘S first day and all…”

“Well, it is exams this year,” Lily said. “And Professor Durrin is a—” she leaned in, smiling; “bit of a hard-ass.”

Remus felt the corners of his mouth tug upwards. “Right.”

“I am sorry by the way,” she sighed.

“For what?”

“For you having to room with… *them*.” Lily avoided looking backward, only straightening up in her seat, but Remus understood. The air suddenly felt more stuffy; clearly something was going on between Lily, her friends, and the boys of 4A that he had not been privy to.

“Yeah…” Remus drawled awkwardly.

“They’re all just so—” Lily scowled before letting out a breath. “I still don’t know how Miles put up with it.”

“Miles?”

“Their roommate before you.”

Oh.

“He leave?”

Lily looked down at her agenda, tapping her pencil against its page. “Yeah, a few months shy of end of term, last year. I think he got sick, but I dunno for sure. Miles was nice though, kinda like you, Remus.”

“I’m not nice,” Remus rebuffed.

“Well, that’s an odd thing to brag about. I only meant Miles liked books and things too.” She gestured to the novel Remus had left on the corner of his desk and he grabbed it, sliding the book back into his bag pointedly.

“Don’t worry,” Lily said. “The similarities end there, I think. Miles also kept his hair combed rather than looking like an unwashed paintbrush.”

Remus fought a small smile. It was almost like getting hustled by Tomny. “You’re actually quite mean, aren’t you, Evans?”

“Only to keep people on their toes,” Lily said, smirking down at her agenda. “Anyway, don’t let them rope you into anything you don’t want to do. I know how they are.”

“Hm.” *That made one of them.*

Not long after that Professor Durrin appeared and launched into what he surely thought was a riveting first lesson on the environmental geography of the British Isles. Remus was kept at attention only because of the fact that Lily’s elbow would occasionally graze his—she was left-handed—making a shiver run up his shoulder.

“Remus,” Lily whispered eventually, “you’re bobbing your leg.”

“Oh.” He forced himself to stop, turning to teeth-grinding instead. Their schedule allowed for ten minutes travel time in between lessons. If Lily could direct him to his next lesson, he might have time to sneak a smoke.

Of course though, Sod’s Law always won out.

Just a few minutes shy of the end of the lesson a knock came on the classroom door, and each student sat up a little straighter as Professor Durrin poked his round face out into the hall. A moment later he reappeared and crossed back to his chalkboard.

“Remus Lupin,” he called lazily, “you’re wanted in the Headmistress’s office.”

It took another elbow (this one on purpose) from Lily to get him moving. Gingerly, he collected his things and stood up, walking past the rest of the class. Just before walking out the door, Remus glanced back to find James staring at him with the rest while Sirius balanced a pencil on his upper lip, ignoring the whole affair.

Chapter End Notes

The albums referenced in this chapter are Deep Purple's 'In Rock' (1970) and Slade's 'Slayed?' (1972).

'Sod's Law' is just the British slang equivalent for 'Murphy's Law'.

Chapter 7: Lost Causes

Chapter Summary

Remus meets the Headmistress and night two in the dorm begins.

Chapter Notes

CW: References to smoking/cigarettes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hey hung up old Mr. Normal,
Don't try to gain my trust;
'Cause you ain't gonna follow me any of those ways,
Although you think you must;
We're not gonna take it…

- "We're Not Gonna Take It" The Who, 1969

The secretary who'd been sent to fetch him led Remus across the grounds between the buildings, her stumpy heels slipping across the cobblestones until they'd made it to what had to be the oldest, finest building on the entire campus.

"This is Castle Hall," she said, indicating the great round drive that went right past the building's front steps and connected down to the road below. It was probably the place where the driver who'd picked him up from the train station *should've* dropped him off.

"The Great Hall is just behind," she added. "You'll be having all your examinations there."

Walking up Castle Hall's front steps, she held the door for Remus. Inside the floors were made of stone like an actual castle, with walls of deep wood decorated with black and white photos presumably of the campus buildings in their prime.

"The Headmistress' office is up on the third floor," the secretary said, "now you go on."

Remus resisted the urge to roll his eyes and simply nodded his head, turning to the grand staircase just ahead of him. The second and third

floors of Castle Hall were much like the rest, vast hallways filled with decorative furniture that looked so delicate they'd likely disintegrate if anyone so much as sat down in one of the chairs. No one was around, it being the middle of the first day of lessons, but once he'd made it to the third floor Remus was able to see out across the front berm where students were trickling out of their respective school buildings, each heading to their next lesson of the day.

Luckily, the hall was easier to navigate than the rest of Hawkings, and he found the Headmistress' office easily, thanks to the decorative plaque that read; *Headmistress Minerva McGonagall, O.M. First Class.* The front of the door was carved in the image of a golden lion paused mid-roar with a single decorative knocker inset above the lion's head. Remus gripped the knocker and banged it hard.

"Come in," a voice called, and he turned the door handle, walking inside. He stepped into a vast sitting area with vaulted ceilings and rich burgundy wallpaper. A fire was burning in the fireplace grate, making him instantly too warm, and the room was made up with a velvet sofa and a few scattered arm chairs all decorated with the rich maroon patterning of Hawkings' colours. Luxurious paintings hung on every wall and a statue of a grey tabby cat sat on the fireplace's mantle, staring at him with yellow eyes like a watchful guardian.

Beyond the sitting area was an office filled up by a great oak desk and walls lined with books and various other items that looked like they were either very old or very rare, and in the middle of the office, sitting behind the large desk, was a stern-looking woman with a mouth drawn as thin as a pin. She had black hair streaked with grey, tied up into a severe bun on the top of her head, and wore a set of green robes that made her look more like a wizard than a teacher.

"Mr. Lupin," she said, looking up from the neat pile of papers she had in front of her, "please, come sit."

Remus had never liked being called 'Mr. Lupin', it was a title reserved for his father or scoldings, but since he suspected the incoming conversation to involve both, he approached the Headmistress' desk and sat down in one of the cushioned chairs across from her, school-bag across his lap.

Headmistress McGonagall set down the paper she had been reading, face-down, and sat back in her chair with her arms across her lap. "Hello Remus," she started, "I am Headmistress McGonagall. Firstly, I would like to welcome you to Hawkings School."

She paused, as if waiting for a reaction, and Remus nodded. Seemingly satisfied, she continued. “I’m sorry I couldn’t welcome you yesterday.”

“I was late to move-in,” Remus answered flatly. His gaze drifted upward, where a stag’s head was mounted on the wall behind her. McGonagall cleared her throat to get his attention, and Remus snapped his eyes back to her.

“Yes, your father contacted me and said that you would be arriving on the second. He also agreed that you would attend a meeting with me in my office though I regret to say though that the second was yesterday, and now it is the third, today.”

Remus ground his teeth together. No one had bothered to tell *him* he was supposed to meet the bloody Headmistress first thing. “Sorry,” he forced out between his teeth, “I didn’t know.”

McGonagall nodded placidly, though he had the feeling she was most definitely not satisfied. “We don’t get many new students as old as you at Hawkings. Generally it is believed by the parents and faculty that students benefit most from ongoing, structured education. It was a personal favour to your father that we enrolled you, and of course your late mother, a graduate from Hawkings.”

Remus felt his insides turn to ice. *His mother?*

“You can imagine our concern when you did not turn up for your meeting yesterday,” the Headmistress continued. “If you hadn’t been marked as present by your dorm monitor at last night’s evening curfew, we would’ve had to contact the authorities over your whereabouts. It’s not in the school’s best interests to lose a student.”

The icy feeling turned to a boil. Already he was on the outs, and he’d scarcely even started at the school. “Sorry,” he said again, though he didn’t mean it.

McGonagall reached for a folder she’d separated from the rest and opened it, taking a moment to read its contents. Remus had no doubt of what she'd find; five different schools since he was eleven, various incidents with the police, all worked out amicably or [off the record] under the table. There was probably something in there about Mr. Wright too, the chemistry teacher Remus had sucker-punched after he'd spent an entire period shaming another kid, Darby Williams, for his intellectual shortcomings. Remus hadn’t been particularly close to Darby, (he’d only been at the school for half of year ten and spent most of it skiving off,) but if there was anything worse than a teenage

bully, it was an adult one. He'd moved before thinking, perhaps his fatalist of flaws, and sent Mr. Wright to the floor with a bloody nose. Not that the damn teacher didn't have the last laugh. Remus was expelled, and Mr. Wright got a particularly fat cheque courtesy of the Lupin Estate in exchange for his word to never speak of the incident again.

McGonagall lowered the folder and Remus looked up at her from under his brow, waiting for the rest of the lecture.

"A few of your teachers reported that you were an avid reader."

Remus blinked. "Huh?"

"You have several comments on your transcripts regarding reading," the Headmistress explained. "This teacher—Mrs. Bradshaw? She seemed to think that you were quite the bright, young boy. She mentioned that you were reading well above the level of your fellow classmates, and that your maths were decent as well."

Remus thought back. Mrs. Bradshaw had been one of his year nine teachers, but there had been two schools that year, and he couldn't remember which she'd taught at.

"Do you like to read, Remus?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Not really." A lie.

"Hm… Well, you do know Hawkings boasts one of the best Upper-Secondary English programs in the country, yes?"

"Er—sure?"

McGonagall flicked the folder, straightening its contents. "You didn't attempt any O-Levels in your tenth year did you, Remus?"

Remus busied himself by examining his bag strap. "No."

"Well then, I suppose you'll have to work extra hard to achieve passing marks by the end of the year. In order for you to go on to A-Levels and university, at least two of your classes must be passed with an A mark, you understand."

"Mm…"

"Mr. Lupin."

Remus forced his gaze up. Across from him, Professor McGonagall had set the folder down in front of her, face-up, revealing a piece of blank paper without a single note on his record or marks despite all her ramblings. A small smile, he noticed, was playing at the corners of her thin mouth.

“Mr. Lupin,” she repeated, “I shall make myself very clear: Hawkings School does not take on lost causes. You were enrolled because of your successes, not your failures. That being said, the school has rules, and those rules *must* be followed. Do you understand?”

She waited until he’d nodded.

“Good. For now we’ll leave the focus on getting you caught up with your classes. Until then, you’ll be expected to attend each and every lesson, get along with your classmates, and live within the parameters of the school’s regulations. I believe they call it 'the bare minimum'. Can you do that for me?”

No, he thought.

“Yes,” he said.

“Good. I should let you know that your father has arranged a regular stipend for school things throughout the term should you need them—to be doled out at the discretion of various school representatives, of course.”

“Of course,” Remus added, sarcastically.

“You’ll be able to access it from the school’s commissary whenever you should have need of it. On that note, I believe I’ve taken up more than enough of your time for today. If you don’t have any questions, take this pass and give it to your next teacher to excuse your tardiness.”

She passed a yellow slip across the table. It had her great swirling signature at the bottom. Remus pocketed the slip and stood up, ready to be dismissed. He had just turned away from her desk when she stopped him.

“Oh, and Mr. Lupin, just one more thing. Please turn out your pockets.”

* * *

Remus returned to class with his pockets lighter and his patience severely short. He'd avoided losing Tomny's zippo due to a quick sleight of hand, but McGonagall had confiscated his cigarettes and promptly gave him a sharp warning about underage smoking. He'd have to be more careful if he didn't want to lose his entire stash to a teacher that would surely just pocket them to smoke later themselves.

Maths was next, with Peter and Sirius (poor Peter had a double-block), but the teacher Dr. Becker had assigned seats anyway. He ended up on the left side of the classroom just behind the girl from earlier, Mary, who spent the better part of the lesson making eyes at Sirius from across the room. The rest of the day passed with little interruption, apart from the fact that Remus was starting to realise he had very few lessons away from Sirius. Each time they arrived in the same room they did their best to ignore one another, and at lunch when Peter dragged him to their joint picnic table on one of the berms Remus ate with his back facing the rest of them. His leg bobbed incessantly, but he didn't have a spare moment to get all the way back to the dorms to the rest of his cigarettes without being late for another lesson.

By the time they'd finished the school day and had dinner Remus felt as though he might implode with even the weakest prodding. He took the trolley back to his room alone and, finding that the boys hadn't made it back yet, dove immediately for his mother's trunk. Just as he'd shut the thing the dorm room doors opened and the other three boys spilled in like romping puppies. Remus groaned inwardly, nearly crushing his carton of cigarettes as he shoved them beneath his pillow and threw himself down on the bed.

"Good first day, Lupin?" James asked, crossing to his own bed and sitting down.

"Good enough," he answered with a shrug, tapping his fingers on the spine of his geography text.

"My day was just fine," Peter said. "Moira sought me out." He added this bit with a cheeky glance in James' direction, and James returned the look.

"Oh yeah? Thought you guys finished that last term."

"We may have rung each other a few times over summer."

“Pete, you dog.”

Clearly unused to being the subject of gossip, Peter snickered as his cheeks turned red. A moment later, Sirius had emerged from the steaming bathroom, fully clothed with a towel around his shoulders to catch the water that was dripping off the ends of his black hair. Making his way to his bed, he pulled the towel off his neck and rubbed his head with it once more before hanging it on the peg next to one of his bed posts. Then he shook out his hair, the same way a dog might, and reached for his stack of records.

Remus was on his feet in a second. In a few quick strides he’d crossed the bedroom and smacked his hand down on top of the turntable so Sirius would be unable to lift its top.

“No,” he said sternly. "You had your fun yesterday. Other people live here too.”

Sirius looked up at Remus with big eyes, but his expression read as incredulous. “And just who do you think you are?”

“Someone who *lives* here.”

Sirius scoffed lightly and looked to James. “One day and he thinks he’s king of the castle.”

“Well, I’m no bloody subject,” Remus snarled.

Peter looked as though he were ready to dive for cover, and James leaned forward on his bed, clearly uncomfortable.

“What if he just plays it a little lower, Remus?”

“I’ll play it however bloody loud I want to,” Sirius griped.

“Where do you get off being such a prick?” Remus demanded. “Who are you—the bloody Queen?”

“Only if you want to call me ‘Your Majesty’.”

Bristling, Remus made to step forward but James got between them first.

“Lads, it’s just a bit of music. C’mon Sirius, now it’s only seven o'clock, we can play it in the common room.”

Sirius reeled back. “No way! This is *our* room, not his. We’ve lived

here for four years. If he don't like it, then he can sod off."

"Well, it's technically Remus' room now too—"

"Shut your gob, Pete!"

"You must be real popular if that's how you talk to your own mates," Remus mocked.

Sirius' nostrils flared like a bull's. "And just what do you know about us mates, huh? You're just new blood."

"What the fuck you just call me?"

James threw his arms up, pushing both Remus and Sirius away by the shoulder. "That is *enough!* Christ, it's like dealing with a couple 'a bloody birds going at each other. If you can't get along in the same room then you're just gonna have to separate. So c'mon, Black, we're leaving."

Before Sirius could protest any further, James bent down and grabbed a fat stack of the records piled up at the foot of the bed and shoved them into his arms, turning his best friend by the shoulders and marching him straight out of the room.

"Leave the door unlocked, Pete," James said, before letting the door fall closed behind them. Just before it did, Remus heard Sirius grumble;

"You forgot Led Zeppelin."

Remus let out a sharp breath as he staggered back to his bed. The same throbbing from that morning had begun just behind his eyes and Sirius hadn't even played any music. Sitting down on the bed's edge, he squeezed his forehead with both hands.

"Glad that's over," Peter sighed. "Feel like a round of cards, Remus?"

Chapter End Notes

UK Slang/Definitions:
'Skiving off' means to skip or not attend to responsibilities.
'O-levels' are exams taken by year ten and eleven students in the UK, fully-replaced by the GCSE's in 1988.
'A-levels' are similar but more advanced, taken by year 13 students.

'Sixth form' is just another term for year 12 & 13 (also referred to as lower-sixth and upper-sixth, respectively.)

Chapter 8: Forms

Chapter Summary

First day of forms and Remus and Sirius remain at odds.

Chapter Notes

I cover a lot in this chapter. Hope it makes sense, lol.
CW: Smoking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heartbreaker, soul shaker,
I've been told about you;
Steamroller, midnight stroller,
What they've been saying must be true;
Red-hot mama, velvet charmer,
Time's come to pay your dues…

- "Hair of the Dog" Nazareth, 1975

Thursday morning's Holy Communion was, as expected, a very dull affair. Remus might've tried to skive off all together had James not told him they took attendance and wrote letters to the families of students who skipped out, especially if you were daring enough to do so the first week. He reasoned that if he was going to make his escape from Hawkings appear genuine—or at least moderately surprising—letting his father know that he'd been out to lunch on the second day of school probably wasn't the best course of action. So, like the rest of his roommates, Remus hauled himself out of bed at 7AM that Thursday morning to listen to the priests drone on and on with their rites and prayers.

The hymns felt awkward and Remus couldn't remember any of them from the Sunday Eucharists he'd attended as a child. The other boys had no problem of course, apart from Peter who spent most of the time trying not to nod off on his feet. James and Sirius both seemed bored, occasionally whispering to one another behind boyish smirks or thumb-wrestling in the middle of the pew, but still they chanted and sung like everyone else. It was easy to pick out Sirius' voice during the singing and the Latin bits, but then he'd caught him staring during a reading of one of the Gospels and Remus spent the last half hour with

his eyes trained on his shoes.

Avoiding Sirius might've proved more difficult due to their similar school schedules had Peter and James not appointed themselves as peacekeepers. Everywhere Remus went he was head-off by Peter, who had a better nose for tracking than his father's hounds. Despite Peter's best efforts, Remus managed to shake him off between Modern Foreign Languages and lunch, after he'd snuck off to have the fastest fag of his life. He told himself it was just to keep hold of the Remus he'd been back home in London, but Tomny, the cheeky bastard, would've called it nerves. Remus might've silently agreed. He'd never really smoked much on his own before that summer, but now having a cigarette between his fingers just felt calming. It meant he could shut up for a while and tune everything out, and everyone else around was expected to do the same.

No one seemed to have told James Potter that though.

He came around the side of the Flamel Building with his book bag tucked under one arm, his glasses lopsided on his face like they usually were, looking as friendly as ever. "There you are!" He cried, as Remus fumbled to drop his cigarette and crush it under his shoe. "Armie Bell told me he'd seen you crossing here after class."

As James approached Remus hacked a cough into his closed fist. He'd been so surprised by his sudden appearance that he'd inhaled straight into his lungs, burning a hole in his esophagus and making his eyes water.

"You really missed some funny stuff in chemistry. Slughorn made a lava lamp out of a coke bottle and then Sirius—" James paused, a funny look crossing his face as his nose wrinkled. "Remus are you smoking?"

Remus coughed into his fist again and obstinately shook his head.

"You are!" James said in a mixture of light shock and awe.

"So what," he snapped, hacking a few more times, "you gonna tell?"

"No," James started, almost laughing, "Pete's brother sneaks cigarettes in all the time from the village. Other stuff too, but he won't share that."

Finally able to breathe again, Remus suddenly felt more optimistic as he pressed his hands into his pockets and thumbed Tomny's zippo.

“You smoke then?”

“A few times,” James confessed shyly, "but not really. Sirius would love to—thinks it looks cool—but Miles hated it.”

There was that name again; Miles.

“He was your roommate before.” *Before me*.

James nodded. “Yup. We’ve known Miles since year four.”

“And he just left?”

“Well, it was a little more complicated than that, I think.” James rubbed the back of his neck like he regretted bringing the subject up, but Remus could already feel his curiosity getting the better of him. If James was to find out one of his secrets there was no reason why he couldn’t find out one of his.

“Miles left really quickly last year,” he explained. “Just super sudden. We got a letter from him just before the end of term saying his grandparents wanted him to transfer to a school closer to home. He’s from Newcastle though so it’s not exactly easy to visit.”

“Lily said he got sick. What happened?”

James looked down at the ground, at Remus’ discarded cigarette butt. “Dunno. We didn’t even know he was ill, he never said anything. Then he left and we couldn’t even ring him. Sirius is still touchy over it so Pete and I figured it was best to… not talk about it? I dunno… Reckon he blames himself for not realising. Might blame all of us a bit—I mean we lived with him and we didn’t even notice anything was wrong.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Remus said before he could stop himself. James looked up hopefully, like he’d been waiting to hear those same words for a while, and Remus didn't have the heart to take them back.

“It’s not your fault he got sick,” he repeated as a lump rose in his throat. “People just get sick sometimes. It’s life.”

James gave him a doleful smile. “I guess so. Life’s a real bitch.”

"And then you die." Matching his expression, Remus drew his hands out of his pockets. As he did, Tomny’s lighter fell to the ground with a clink and he froze up, but James only raised an eyebrow at him before

leaning down to pick it up.

“C’mon,” he said, passing the zippo back very casually, “it’s lunch now and I’m starving. It’s just us too. Pete’s eating with his sister and Sirius has detention.”

Remus pocketed the lighter quickly and scooped up his book bag before he paused, its strap half-way over his head. “It’s the *second day*.”

James just smirked back at him. “Never underestimate a Black.”

* * *

Lunch with James was fine, even if he had tried to convince Remus to try out for football.

“I’m team captain this year since Dennis graduated,” he’d explained over a mouthful of sandwich, “so we could practice whenever we wanted! Try-outs are on the twelfth. You’re so tall I bet you’d just fly across the field.”

Remus danced around the subject with about as much grace as a three-legged giraffe until the school bell mercifully rang. He’d expected that to put James’ lecture about try-outs and team stats to rest, but they both had PE next—the only classes at Hawkings that were divided by gender—with Sirius and Peter. They all met up outside Hawkings’ large gym before heading inside to change into their gym kits (Remus was grateful for the private stalls, his last school had boys strip in one big changing room). Afterwards their gym teacher, Ms. Hooch, ordered them on a perimeter run of the school grounds, including the lake.

“There’s a lake?” Remus asked James, who had immediately started stretching out his muscles.

“Yeah, where do you think the rowing team practices?”

Remus groaned inwardly.

After dinner they retired to their dorm room—or more accurately, James, Sirius, and Peter retired while Remus camped out in the common room by himself with a book until he was sleepy enough to drag his sorry arse back up to bed. The next morning went much like

the last, and apart from the very unnatural state of noise they always woke up to, he was beginning to sense that everyone at Hawkings operated at a very particular pace. After breakfast Lily successfully intercepted him on his way to forms, only slightly disappointed that they were not heading in the same direction. Her forms teacher was a Classics professor named Professor Bilshin, who Remus happened to know was James' as well. Thinking better than to throw himself in front of the metaphorical train that was James and Lily's relationship, he said goodbye and made a beeline for his building.

Forms with 'Mrs. Buchanan' was to be in Music Room #2, located in the Bellchant Building, according to the school map Remus had swiped from the common room last night. The map's paper was horribly rumbled like it'd gotten wet far too many times, and a cup of tea had left a ring across the front. But after being too daft to ask for one at Castle Hall (and he didn't have any plans to go back there any time soon) he'd taken the unsightly map as his own and quickly set to reminding himself where he'd been so far, comparing the image of the school's grounds to the route his gym class had taken the day before and marking down all of the spots that seemed the most private and promising.

Sirius was already there by the time Remus arrived, having left breakfast before him with James. Unlike the rest of the kids, most of whom were hopping around the small orchestral platforms and talking to one another at the top of their lungs, Sirius was tucked away near the back, lounging on the bench of a grand piano. The fallboard was closed and Sirius was leaning back against it, propped up his elbows as he chatted up a pretty brunette girl. She had a purple shirt tucked into her grey skirt, but Remus couldn't remember which dorm had purple as its House colour.

Shrugging out of his coat, Remus took a seat opposite to the piano and kicked his long legs out ahead of him, stretching until his school shoes pressed up against the chair in front.

"Psst," came a voice from over his shoulder, making him nearly jump out of his chair before whirling around. He came face-to-face with a boy who had an expression rather like that of a pinched toad, with flat, yellow-brown hair and mud coloured eyes. He appeared younger, probably a year below or more, considering forms mixed students from all upper secondary years. He looked at Remus expectantly, with the gaze of a crow trying to decide if it would have enough time to swipe that last mini-muffin from the picnic basket.

“Yeah...?” Remus grunted, leaning away.

“You're the new replacement."

"Excuse me?"

"You know, the one who showed up first day with holes in his trousers. Where you from then?”

Remus’ expression sharpened. There was no way he'd have forgotten running into such a sour git on his first day, which could only mean that Hawkings' rumour mill was more formidable than those he'd faced at the other London schools.

“What do you want?” He sighed.

The boy smirked, revealing a rather unappealing smile. “Didn’t know Hawkings was letting in common oiks now. What corner they find you on? And who did your hair? Or did you take hedge-cutters to it yourself just to save a few quid?”

“Okay, you little shit—”

“I’ll bet you’re one of those charity cases they let in every now and then, yeah?” The toad continued. “So who’s your sponsor, a group home? Some church?”

Remus’ temper flared—this kid would be his Mr. Wright of the new school year, his ticket back to London—but before he could jump up from his seat to have a swing, the back leg of the boy’s seat was met with a sharp kick, surprising him enough that the chair skidded a few feet in the other direction. Sirius stood next to them, hands in his pockets, no pretty brunette in sight.

“Piss off, Crouch, before I make you regret it,” he warned, and the boy —Crouch—now recovered from his sudden comeuppance, turned to grin at Sirius with that ugly smile.

“Forms with Buchanan again, Black?”

“Hope you didn’t miss me too much over summer, you slimy git.”

Raising his hands innocently, Crouch stood up from his chair and got up onto a higher riser. On the raised platform he just matched Sirius' height, but only barely. “Careful, church-boy,” he said to Remus, “this is a class for no-goods, and he’s the worst of them all.”

“Beat it,” Sirius said, lower this time.

“I’ll tell Reg you said hi.” Looking cheery, Crouch skipped his way back across to his side of the classroom, making sure to give Sirius a wide berth.

“Don’t let shits like Barty Crouch talk to you like that.”

Remus snapped his gaze to Sirius, who was staring him down now. “Wasn’t gonna,” he shot back.

“Good. It’d ruin our reputation.”

“What reputation?”

“Mine and James’. If stupid sods like Crouch think they can get away with talking to you like that then they’ll try it with us. Really it’s just a hassle, and dragging you around is enough.”

Remus felt his mouth pinch together. “You don’t drag me around.”

“You follow us then.”

“Wasn’t my idea. Peter was the one—”

A sharp, rhythmic ticking suddenly started at the front of the room. Remus turned in his chair to find a woman with ferocious brown curls standing just ahead of them at the base of the risers, waiting for the students to settle in. She had placed a metronome on the podium at the front of the oval-shaped classroom and was beaming back at the class with a friendly smile. Without a word Sirius spun around and returned to his piano bench. The girl from earlier had moved a chair beside him, joined by another boy with a slap of auburn hair.

“Good morning, class,” the teacher announced. She had flecks of silver at her temples but seemed younger than the professors Remus had met so far, dressed in a lime-green frock and white Beatle boots that made her appear as though she were about to go on an afternoon picnic with The Mamas and the Papas.

The class responded together with fervid energy, *“Good morning, Mrs. Buchanan!”* All except for Sirius who crowed from his seat at the piano; “Morning, Sheila!”

Mrs. Buchanan turned her eyes to the piano and sighed through her smile. “Mr. Black, so happy have you back.” It felt like sarcasm, but

Sirius only grinned.

“Yeah, happy to be back, Sheils.”

The rest of the students snickered, but Mrs. Buchanan remained unperturbed, only straightening her stack of papers on the podium.

“Right, registration then?” She announced, before starting down her class list. “No need to ask if Mr. Black has arrived on time.” She said this out of the corner of her mouth, and Sirius opened the piano’s fall-board to play several deep notes; *Duh-duh-dunn*. The kids laughed again, and Mrs. Buchanan smiled despite herself.

“I saw Diana…” The music teacher continued, scanning her list. “Ralph Jones?”

“Present.”

“Good morning, Ralph… Pierce Walker?"

"Here."

"Hello, Pierce... George Kelley?”

“Good to see you, Mrs. Buchanan! Might I say, that you're looking as stunning as ever this year."

Another round of giggles went up, and George looked very pleased with himself as their teacher pinched her florescent-green dress in a curtsey and nodded at him.

“Good show, George, good show. Now let's see... oh. Is there a... 'Remus Lupin' in?”

Not about to bother with any flattery of his own, Remus raised his hand and mumbled a lazy ‘here’. Mrs. Buchanan looked up from her list, locating him easily before giving him a quizzical stare. Waiting for the new student speech, Remus prepared himself with the slightly-annoyed-but-necessary response, but Mrs. Buchanan only gave him that warm smile again and nodded her head.

“Hello, Remus,” she said, holding his gaze.

A moment passed, and everyone else turned to stare until Remus was sure his ears had gone red. He quickly nodded in return, grinding his teeth together until the teacher finally continued on with her list. When she’d reached the final name—Verity Wilkenson, the girl sitting

next to Sirius—she stopped the metronome's ticking and came around the front of the podium.

"Some of you are familiar and friendly faces," she started, "and others I don't know! But I think you'll all come to like how we do forms in music room number two."

There was a whooping from the back from Sirius and the red-haired kid, and Mrs. Buchanan laughed. "Yes, studying and catch-up is important, but it's still first week. Nothing to catch-up with quite yet, and I know at least a few of you have music right after this, so I've prepared some fun and exciting things for you to warm up the morning with."

Mrs. Buchanan walked to the far side of the room and reached for a large wooden box set on wheels, pushing it to the centre of the classroom. "Come grab an instrument!" She called, and instantly everyone was on their feet. The kids young as eleven and old as seventeen rushed forward, reaching into the bin over top of one another and withdrawing various instruments; nothing so fancy as a real violin or flute, just simple little percussion instruments and noise makers.

Egged on by the pointed looks of his eager teacher, Remus ended up with a simple, flat hand-drum about a foot across, but nothing to bang it with. Barty Crouch grabbed a recorder, which he blew loudly and terribly until Mrs. Buchanan switched him for a more harmless tambourine. After finally abandoning his post at the piano Sirius found himself a harmonica and twirled it expertly between his fingers, bobbing his leg the same way Remus did when he was antsy or excited.

"Now most of you know how this goes!" Mrs. Buchanan said, wheeling the now-empty box away from the centre of the room. "Feel free to get up and move about the room. Join in and dance too, it's all good fun anyway."

The music teacher crossed the room and stopped next to a large hi-fi that had to have been older than any of her students and set to fiddling with its dials. "When the music starts, you start," she instructed, before slowly turning the stereo's volume dial. A moment later, the band room was filled with the sound of a trumpet, then accompanying drums, then piano, until finally the entire room was filled with energetic swing music—which was almost immediately joined by the sound of two dozen other instruments, each of them as

loud and as happily-obnoxious as the other.

Remus might've been more disgruntled by the noise—it could hardly be called *music,* after all—had he not been so instantly enraptured by Sirius' playing. The ungodly clamour should've made it impossible for anyone to be heard over the thunderstorm of noise, but Sirius Black was a beast built for noise, it seemed. His harmonica cut right through until eventually, every boom and squeak and jangle was following his lead.

"Don't be shy, Remus!" Mrs. Buchanan threw her voice across the room and Remus realised that he'd just been sitting there, held hostage in his seat by his surprise and the class's enthusiasm. Coming to his senses, he spotted Sirius in the centre of a circle of other kids, lips rolling back in a triumphant smirk over the edge of his harmonica. Sirius pulled the instrument away from his mouth and jutted his chin in his direction.

"C'mon, Lupin. I know you hate music, but don't tell us you're frigid, too?"

The kids who'd heard him all laughed, and Remus, feeling extremely warm beneath the collar, stood up and approached his forms teacher and other classmates, who were still rattling their shrill noise-makers and pounding their plastic drums—one even had a washboard—all completely out of tune. He stopped by the hi-fi, where Sirius could see him and Mrs. Buchanan was clapping on tempo, and lifted his drum, bracing it against one arm and smacking it loudly with the other until his palm began to sting. Sirius' eyes never left him and finally he returned to his jaunty tune, head cocked to the side smugly like there was nothing he couldn't do.

In that moment, Remus wanted nothing more than to use Sirius Black's head as a drum instead.

Chapter End Notes

> I've taken liberties with the traditional format of forms class/ registration, only for story purposes. My reasoning is that because this is a fan-fiction based on a made-up magic school, my own non-magical made-up school can be a little different as well. Cheers.

Chapter 9: Long Haired Lover

Chapter Summary

It's a very eventful morning in church for the lads! Lots of music chat here.

Chapter Notes

No CW's this chapter, though Remus is suitably triggered by this song; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YriPIujLtsA

You'll understand his mortification if you're brave enough to follow that link to the truly horrendous song that is Jimmy Osmond's "Long Haired Lover from Liverpool", but it's not necessary to understand the chapter. (The Youtube comments are pretty funny though.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I borrowed Gypsy's Gibson just to show them,
And now I'm a rock and roll star, I don't want to know them;
If they want a stray they better go out and grow one,
I'm one of the boys,
One of the boys…

- "One of the Boys" Mott the Hoople, 1972

Sunday 19th October 1975

Sure that avoidance was the best policy when it came to making friends he didn't want, Remus had spent the first month and a half of school isolating himself in quiet corners and making use of the trolley as he went about the campus with his rumpled map, checking off each spot he deemed acceptable for a bit of peace. The astronomy building proved to be the perfect hide-away; the gate to the exterior fire escape was always left open and a few jiggles in the right direction with a paperclip had the observatory door practically falling open on its own.

If his roommates ever wondered where he was always disappearing to, they didn't ask, and steadily Remus' desire to disappear into the woods had ebbed. Sirius remained cool and aloof, playing his albums

on a continuous loop whenever he was in the dorm room and without James and Peter around to force them to be civil, the two boys spent most classes at odds—which to Mrs. Buchanan had become an open invitation to pair them off whenever possible as though she were some satanic matchmaker.

“You honk that damn trumpet in my ear one more time and I’ll—”

WAA-WAAH! “Hold on, Lupin, I can’t quite hear you over the class's clamour and I prefer that any love confessions come across loud and clear!”

It was unbearable.

If Mrs. Buchanan weren't such an engaging teacher, music room #2 would’ve witnessed a full-out brawl at least two times a day. Outside of music class, there was always forms, and any student deemed too rowdy or too out of pocket was sent to the Bellchant building in hopes that a bit of musical therapy every other morning might straighten them out long enough to make it through the rest of their daily lessons. How Sheila Buchanan had the energy to wake up every morning, was beyond him. Luckily, it was hard for most people to object to any order she gave them, even Sirius. She was more popular and beloved than any teacher Remus had ever had, and many students appeared in her room before and after class just to say hello. By their fourth lesson every student in their class had picked a musical instrument to learn, and by a small sliver of luck in an otherwise ill-starred world, Remus was given the chance at the bass guitar.

It was a Fender ‘64 Jazz Bass, and it was *beautiful*. A few nicks and dents most-likely procured from past students and in good need of some new strings, but absolutely gorgeous. It was only the second rock and roll instrument he’d ever held in his life—Tomny knew a guy who’d pinched a music shop before getting put on ice—and he might’ve jumped up and down in in excitement, had he not known exactly who was sitting next to him, one perfect eyebrow raised in judgement.

“What?” Remus demanded, as he’d shot a sour look at Sirius. He himself was holding a Rickenbacker 400-series electric guitar. It was a little outdated, but Remus had still nearly fainted at the sight of it.

Sirius looked from Remus to the Fender and shrugged before reaching to adjust the pins he wore in his hair to keep it from falling into his face while he played. They were probably the same ones he was

always plucking out of Mary's hair.

"Well, you're staring so what is it?"

Sirius shook his head haughtily. "Nothing."

"Tosser," Remus grumbled under his breath.

He could've sworn he'd seen Sirius smile at him; a rare occurrence, even on a beautiful Sunday morning in mid-fall. The leaves around Hawkings had just begun to blanket the ground, covering the grassy berm outside the school's church with a sea of brown, yellow, and red. Earlier that summer, if anyone had told him he'd last long enough at Hawkings College to see the leaves change colour, he'd have socked them one to knock those loose bolts back into place. But it was true, and was perhaps the longest Remus had gone without socking anyone at all. Lyall Lupin might've been jumping for joy back in London, had he not had such a rigid stick up his arse. Good thing he had Giles to jump for him.

The four of them had woken early for Sunday's Holy Communion—*Beggars Banquet* had been the chosen soundtrack of the morning—and were now discussing some sort of revenge plot against Sirius' younger brother, whom Remus had never so much as seen.

"Really, Sirius," Peter drawled, laying on the grass next to Remus and staring up at the blue morning sky, "I don't know why you don't just go and dump his things into the lake or something."

"Because he'd just get new ones! Although if *he* woke up floating in the lake…"

"You'd never be able to pull it off."

"Pete, all these years and you still have so little faith in me?"

"Faith and confidence are two different things, Black."

Sirius snickered and leaned back on his elbows. As he did, he tipped his head back and caught Remus staring. "Can I help you?"

"No, don't worry about me, maestro. I'm fine."

Sirius scowled instantly and Remus felt a little pang of satisfaction. Sirius had earned himself the nickname the week before after word of his impeccable talent with the piano had started circulating around

their music class. While Remus had been practising, a girl named Jacqui finished a particularly horrible violin rendition of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” and sat back in her chair with a moan, only to seek guidance from their resident teenage virtuoso.

“Sirius, how do you do it?” She asked, and Davey Gudgeon, the unofficial president of the Sirius bloody Black fan-club immediately swooped in to answer her;

“He’s a prodigy!”

“Nah,” Sirius said, while fiddling with the Rickenbacker's tuning keys, “it’s just similar to piano, is all.”

“You play piano?” Jacqui had asked in awe.

“Used to.”

“Would you play some now? Mrs. Buchanan stepped out and the piano is—”

“*No.*”

The combination of Sirius’ tone and the fierce glare he’d given them had been enough to shut Jacqui and Davey’s mouths, but the fact of the matter was that with his guitar in hand, Sirius was already on his way to *Top of the Pops*. Remus hadn’t realised it that first day, but the show he’d put on with the harmonica was really just a snippet of his talent. Sirius played that Rickenbacker like it was made for him, and the rest of the class knew it too.

As he sat on the berm, Sirius rolled his eyes and finally looked away, cupping a hand to his mouth; “Oi, Potter, it’s time to go in.”

Across the grass, James expertly kicked his football up from the ground with the toe of his Oxford and knocked it toward Sirius with a quick bump of his chest. Remus quickly glanced down to the book he’d been reading before he could be caught staring again.

“I dunno why you’re so determined to make Reg’s life so miserable,” James said, walking back to where the boys were sitting beneath an oak tree.

“It’s just payback,” Sirius said, tossing the football back to James, who caught it easily and tucked it beneath his arm, the other hand on his hip like a disappointed housewife.

“You mean for the time he and Crouch signed that library book on human reproduction out under your name—*last June?* That was a weak attempt at a prank at best.”

“Weak attempt or not,” Sirius replied indignantly, “the little gits never returned the book and Pince’s been on my ass about it ever since I got back. She had me on shelving duty two weekends in a row!”

“Only because you tried to tell her you couldn’t possibly have it because you already knew everything you needed to know about female anatomy.”

“Okay but you should’ve seen her face though.”

James sighed. “And what about everything you’ve already done to them since term started? First you put glue in their dorm room lock, and then you put crickets in Reg’s school bag—”

“And don’t forget the birdseed he dumped across Salazar’s lawn,” Peter added, helpfully.

“And now Crouch’s hair is the colour of *vomit*,” James finished, pinching the bridge of his nose. Remus tried not to smile at that. It had been more than a little funny when Barty had shown up in forms with a head of murky green locks as though he were the Creature from the Black Lagoon’s less handsome cousin.

Never underestimate a Black.

“That birdseed bit was funny, don’t you lie,” Sirius said, getting to his feet. He had a few leaves in his hair from wrestling across the lawn with James earlier than morning. “Bird shit, *everywhere*.”

“You’re going to be expelled before Christmas.”

“Good. Think Andy fancies a visit? I know she’d find it funny, and she’s got better music taste than all of you lot put together.”

James shook his head and the church's bell began to chime. All around them upper-secondary kids in full uniform began shuffling toward the school’s church, most of them yawning and still blinking the sleep from their eyes. Lord’s Day or not, it was particularly cruel of the Holy Father to have them up before ten on an off-day.

“Salvation awaits,” Sirius said sarcastically, helping Peter to his feet.

“C’mon, Remus,” James called, running to the church’s door and stashing his football in a bush next to the stairs.

Remus snapped his book shut. It was a copy of *Jacob’s Room* by Virginia Woolf, which one of Lily’s roommates, Marlene, had lent him after they’d noticed him reading during private study period. He’d initially tried to dismiss their interest, but he was so desperate for something to fill his time besides homework, bickering with Sirius, and smoking, that he’d found himself returning to the same swot-like tendencies he’d been so determined to abandon after he’d met Tomny.

Pushing himself upright, Remus joined the boys on their way into the church, tucking his book into the inner pocket of his school jacket. After a secretary checked their names off a roster, they filed inside alongside a sea of their classmates and chose a pew about mid-way to the back with the rest of the year elevens. James went first down the row, then Peter, which meant Sirius and Remus were left to sit next to each other. Both boys glanced at each other at the end of the aisle, a little dumbfounded, before Remus nodded sharply and let Sirius go first He slid in after him, making sure to leave a bit of space between them.

Much to James’ delight, they quickly discovered that Lily and the other girls were sitting just ahead of them.

“Oi, Evans,” he whispered, “Evans!”

“Ginger!” Sirius said.

Lily whirled around, face a mask of instant anger. “Oh shut up, you horrible tramp,” she hissed.

“Now that’s a fine thing to say in church,” Sirius said cooly.

“If the shoe fits, Black.”

“Wasn’t I just saying how ginger’s my favourite colour?” James said to Peter, making Lily roll her eyes. He grinned dopily and looked back to her. "So, Evans, fancy a date tomorrow?”

Lily bristled. “I’d rather take a mud bath in Professor Kettleburn’s pig pen.”

“Brilliant. Pick you up at seven then? I’ll bring my swim trunks.”

“Sod off, Potter.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a chance, mate," Sirius said, tapping his knuckles against James’. "Make sure you bring the sun lotion."

With an extremely sour expression, Lily turned her back on a very unabashed James while Mary and Marlene spun around to face them along with their fourth roommate, Lottie, Peter’s twin sister and double in all things apart from her head of massive blonde curls.

“Don’t talk to us,” Mary said decisively, though smiling. “You’re not our friends.”

“You’re right,” Sirius said, “in the church we’re not friends, just children of God.”

“Far from you to ever be a child of God,” Marlene said quietly.

“More like ‘creature of God’,” Lottie added.

“Shut up, Lot,” Peter grunted, pudgy face turning red. Lottie stuck her tongue out at him.

“Remus if you’d ever like to hang out with a sweeter crowd you’re more than welcome to join us,” Mary said shamelessly, resting her chin on the back of her pew. Remus raised his eyebrows as she batted those dark lashes of hers. Mary was the only one of the girls who wore make-up and was regularly written up for it yet insisted on starting every morning with her same ostentatious eyeliner.

“You can come for tea,” Lottie offered, then catching Lily’s eye, she quickly added, “only Remus of course.”

“Careful Lupin,” James advised, “they’ll make you tea and when you’re not looking, paint your nails or curl your eyelashes.”

“I’ve painted Sirius’ nails before,” Mary shot back, lifting her head.

“*When?*”

“When we dated last year.”

Sirius rolled his eyes dramatically. “That was one time. And we only dated for three weeks.”

“Want to make it four?”

“Macdonald,” Sirius gasped, a hand over his heart.

“Shh! It’s starting,” Marlene hissed, turning her head back around. She was so tall she blocked most of Remus’ view with her icy-blonde plaits.

The other girls turned around while the boys settled back into their stiff pews and Communion started. Each of them stood when prompted, sang when requested, and chanted when asked. Remus, over the last few weeks, had gotten quite good at mouthing the words, robotically moving his mouth in time with the hymns and songs, clamping his teeth together during the chants. Those students who were caught daydreaming were often snapped at by teachers or watchful ministers, so he figured it was best to at least play along.

Halfway through what felt like their dozenth hymn of the morning, Sirius glanced over with a suspicious look. Remus immediately halted his pretend gibberish and returned his questioning look with a raised brow.

‘*What are you doing?*’ Sirius mouthed at him. Remus pressed his lips together tightly. He hadn’t realised he was being watched.

“I don’t know the words,” he confessed in a whisper.

Sirius pointed to the back of the pew ahead of them, where leather-bound books sat that held copies of each song and hymn—in English *and* Latin—but Remus silently rebuked him. Reading his expression, Sirius reached forward and grabbed one of the books, poking Remus in the arm with it until he snatched it away and shoved it back into the pew ahead of him. Sirius seemed unperturbed, and only cracked a cheeky smile as he straightened up and went back to ignoring his presence all together. It was a small mercy, and with an annoyed sigh, Remus returned his gaze to the front of the church, where Mrs. Buchanan was conducting the school’s choir and the ministers were leading the rest of them in the adjoining lyrics.

Sirius did not return to his singing and moments passed as Remus began to feel that familiar itch of curiosity grow until finally it won-out and he chanced another glance to his side, only to find that Sirius was now mouthing the words as he had done, a stupid grin on his face. Instantly irritated that he would go so far to mock him, Remus almost shoved him before he realised that Sirius wasn’t mouthing the hymn at all. In fact, it wasn’t even gibberish.

It was a song.

Blinking in confusion, Remus waited until Sirius looked up at him. He started bobbing his head, then swaying, and seemed about ready to start tapping his foot as well, before he slowly raised his voice into a whisper only loud enough for Remus to hear over the communion.

"I'll be your leprechaun and sit upon an old toad stool,
I'll serenade you till I'm old and gray…"

Remus clapped a hand over his mouth to hide the laugh of disbelief that was bubbling up in his chest. Not *that* song.

"Black," he muttered from beneath his hand, lowering his head to get closer to him, "stop it."

After pausing for only a moment to hear Remus' hissing, Sirius decidedly ignored him, the corners of his mouth tilting further upwards as he recited the next line of the song;

"I'll be your long haired lover from Liverpool,
You'll be my sunshine daisy from L.A …"

Remus turned straight forward and dropped his hand away from his mouth. Of course he recognised the song. It was a horrible novelty record that Jimmy Osmond, the tiniest shit of the Osmond clan, had put out a few years back that had stayed at the top of the music charts for weeks over an entire Christmas holiday. Anyone who had ears in 1972 would've recognised it—there had been no escaping the song on the TV or radio. Even Sirius' favourite, Bowie, had lost out on a top of the charts spot for "The Jean Genie" when Osmondmania had taken over the UK. It was a horrible song, one that was sure to get stuck in Remus' head while he lay awake at night staring at the roof of his four-poster—and that was positively the reason why Sirius had decided to sing it.

Remus reached over to give Sirius a quick jab in the ribs. "You're such a—"

"But all the other flowers hung their heads and cried—" Sirius crooned, grabbing onto Remus' wrist and pulling him in closer, "*because the loveliest of all of them was you!"*

Ripping his hand away, Remus stepped sideways to get away from Sirius, but the pew was crowded and the boy to his left only gave him a dirty look after he'd nearly stepped on his toes. Eventually Peter noticed and he elbowed James, leaving them both to turn their heads and stare at their best friend.

“But you were evidently the exception to the rule,
I picked you quickly then I ran away…”

Catching James’ eye, Remus silently pleaded for him to put an end to Sirius’ singing before anyone else noticed, but he only looked between the two of them; Remus, incredulous and mortified, and Sirius, merry and unbothered, and shrugged with an amused expression. Remus snorted again and covered his mouth, at least expecting the other boy to stand back and watch it unfold, but it seemed that James Potter was also not to be underestimated. When Sirius began his next verse, James and Peter both laughed and joined in, starting off quiet and mumbled until their own sense of recklessness took over, and they’d raised their voices to match his.

“I'll be your long haired lover from Liverpool,
And I'll do anything you ask;
I'll be your clown or your puppet or your April Fool,
Cut my hair, I'll even wear a mask...”

More kids turned to stare, and Remus, feeling eyes bore into the back of his head from others in the pews behind them, kept his head bowed as his roommates continued to sing. Sirius on his own had barely been loud enough to be heard over the Communion’s singing, but with all three of them there was no way for anyone to pretend it wasn’t happening.

Of the girls in front of them, it was Mary who turned around first, her big, brown eyes wide as she stared in disbelief. Then it was Marlene, who looked like she was deciding whether to throttle the boys or faint. Finally Lily turned, never without a stern warning on hand, and leaned over the back of her pew to scold them.

“What are you *doing?”* She hissed, but it only egged them on more—James in particular, who raised his voice for the next several lines. Lily balked, as did most of the students around them until finally, little chitters of laughter began to rise up. The other year elevens had begun to realise what they were up to, and several turned around in their pews to stare. Some even began to join in, recognising the tune. The more voices that joined in, the less people knew who had started it, but that didn’t matter to anyone. Everyone was rallying around the silly song simply because they were teenagers forced to sit in religious silence who’d finally been granted some merciful entertainment. To them, it was *funny*.

Remus could feel himself growing mighty close to Marlene’s train of

thought, and his fingers itched to reach out and silence the other boys himself. The church song was ending, he could hear the filterings of it as the accompanying piano slowed and the sound of the insane school kids was starting to take over. Finally, as Sirius belted out, "*I'll be your Valentine, and you'll be mine,*" over the final line of the hymn, Remus decided that he'd had enough. He reached down and grabbed Sirius' wrist in a tight grip as the other boy had done to him, earning him a sharp look as Sirius turned on him.

Remus shook his head, *'that's enough!',* but Sirius wasn't glaring, he was grinning. After giving a quick nod, Sirius leapt up on the seat of the pew, hand still trapped by Remus' grip. There was no more hymn, no more piano or priestly singing, but there *was* noise. As Sirius stood up on his pew, egged on by his schoolmates as they belted out the final lines of the song, everyone turned to look. Remus could see the faculty's eyes widen all the way from his seat, but Sirius didn't so much as pause. All eyes were on him, and everyone knew the song. It was like watching a barrel go over a waterfall; inevitable.

"I'll be your long haired lover from Liverpool,
You'll be my sunshine daisy from L.A—
You'll be my sunshine daisy from L.AAAAAAAAAAA!"

As Sirius plowed through the rest of the song he was met with rapturous laughter and eager voices. Instantly the hall was more alive than Remus had ever seen it, with kids of all ages joining in. However, their glee was very much short-lived.

"MR. BLACK!" A voice hollered from the front of the church. Despite the smug way he'd treated Remus, Sirius froze and students turned around row-by-row as Headmistress McGonagall made her way down the centre aisle, stopping directly next to their pew. Remus tugged his hand back immediately, not wanting to be involved, and Sirius almost lost his balance on top of the bench before righting himself.

"Mr. Black," The Headmistress started again, her mouth drawn into that tight line. "I was wondering when we'd be having our first chat of the term." Every head in the room was craning its ears to hear what sort of punishment Sirius was going to get.

"It's just a little singing in church, Professor," he said, diplomatically, licking his lips to hide a cheeky smirk. "Isn't singing in church encouraged?"

"Indeed it is," Mrs. Buchanan said, appearing at the Headmistress'

elbow with a smile of her own. She glanced at Remus and winked, and Remus thought he'd begun to see things.

"Since Mr. Black is so eager to share in the music today," she started, earning herself a smug bow from Sirius, who still hadn't come down from the pew, "how about we make use of his talents?"

The Headmistress raised her eyebrows, as if contemplating the offer. "What is it you had in mind, Mrs. Buchanan?" She asked casually, as though she weren't speaking in front of three hundred students and faculty.

"Let him sing," Buchanan said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the word. "At the front of the hall of course."

There was a loud snort—Peter—and Remus turned around to see a very different expression on Sirius' face. This one was sour, even a bit agitated. Perhaps that was just what Sirius looked after getting the rug pulled out from under him.

"C'mon, Sirius," Mrs. Buchanan said, holding out her hand, "let's sing the next hymn together, yeah?"

Remus saw that vein jump out in Sirius' neck as he slowly dropped down from the pew. James was currently hugging his middle, trying not to laugh, while Peter had replaced Remus as the one with his hand over his mouth to smother his amusement. Marlene still looked horrified, unable to see the humour in interrupting Communion, but Lily, Mary, and Lottie all looked as though they'd seen the best comeuppance imaginable. All of these reactions were only amplified when Mrs. Buchanan took Sirius' hand like a child and began leading him to the front of the church while the rest of the student body sniggered around them.

"Settle down, that's enough!" Their Headmistress ordered, gliding back up the aisle.

As he was lead, Sirius glanced back at Remus, his expression mostly unreadable but also very put-out. Remus swallowed, but didn't react. The lunatic had done it to himself, after all.

Other kids were still snickering by the time Mrs. Buchanan and Sirius joined the choir at the front of the church. Headmistress McGonagall ordered everyone to sit, and they did so, with a short bit of shuffling and the sound of many creaking pews. Remus watched as Mrs. Buchanan leaned in close and said something into Sirius' ear. He

rolled his eyes and their teacher smiled, taking up her baton in front of the choir as the piano began to play.

Remus didn't know this hymn either, but it wouldn't have mattered either way; the moment Sirius Black opened his mouth he was transported. It had been easy, during "Long Haired Lover from Liverpool" to ignore Sirius' singing in lieu of his own embarrassment, but at the front of the hall, with every eye on him, it was impossible to ignore Sirius' voice. The choir sang with him, but Sirius was the star.

He was good, more than good. Remus wanted him on an album—Sirius could've *been* on an album. Between the hair and the guitar and the singing, he could've put Ricky Nelson himself to shame. Remus was entranced, and when he finally looked beside himself he found even James and Peter's grins gone.

They knew he could sing too, he realised. The guitar, the piano, they knew all of it. Even Mrs. Buchanan had known; she must have, or she'd never have invited Sirius up in front of the entire upper-secondary student body. Anyone else would've gotten detention, but the boys of dorm 4A abided by different laws. They played music late into the night, had reputations that spanned the entire school, and behaved like kings of a small country of fools. They had been best friends since they were children, knew everything about one another, and Remus was just their replacement roommate.

And so as Sirius' song came to a close, more beautiful and humbling than anything he had ever heard in a House of God, all Remus wanted to do was hop on a train back to London.

Chapter End Notes

The album referenced was 'Beggars Banquet' by The Rolling Stones (1968).
'Top of the Pops' is a BBC music television program that began in 1964.

Chapter 10: An Unwilling Accomplice

Chapter Summary

Sirius plots revenge, an occupational hazard for the boys of dorm 4A, while Remus hands him the key.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking references & 'f' slur in a smoking context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I once had a dream,
So I packed up and split for the city;
I soon found out that my lonely life wasn't so pretty,
I'm glad I went now I'm that much more sure that we're ready…

- "That's Not Me" The Beach Boys, 1966

Sirius Black may have claimed to be a well-adjusted, gracious, young man with a decent head on his shoulders, but he held grudges like Lyall Lupin's hounds hunted prey; fiercely and with little mercy.

It had been several days since the Communion-concert incident and Sirius still hadn't let his humiliation go. He blamed Headmistress McGonagall of course, after she'd neglected to thank him for putting the "fun" back into "fundamentalism", and also Mrs. Buchanan, for her cruel and unusual punishments, which she tended to favour over a typical detention. This was evident by the fact that Remus had had to watch Sirius receive a reprimand from her twice more since Sunday, once in forms for locking Barty Crouch in the broom cupboard and again in music for taping Alexander Flutwarts' hands to his accordion after he wouldn't stop trying to use the instrument to imitate the sound of a dying cat. Between watching Sirius clean out the spit valves of every brass instrument in the music room and then singing once more in front of the entire class—with Alex's mediocre accordion-playing for back-up—Remus had steeled himself to stay on Sheila Buchanan's good side. He clearly hadn't the voice for her particular vein of punishment.

Perhaps the most startling revelation about the whole Holy affair—beyond Sirius' frustratingly good voice—was that Remus was also

being blamed.

“It’s almost your fault, you know,” Sirius had said bitterly, as the four boys made their way back to the dorms after Communion.

“What?”

“It was. You’re the one who wasn’t singing the right song.”

“I wasn’t singing at all,” Remus snapped. “You’re the one who started bleating like the bloody Osmonds in church! And then you got up on the pew—did you really think you weren’t going to be caught?”

Sirius mimicked Remus with the shake of his head. “It’s like listening to my mother. I swear Londoners are about as exciting as sawdust.”

“Oh, because the great countryside of Bath is known for being so daringly anti-religious,” James said, coming between the two of them and slinging his arms around their shoulders and holding them tight. “Why don’t we just think about something else, hey? Like how we’re going to get them back?”

Though Remus was pretty sure James had been joking, Sirius seemed to take the suggestion to heart. His mischievous brain shifted instantly from tormenting his brother to how the four of them were going to stick it to those dusty priests and rhadamanthine teachers—Sirius had actually used this word—which left them pitching ideas to one another of how to best go about disrupting the Lord’s next Supper. It was decided that laxatives in the communal wine were too dangerous and, well, too gross; and not everyone drank the wine anyway, which turned Sirius off of the idea entirely. James had the suggestion to fill the priests’ bibles with images from dirty magazines, but that too had been dismissed.

“We’re not thinking big enough!” Sirius complained.

Remus did his best to keep mum around the others, filling his time with the books Lily and Marlene lent him or otherwise slipping away for some quiet. The common room wasn’t a bad place to be when he wanted a bit of peace, but the room tended to fill quickly, which made for bad reading and worse ignoring; so he continued making his way about the grounds, using his map to mark off the quietest and most secluded spots on campus. Sirius, it seemed, would not have it. It had grown harder to shake the other boy since Sunday, despite his continued aversion to Remus’ presence. It felt more like Sirius wanted him to get in equal amounts of trouble rather than be his friend, and

was determined that Remus be an accomplice whether he wanted to join in on the antics or not.

“Where is it you’re always going?” Sirius had demanded one lunch-hour, after Remus had slipped off for a fifteen-minute fag. Remus slid into the bench next to Peter and managed to catch James’ eye across the table.

“The loo,” Remus said, taking a bite of his own lunch. He smirked at James, and Sirius glanced between them sharply.

“ ‘The loo’?”

“Yeah, tummy troubles. Best to stay clear.”

James snorted into his pot-pie.

Despite his attempts, Sirius did not let up. He became more nosey, more insistent that Remus accompany them on every affair and outing. By the end of the week he had been party to two toilet-paper defacings, stood-by as Sirius and James put rubber snakes in the year 12 gardens (where you got a rubber snake in northern Scotland, Remus had no idea) and had even been forced to break curfew to push the Hawkings rowing team’s boats into the centre of Lake Dubh. (When he'd asked why, the answer he'd been given was why not?)

They’d had a bit of explaining to do to the Godric dorm monitor, Benjy Fenwick, when they’d returned from the lake; but luckily James was able to distract the year 13 boy with talk of the latest win for Arsenal, of whom Benjy was also a fan. In the end it had been Peter and Remus who’d dragged Sirius back to bed, after he’d heard Benjy bad-mouth Chelsea, his favourite football team. Accustomed to running with the East End boys back home, who pinched pockets and set rubbish bins on fire for a bit of quick fun, Remus didn’t bother pretending as though he were that impressed by the stunts.

But as luck would have it, it turned out to be Remus who would light the fuse for the next big interruption of the Holy Spirit.

It was late in the night when the topic was broached again. James, like Peter, had had no problem inviting himself to sit on Remus’ bed while the two of them compared biology notes for an upcoming test. Peter sat nearby on his own bed, limping through his maths homework, though Sirius was still keeping his distance, pacing the entire length of their room with his toothbrush hanging out of one corner of his mouth.

“We’ve got to do something this Sunday,” he said, mumbling around the mouthful of toothpaste.

“Why the rush?” James asked. “We’re going to be in Communion for the rest of the year.” He reached over to correct a label on Remus’ diagram of the respiratory system and Remus let him, having already grown tired of labelling and was instead absent-mindedly skimming a chapter in his textbook.

“Because,” Sirius replied,”it has to be fresh!”

“No one even remembers it now,” Peter said. “Not that you weren’t good, Sirius. I'd almost missed hearing you sing.”

“Your nose is looking a little brown there, Pete,” Remus added, making Sirius smirk and cross his arms.

“Yeah, well, this morning Moira asked when my next performance was going to be,” he said smugly, and Peter made a sour face, like anyone might if their almost-girlfriend was giving their best friend eyes. Remus was quietly impressed though; out of the three of them he hadn’t expected Peter ‘I’ve lost my pants again’ Pettigrew to have potential with the opposite sex. Not that Remus hadn’t noticed the way girls made eyes at Sirius and James. Well, every girl but Lily.

“People’ll be expecting something,” Sirius continued, before spitting his toothpaste into the half-finished bowl of popcorn James had brought to bed. He only narrowly avoided spitting onto Peter’s hand as he reached for some, making the other boy wail in disgust as Sirius danced away, grinning maniacally.

Ignoring their antics, Remus sighed as he rhythmically tapped his pencil against his knee. “I still don’t understand the point of this. Why can’t you just sit quietly in church until it’s over like everyone else?”

“ *‘It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done*’,” Sirius quoted, still waving his toothbrush around. “That’s Dickens, my dear Watson.”

“I’m not sure you’re using either of those quotes right,” Remus shot back. “And if people will be expecting you to pull something then isn’t the smarter thing to do nothing? Or do you want to sing another ‘Hail Mary’ in front of the entire school?”

“That would be the *boring* thing,” Sirius said, leaning against one of James’ bedposts. “But no. I’ll cut my own tongue out before I let that

old crone Buchanan, make me sing another one of her hymns. And put the bloody book down for once, Lupin. You're still an accessory to all this."

Remus scoffed and snapped his book shut. He felt like 'crone' was rather a stretch for their music teacher, who couldn't have been older than thirty-five and had the patience of a saint. At any of the other schools he'd attended Sirius would've surely gotten the strap so often he could've entered it into his school timetable.

"At least you sounded good," Remus grumbled before it dawned on him that he'd just given Sirius Black a compliment, and he rushed to correct his mistake. "You knew the words, I mean."

"Of course I knew the words—been singing 'em since I was pissing my own pants."

"When was that, last week?" James quipped.

"Oh you want a go at it, Potter? Alright then!"

Sirius surged forward and swamped James on the bed, tumbling back and forth as they began to grapple each other, grunting and laughing. Remus jumped up immediately and pressed a hand to his forehead, suppressing a groan. It wasn't that he hadn't been around roughhousing before—but they were just so close. Why couldn't they wrestle on their own beds?

As Sirius and James went about trying to gather each other in a headlock, scattering notes and textbooks about the floor, Remus drifted toward Sirius' bedside hutch. He'd been playing *Diamond Dogs*, the album he'd begrudgingly started to enjoy the most out of Bowie's entire discography, even if the cover made him want to wince and close his eyes. "Sweet Thing" reminded Remus of that time over the summer when he'd taken those pills with Tomny and could've sworn he could hear in colour, but it was "Rebel Rebel" that made him *want* to listen.

Rebel rebel, you've torn your dress,
Rebel rebel, your face is a mess;
Rebel rebel, how could they know?
Hot tramp, I love you so!

Lifting the turntable's needle, Remus flipped the record and dropped the pin back down as the familiar crackling spilled out of the speakers. *Bet Bowie would sound better in a cathedral than a dorm room*, he

thought to himself. And then he said it.

“Maybe you should just sing a decent song instead.”

There was a loud thump followed by a clatter from behind. Remus spun around to find Sirius lying on the ground beside his bed, surrounded by scattered textbooks, notes, and his own abandoned toothbrush. He was looking at Remus with the same big eyes the dogs back home gave him when they thought they were about to get a treat, while James leaned over him with his glasses askew. Before he could offer any apologies, Sirius was on his feet.

“What did you say, Lupin?” He demanded.

Remus balked. “Er—nothing."

"No, you said something. What was it?”

"It was just a joke. At least playing a half-decent song wouldn’t be as painful. You know, better than another bloody hymn.”

Sirius’ eyes were alight. He looked from Remus to the hi-fi and slowly a smile spread across his face. “Oh my god, the swot’s done it!”

“Oi—”

“We’ll just make it loud, no need for singing! We could use the school’s—there has to be one in the AV room. We can just take that and plug it in—but oh there's also—and then—”

“Care to impart some of that knowledge on your best mates?” James said, sounding as confused as Peter looked. “You sound like a rambling idiot.”

“We’ll play ‘em a song!” Sirius said, throwing his arms out. He did that a lot—punctuated every word with a hand gesture.

“Ah, got it. Clear as mud.”

“Oh, piss off, Potter. I mean we can use the stereo. They don’t want *our* singing, but who’s to say they won’t like someone else’s?”

Remus squinted at Sirius questioningly, but it was Peter who spoke first.

“You mean you’re going to play Bowie in church?”

“Bowie—Sabbath—The Stones—anyone, so long as it’s *loud*.”

Remus shook his head and stepped around Sirius, sitting on the edge of his bed and bending at the waist to collect his now very disorganised notes. As he set about getting them back into the right order, James swung his legs around beside Remus, knocking their knees together.

“Where will you even put this ‘very loud’ stereo?” He asked, adjusting his round glasses on his nose. “The priests are hardly going to let you waltz into Communion carrying the hi-fi in your lap.”

Sirius wiggled his eyebrows. Infuriatingly, he did not look like an idiot while doing it. “On the organ balcony.”

All three boys stared back. The Hawkings Church was one of the oldest buildings on the campus, and its organ was the size of a building all on its own. The balcony where it sat overlooked the rest of the church from behind. No one would be expecting a rock and roll concert to come from such an intricate and revered instrument.

“Just think about it,” Sirius continued, “that thing’s got like a million pipes, the back half of the balcony is just a maze of hallways with all of them. We could put a stereo in there, and it would take them at least a few songs to figure out what was happening. It’s genius.”

“And how do you expect to get away with that?” James countered. “We can’t leave our seats during the readings, and even if you manage it, they’ll know it was you.”

“We’ll set it up beforehand.”

“And who’s going to start the song?” Peter asked, sitting upright on his bed.

Sirius clicked his tongue, clearly not having thought that far ahead. “Think I could pay off Shunpike to do it?”

“You mean the trolley driver?” Asked Remus, glancing up from his notes.

“Yeah. Pretty sure Stan would do just about anything if you paid him.”

“I thought your parents cut you off for poor behaviour?” James asked.

With another ‘tsk’ Sirius rolled his eyes and spoke out of the corner of his mouth; “Didn’t want anything from them anyway.”

“Why don’t you just use a timer switch?” Remus said, and all three heads turned to look at him. *Honestly, these rich prats*.

“Like the ones they use on shop lights or window tellys?” He coaxed. "They got one in the common room. It’s what turns the lights off at curfew. Shops use 'em to keep thieves away at night."

"How do you know that?" Peter asked, and Remus puckered. Explaining how he knew that plenty of shop lights operated on a timer because he ran with the same crowd who broke the door in the moment those same lights clicked off felt a lot like shooting himself in the foot, but it didn’t matter, because Sirius was already looking at him like he could’ve kissed him.

“Lupin, I could bloody snog you!”

Remus’ eyes turned to saucers. “Please, *don’t*.”

Sirius grinned and shook his head lightly. “There then, that’s our plan. We’ve just got to get into the school’s stash of radio equipment.”

James shook his head, but was smiling. “And I suppose you have a plan for that too?”

Mercilessly, Sirius turned his gaze to Peter and lifted both brows. Peter immediately cringed and dropped his head down.

“Oh fuck.”

You’ve torn your dress, your face is a mess,
You can’t get enough, but enough ain’t the test;
You’ve got your transmission and your live wire,
You got your cue line and a handful of ludes,
You wanna be there when they count up the dudes,

And I love your dress,
You’re a juvenile success,
Because your face is a mess;
So how could they know?
I said, how could they know?

* * *

Saturday 25th October 1975

It was still almost a week till Halloween and yet already it seemed as though every student at Hawkings College was buzzing with unbridled excitement and energy. The spooky holiday fell on a Friday that year, meaning that the events were going to be spectacular, and certainly unsupervised. The girls dorms Rowena and Dorset House always organised an annual pumpkin carving contest, while Godric also kept up one of their own traditions, which involved just as many pumpkins (of the smashed variety) and a few dozen baseball bats that someone always managed to lift from the gymnasium's storage room. None of the Halloween events were organised or sanctioned by the school—strictly student-only happenings, which made for plenty of opportunity for mischief. Unable to curb every inkling for student rabble rousing, the Hawkings professors seemed to resign themselves to hand out the necessary detentions come November 1st.

Never ones to be outdone, the 4A boys were already talking about the sort of fun they had planned, but that was to come after Sirius' revenge, a plot each of them would be party to.

It was really Peter who turned out to be the crucial player in the plan. As a member of the small Audio Visual club since his ninth year and now its elected treasurer, he had access to a set of club room keys—a fact that made Sirius exceedingly giddy and Peter exceedingly nervous. Most of the time the club just met to read and exchange comics or watch shows on one of the school's tellys, and because of this Peter had the most up-to-date knowledge on what was going on in the world—and whichever celebrity was the last to make a fool of themselves on the *Dick Cassidy Show*.

"Don't touch anything!" Peter pleaded, as the four boys made their way into the dark clubroom late that Saturday night. Once the door was closed and locked behind them James hit the lights, revealing a small room no bigger than Remus' pantry back home. A table and chairs were organised in the centre with various boxes filled with wires or bulky electronics lining the shelves on every wall.

"You really spend every Tuesday and Thursday night in here, Pete?" James asked, peaking into a cardboard box that looked as though it was moulding on the bottom.

"Not everyone wants to be on the bloody football team, James," Peter

said bitterly, before slapping his friend's hands away. "Francis is going to kill me if he finds out I brought you nobs in here."

"Sorry to say I'm not much afraid of your Swot Club president, Pete," Sirius said. He'd already abandoned the rest of them and made his way to the far side of the clubroom, digging around in a box of cabling. "We need a long extension lead—so that we can plug the stereo in from the balcony."

"You're not going to find it in there," Peter complained, joining Sirius across the clubroom.

Remus hung back by the door, feeling rather indifferent about the whole thing, despite the fact that half of the plan had been his idea. He was just letting them drag him around, he knew, but it was surprisingly hard to say no to Sirius Black when he actually paid you any attention.

"Alright, Lupin?" James asked, stepping up beside him.

Remus gnawed at the inside of his cheek. "I'm not a thief, you know."

James' expression turned concerned, then he smiled through it, as though Remus had just said something very odd. "I meant with the timer," Remus corrected. "I've never stolen anything."

"Oh, well it's not stealing, it's just a little bit of borrowing for some fun. No harm done."

Remus shrugged. It *felt* like stealing. There was that same knot in his stomach he got every time he'd followed one of the boys on an 'outing'. For Tomny and the others it was different, he knew. They stole things they didn't have or couldn't afford, but Remus had never gone without—not really—so for him, it felt needless; dishonourable. It'd be a lie though, to say that he'd never partaken in a few generous cigarettes from one of the others, despite the fact that those were almost always pinched from a pocket or corner shop.

"You act like we're about to turn you in to the bobbies, Lupin," James said with a chuckle, but Remus caught his eye and the laugh died instantly. James understood, he thought, through that thick, good-boy head of his. "We won't," he said quickly, "we wouldn't. It's against the code."

"There's a code?"

“Yeah, ‘all for one’ and the other bit. It means one of us goes down—we all go down.”

Remus swallowed a sardonic smile. “ 'One for all, and all for one’.”

“So you got what I meant!”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Sirius gave a wolf-whistle from the other side of the room loud enough that Peter had to cover his ears. “Oi, Potter, Lupin! Come help us carry this stuff!”

“Shhh!” Peter winced.

In the end the four of them loaded up a single AV cart with two stereos, three speakers double the size of a grown-man’s torso, and several yards of electrical wiring to power them. Back at the dorm, Sirius’ musical stash also included several cassette tapes which eliminated the need for a turntable. This was a plus, since Peter had nearly fainted by that point anyway, rambling on about how Francis was definitely going to notice two missing stereos.

“Why do we even need two in the first place?” He demanded as James opened the door.

Sirius only grinned. “Just trust me.”

As they made their way out of the clubroom with Peter checking ahead to make sure the hallway was clear and James and Sirius pushing the cart, Remus paused. A thought had occurred to him while he had been staring at the stacks of audio equipment. Really it was a little embarrassing that the idea had never occurred to the other three before then, but taking a moment to hang back by himself, Remus rifled around a few boxes until he’d found the answer to a very noisy problem. Blowing away the dust, he tucked his prize into the back waistband of his trousers, beneath his coat, before following the others out into the hall.

Chapter End Notes

Album referenced was David Bowie's 'Diamond Dogs' (1974). The song quoted in-chapter is "Rebel Rebel".
A 'swot' is the British term for 'nerd'.
I made 'The Dick Cassidy Show' up. Based on common celebrity talk-shows of the era.

'Bobbies' is slang for cops, specifically the London Metropolitan Police.

Can't wait to give you guys the next chapter! Pranking is hard without magic to help, but I figure I've got a decent hold on it now. Let me know any thoughts on how you think it's going to go for them. Cheers.

Chapter 11: Hear the Angels Sing

Chapter Summary

Time to raise the curtain on the first prank of 1975.

Chapter Notes

CW: References to sexual content, though it's only a plot gag.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

God gave rock and roll to you, gave rock and roll to you,
Put it in the soul of everyone;
God gave rock and roll to you, gave rock and roll to you,
Save rock and roll for everyone…

- "God Gave Rock and Roll to You" Argent, 1973

It was long past curfew by the time they had the AV cart rolling across the school grounds. They took the long way, twisting in between buildings to avoid the yellow street lamps that shone over the campus's main roads.

"Hey James," Remus grunted as he and Sirius lifted the cart up over a curb outside the church, "what are the odds that Benjy will let you talk more about Arsenal's chances at the FE Cup instead of giving us detention?"

"You mean the 'FA' Cup?"

"Er—yeah."

James shook his head hopelessly. "Best to try the back door first, mate."

"Who cares? Benjy can't keep us from church," Sirius beamed, wiping the sweat from his brow. He'd pushed the cart the entire way from the Design and Technologies building despite its substantial weight and rusty wheels, only letting James, Peter, and Remus trade off with one another.

"Some of us have lives beyond the Almighty," James said.

“And Halloween’s this week,” Peter moaned. “I told Moira I’d be the one to smash her pumpkin.”

“Was that a dirty euphemism, Pettigrew?” Sirius asked. Both he and James burst into laughter, Remus too.

“No! I meant after Dorset’s pumpkin carving—*ugh*—your mind, I swear.”

The boys managed to staunch their laughter as they rolled the cart toward the church's front doors, parking it at the foot of the steps as Sirius skipped up to the door.

“Shit,” he said, after jiggling the handle, “It’s locked.”

Remus’ jaw dropped. “You mean we lugged this crap halfway across campus and you don’t even have a way *in?”*

“Voice down, Lupin,” Sirius hissed, before giving the door a little frustrated kick. “The church is normally open all hours, in case anyone feels like a midnight confessional.”

“It’s Halloween week,” James said ruefully. “No way they’re going to leave the doors open for anyone to walk in and cause trouble.”

“Good thinking too,” Remus said sarcastically, glancing at the cart of audio equipment.

“Well we’re not just anyone,” Sirius snapped, turning back to the door.

Peter leaned over the front entrance railing to peer through one of the stained glass windows. “I bet this means that no one will be waiting around to catch us, though.”

“I wonder if I can…” Sirius began jiggling the doors of the church like the lock might magically open for him. “James, you grab the other handle.” Standing back, Remus watched as both Sirius and James began to tug on the door handles, setting their feet against the church walls to get better leverage.

“I can’t believe this was part of your brilliant plan.”

Sirius dropped back from the door with an irritated huff. “Well you bloody do something then, Lupin, if you’re so astute.”

“Fine.”

Advancing to the top of the steps, Remus plucked the pin from Sirius' dark fringe and pried it apart until it broke in two pieces. He normally found bent paper clips to be more springy and easier to work with, but the hairpin would have to do.

Ushering all three of them aside to give himself some space, Remus bent down in front of the church's lock and set to work, fussing with it the way Doss had taught him. He'd only ever fiddled with cheap things before, like the front door of Tomny's flat and the occasional fence lock to some poor sod's private property, but the church doors were old and therefore, not really up to snuff. It took some time, but eventually the lock clicked open, and when Remus stood up he found three gaping mouths, each of them staring back at him like he'd just won the Grand National.

Remus pulled one of the front doors open. "It's open."

"No shit," Peter said.

Sirius wrenched the other side of the door open. "Where did you learn to do *that*?"

"Just something I picked up, now are we setting up this plan of yours or are we going back to bed?"

"You're just full of surprises, Lupin," James said, clapping Remus on the shoulder as he skipped down to their idle cart. Sirius was still watching him like he couldn't decide if he should call his bluff. Before he could Remus flounced down the stairs to join James. It took all four of them to lift the rusty thing up the short stairway, and at the top Remus nearly got his foot crushed under a wheel when his and Peter's grip faltered on the one side. They shut the doors behind themselves and wheeled the AV cart through the vestibule, into the centre aisle of the church. The only light came from the street lamps peering through the windows from outside and it was certainly creepy. All the shadows between the pews and behind the confessional booths seemed to move on their own. Remus did his best not to make eye contact with the gaudy art deco statue of Christ standing at the front of the church.

"Who's gonna keep watch?" James asked.

"Pete can keep watch," Sirius supplied.

Peter drew his chin back toward his neck indignantly. "Why me?"

“You always keep watch.”

“That was last year, and only because you and Miles always made me.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Miles was like the brains, ‘course he couldn’t keep watch.”

“And James?”

“Potter’s the muscle, do *you* want to be the only one carrying the hi-fi up to the balcony?”

“I’ll keep watch,” Remus said, moving away from the group and back toward the front doors.

Sirius watched him go, before whipping his dark head back around to Peter. “Way to go, Pete. You made the new kid feel bad about himself.”

“Oh, you should talk!”

“Let’s just get on with it,” James interrupted, tugging one of the speakers off the bottom shelf of the cart. Remus watched them from a ways away, camped out next to one of the stain-glass windows. Looking through them made the church's dim courtyard appear as a million different colours, each of them reflecting off the lamps hanging on either side of the doors.

While taking turns watching the courtyard and watching the boys, Remus was reminded of early summer, when Lee and Flacky had appeared outside the flat with several boxes of old radio equipment they'd 'picked up'. He might’ve felt more guilty over how excited he was to set the thing up in Tomny’s living room, had the radio not crapped out after two songs. That was the only time Remus thought he might’ve been able to believe that the boys had gotten the stuff from an alley bin like they’d claimed and not busted it out of some poor bloke’s back seat.

Fiddling around in his pocket for Tomny’s lighter, Remus withdrew it and began to flick the thing open and closed to keep his fingers busy. He wasn’t tired, despite the fact that they’d had to wait an hour after curfew to sneak out, and he’d felt a quiet thrill getting to show off the lock-picking skills he’d picked up from Doss. If he was going to be forever known as the yob who’d shown up on the first day with holes in his trousers and scabs on his knuckles, then he might as well

dedicate himself to the part. At least then there would be some truth to the rumours.

“Oi, Lupin, come help me with this.”

Remus looked up from his place next to the door, snapping the zippo’s lid shut with another crisp click, and found Sirius standing in the vestibule’s doorway expectantly. “Wasn’t I supposed to be keeping watch?”

“Well is the door locked?” Sirius asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then don’t be lazy. I can’t lift the stereo on my own anyway.”

Sirius turned and marched back into the church, and Remus almost wanted to blow him off, but that would require more arguing he didn’t feel like keeping up with. Pushing off the window’s ledge, he followed him. “Thought you had a muscle man for this?” He asked, taking his place on the other side of the AV cart.

“Potter’s got the speakers,” Sirius said, indicating with his head to the top of the balcony staircase, where James was indeed struggling under the weight of one of the large stereo amps.

“Alright, Potter?” Remus called, raising his voice enough so that it echoed around the empty church.

“Yeh! Jus’ fine!” James grunted as he finally made it onto the balcony and passed out of sight.

“Pete’s setting up the extension leads so we can plug everything in,” Sirius said, as he and Remus hooked their fingers beneath the bottom of the stereo. “I told him to bring the cord down through the maintenance hallway so no one will be able to spot it tomorrow.”

“Good thinking,” Remus said, and after one deep breath, they hoisted the heavy metal box up off the cart and swung it down between their bodies.

“I’ll go up backwards, since you’re taller,” Sirius said, as they hobbled toward the corner of the church, where the balcony’s staircase started. They took the stairs one at a time, quietly grunting with the shared weight.

“So you ever done this before?” Remus asked, looking down at his feet to make sure he didn’t miss any steps and send them crashing down to the bottom.

“Hide a stereo in a church organ?” Sirius smirked. “No, but other stuff.”

“With Miles?” Remus asked, gingerly.

There was a moment of silence before Sirius spoke again; “Yeah. Miles was really clever. He planned a lot of the gags last year.”

“Lily said he was quiet and liked books.”

“Yeah, well what would Evans know?”

“James said he hated smoking—sounds like a real swot."

Remus had barely gotten the words out before Sirius slammed to a stop on the staircase.

“You need to shut your mouth!"

“I was only teasing!” Remus said, nearly dropping his end of the stereo. “You’re always taking the piss—what, can’t handle it being turned around on you, Black?”

“You’re not supposed to have your friends on like that when they’re not around to defend themselves.”

“That sounds like a load of shit,” Remus said, grunting as he struggled to keep the stereo in the centre of his chest. “And he wasn’t my friend. I never even met him.”

“Well duh,” Sirius sneered, “someone give the genius a prize.”

“Look, can we have it out once we’ve put down the damn stereo? You’re breaking my back.”

With a haughty look, Sirius straightened up and they finally started up the stairs again. Miles was clearly a touchy subject, but so far none of the 4A boys had given away why. Perhaps they just missed their friend, that at least, Remus could relate to.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to insult your mate."

Sirius’ nostrils flared, though that could’ve just been the exertion.

“Just don’t talk about it. Miles left.”

“Fine,” Remus huffed.

“Fine.”

They were nearly at the top now, and he couldn’t wait to drop the stereo down and leave Sirius to his obvious sulking. If he didn’t want to talk, that was just fine with him, maybe it was even a saving grace. It only meant that he’d have an excuse not to explain the cigarettes or the lock-picking.

“Almost there,” Sirius said, glancing behind himself as they went. “At the top we can put it—”

Sirius’ foot came out from under him just before the top stair and he went down on his arse with a gasp, slamming the stereo back into Remus’ chest and nearly causing him to lose his balance completely. If Sirius hadn’t reached out at the last second and fisted the front of his shirt, Remus would’ve surely tumbled backward down the entire flight of stairs, the stereo on top of him.

“Don’t worry I got you!” Sirius yelped, eyes wide.

The air gone from his lungs, it was all Remus could do to nod, balancing the rest of the hi-fi’s weight on Sirius’ lap and knees.

“I’m gonna let go and grab it really quick,” Sirius said, nodding once before snatching his hand back and lifting the stereo off of his legs in one smooth motion. Remus exhaled and groaned, giving the other boy one final second to struggle to his feet before they finally lifted it over the last step and dropped the thing down on the balcony floor with a heavy metallic thud.

“This was a fucking terrible idea,” Remus moaned, a hand on his aching back.

“And it was almost the worst spill I’ve ever seen,” James said from across the balcony, where he and Peter were sticking their heads out of the tiny door that led into the internal guts of the church organ.

Sirius clapped his hands against his sides. “Well thanks for the help. Now you two lazy sods can carry the damn thing the rest of the way.”

Both James and Peter grumbled a bit at being called lazy, but they managed to get the stereo into place, dropping it down on the floor in

the very heart of the ginormous instrument. James had done a good job separating the two speakers so the noise would reach the most pipes, and Peter had finished winding the extension leads up from one of the broom cupboards below them in the vestibule. The timer had been plugged in too, though it would be the last thing the boys set before they left for the night.

“You got the tape, Black?” James asked, after pushing the stereo back against the biggest pipe it could reach and making sure everything was plugged in and turned on.

“Right here,” Sirius said, pulling a small black cassette from his back pocket and squatting down in front of the hi-fi, hitting the eject button. Standing back in the doorway and feeling distinctly claustrophobic in the airless, little room (he had to haunch to keep his head from brushing the wood ceiling) Remus heard the click of the cassette door opening and then watched as Sirius perked up.

“It’s already got a tape in it.”

“Sometimes people forget to take them out when they return the stereos to the AV room,” Peter shrugged. “Usually the tapes just go into a lost and found bin unless they’re labelled, but we miss them sometimes.”

“Well this one’s labelled,” Sirius said, plucking the tape out and turning it over, “but only with a date. ‘February 14th 1972’.”

Remus snorted slightly. “Valentine’s Day?”

“You could test the sound out with it,” James prompted, clearly just as interested.

Scrunching his nose with a smile, Sirius pushed the tape back into the cassette dock and hit play. There was a bit of crackling, then the speakers hummed to life, projecting what sounded like a woman giggling.

“Nice of them to rewind it for us,” Sirius said, earning himself a sharp ‘shh’ from both Peter and James. There was more giggling, then a bit of indistinguishable whispering—two voices this time—each muffled consonant amplified by the high volume of the speakers and bouncing around the inside of the organ so severely that it made them all wince.

“Maybe turn it down for now,” Remus tried, earning himself his own ‘shh’, this time from Sirius, who’s back had gone arrow straight in

front of the hi-fi.

“Do you hear that?”

James looked from Peter to Remus. “Yeah, but what—”

“I’m gonna fast-forward,” Sirius said, before pressing a button on the front of the stereo. There was a loud whirring sound, more akin to a tornado than a cassette tape, and when Sirius finally hit the play button, they all heard the familiar click of the tape settling into place, before the entire room erupted in what could’ve only been the sounds of two people shagging one another.

'Ohhhhhh—oh god! Ohhh my god!'

If their brains had been lightbulbs, all four of them would’ve lit up so brightly you’d have been able to see them from space. The realisation of just what it was that they were blasting across the entire church had Peter clapping his hands to his head with a shrill screech, as James inhaled so sharply it almost sounded like he’d swallowed his tongue. Remus, who had never heard such a sound apart from those raunchy movies you could sometimes catch on certain TV channels in the wee hours of the morning, stared up at the ceiling open-mouthed as though the moaning was coming from every direction—which it was.

'Mhmmnnn, ooohhhh!'

“Turn it off!” James wailed, as Sirius scrambled to hit the eject button, cutting off the panting just as the voices had begun to rise to another strenuous cacophony. He fell over the stereo, laughing like he didn’t know what else to do as the rest of the boys sank down to the floor of the tiny, musty-smelling organ room.

“I think your Swot Club president, Francis, has some explaining to do, Pete,” Sirius wheezed. “Oh god, imagine the faces on those ministers if we played this.”

“We are *not* playing that at Communion,” James snapped.

“Okay, okay,” Sirius agreed, “but I think it might be worth it to keep a hold of this.” Sirius scooped out the tape and pocketed it with a horrible grin on his face.

“At least we know the stereo works,” Peter said limply.

“And that it’s more than bloody loud enough,” Remus said, resisting a shudder. He didn’t really know what was being done to that woman to invoke such noises, but he was pretty sure they wouldn’t get away with putting it on TV.

* * *

The only reason they managed to avoid the wrath of their dorm monitor was because Benjy had fallen asleep on one of the sofas in the common room after attempting to stay up and catch them out after curfew.

“Can’t punish us if he didn’t see us come in,” Sirius whispered as they crept up the stairs.

It was past midnight by the time they were all washed and dressed for bed. James and Peter fell asleep the moment their heads hit the pillow, but Remus still felt wide awake. Being out in the night air had left his body humming. It was as close a feeling he’d had to his life in the East End since he’d left London nearly two months prior, and he could feel a familiar bout of his restlessness setting in. He’d just cracked a book—assigned reading for Modern Languages—when Sirius emerged from the bathroom dressed in his pyjamas.

“Bit late for reading, innit, Lupin?” Sirius asked in a low voice. It was a bit odd to hear a posh boy use words like 'innit', but if Sirius noticed the look Remus gave him, he ignored it. Both James and Peter had drawn the curtains around their beds to block out the light from Remus’ lamp, and Sirius gave a deep yawn.

“Can’t sleep.”

Nodding, Sirius crossed the room to his bed and paused before his stereo, slowly thumbing through the records he’d left on top. Watching him from his spot against his headboard, Remus thought back to the AV room, the answer to such an obvious problem, if only Sirius deserved it.

After a few moments Sirius stepped away from his wardrobe hutch and bent over his bed, gathering his covers back and slipping beneath them. It was restraint that he was showing, despite being just as obviously wound-up as Remus was. It was enough, and Remus sat up quickly. After they’d made it back from the church he’d stashed his prize beneath his bed and now he reached for them. A part of him did

want to see Sirius walk around on his eggshells for a bit longer, but the music had really only been bad that first week, and eventually Sirius had taken to turning the music down or off completely whenever Remus entered the room; James' doing probably.

Fiddling with them a bit, Remus crossed the room to Sirius' bed just as the other boy was about to turn out his lamp. Halfway there, he became very aware of a burning heat in his ears. "Here," he said, holding out a pair of headphones, each earpiece slightly worn from use and time, but intact none-the-less.

Sirius, half-lying in bed, stared at the headphones, then at Remus, as though he expected him to pull his arm back the moment he reached for them. Remus had to wave his hand and nodded in a 'go-on' before Sirius finally took them.

"I know you like to listen before bed." That much was obvious.

Sirius nodded, untwisting the wires slowly. "Yeah…"

"I didn't steal them," Remus said, pointedly, "I just borrowed them. You're going to have to give them back eventually."

Sirius glanced up at him. "Okay."

Remus clicked his tongue, rocking back on his heels a bit. "They plug in there," he said, pointing to the hi-fi's audio jack.

"I know where they plug in."

"Good then." Remus turned and marched back to his bed, throwing himself down on top of the covers and picking up his book, trying to ignore the warmth that had spread from his ears to the rest of his face.

"Hey, Lupin?" Sirius called.

"Yeah?"

"Cheers."

Remus bit his lip. "Cheers, Black."

* * *

Hearing the alarm clock that morning felt more akin to sticking a fireplace poker into his ears than a simple wake-up call.

“Potter turn it off,” Remus moaned, before he realised that it was his own alarm and reached over to smack the clock to the floor.

“Poor, poor alarm clock,” James said, picking up the timepiece and replacing it on the bedside table. Already dressed and looking like the most devout son a parent could ask for, he nudged Remus’ shoulder over his covers. “C’mon, Lupin. You should be up with the larks. Don’t want to miss church.”

“No he does not!” A voice called—Sirius’. “Not after all that work we put in.”

Remus batted James’ hand away and turned over to face the wall never to his bed with a wordless groan.

“You’re as bad as Pete,” James laughed. “At least he’s in the shower already. What time did you go to bed?”

“Dunno…”

Already tugging his shoes on, Sirius let out a cheeky laugh. “He was up all night, serenading the moon, that Lupin. *A-woooo!* ”

Remus sat up at that. “That was you! I heard you singing The Moody Blues all night.”

“I couldn’t very well waste your gift.”

“Gift?” James echoed, and to Remus’ relief Sirius only shrugged.

“All I’m saying is that your ancestors must’ve been counting on having an insomniac in the family, naming themselves ‘Lupin’.”

“It just means ‘wolf’,” Remus bit back.

“One of nature’s fiercest nocturnal animals!”

“There aren’t even any wolves in the UK.”

Sirius shrugged again. “Guess that’s why they let you stay, gotta fill a quota.”

Shooting Sirius the bird, Remus grudgingly swung his legs over the side of his bed and rubbed his eyes, still raw from reading by

lamplight. Shoulder to shoulder, James and Sirius headed for the door.

“We’re going down early to make sure no one's caught on,” James said. “You and Pete come down together when you’re ready.”

“And don’t be late, wolf-boy!” Sirius shouted. Remus picked up his shoe from beside his bed and threw it after them, letting it slam into the back of the door.

By the time he and Peter had finished breakfast and rushed down to the church, it was already twenty past and the bells were ringing. Sirius and James were waiting for them out front and all four of them filled in together, looking remarkably ordinary amongst the rest of the students and staff, and not at all like anyone who had any ulterior motives for showing up for the morning’s Holy Worship. They found seats along the centre aisle and sat down with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

“What cassette did you end up going with? You never did say,” Peter said, leaning over James to whisper. Sirius only lifted his chin.

“Guess you’ll have to wait and find out.”

Slumping back against the pew bench, Remus pulled his elbows in close to himself to keep from brushing up against Sirius, who was a constant fidgeter on an average day, but was now vibrating like a plucked guitar string.

“Keep moving like that, Black, and they’ll know it was you who did it,” Remus grumbled.

“Did what?”

Nearly jumping a foot off the pew, Remus turned to and came face to face with Mary, who dropped down on the bench next to him and leaned in close. Beyond her Lily, Marlene, and Lottie all slid in, with Lily looking like she’d swallowed a sour grape. Clearly she didn’t want to spend another Communion in such close quarters with the boys, and Remus could hardly blame her.

“Nose out, Macdonald,” Sirius said over Remus’ shoulder.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed today.”

“I assure you,” Sirius said, “I did not. Fine day, Sunday. Time to

welcome the Lord in all His morning glory."

Mary and Remus rolled their eyes together before she knocked her shoulder into his. "You'd think he was actually devout or something. I, on the other hand, shouldn't even have to be here since I'm Buddhist and all."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "You're a Buddhist?"

"For two years now."

"Don't you have to be baptized to go to school here?"

Lily looked over, her green eyes bright. "She was baptized. She's just been *saying* she's Buddhist for two years."

"It's a sin to lie in church, you know," Marlene said from over Lily's shoulder.

Mary turned her nose up. "Rules need not apply."

"You know I did some reading on Buddhists over the summer," Marlene said. "And you don't act like one at all. They all talk about how enlightenment is attained through meditation and wisdom."

"That feels racist, Marls. They're my people."

Marlene sputtered. "What? No—I just mean that you never meditate. And Buddhism comes from India!"

"I've got cousins who are Buddhist," James offered, turning it into a pew-wide conversation.

"See?"

"McKinnon," Sirius interjected, "are you saying Macdonald can't be black and Buddhist?"

Mary snorted, and Marlene slammed her palms down on her lap. "No —ugh!"

"You could always take up Satanism, Macdonald," Sirius supplied. "Maybe then they'd really kick you out of the church."

"Why bother? It clearly didn't work for you."

He wiggled a finger at her. "Naughty, Macdonald. But, I wouldn't

worry too much about having to fake your prayers today." Sirius learned back to share a knuckle bump with James, who turned and did the same with Peter.

"So you did do something then!" Mary said, at the same time that Lily moaned; "Good lord, you've done something haven't you?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," Sirius said, leaning back in his seat and looking very smug. Shaking her head, Lily glanced at Remus questioningly, but before he could even think about fessing up, James' words from the night before popped into his head; *All for one and one for all.*

Remus just shrugged.

As the priests called the Communion to attention, Mary nudged Marlene with her elbow. "You never lambaste Lily, and she took your Lord's name in vain."

"Shh!"

If Remus was being completely honest, he didn't know much about the details of the prank, aside from what he'd contributed directly. James and Sirius had plucked a timer switch off the Godric common room wall, meaning that that morning they'd woken up without any overhead light in their shared living space. Remus had no idea what time the music was supposed to start, or even what song Sirius had chosen. He only knew one thing for sure; if the plan worked, it was sure to be loud.

By the second reading Sirius was growing increasingly antsy. He bounced back and forth on his toes when they stood and tapped his leg incessantly when they sat. The kid just ahead of him might've just gone bald at the back of the head with the force of Sirius' glare. At one point he reached across James and yanked Peter by his wrist so he could see the time on his watch.

"I thought you said that the timer would work," Sirius hissed to Remus, very low.

"It would if you set it right," Remus replied, indignant.

Sirius gave an irritated '*tsk*' and threw himself back into his pew.

"You reckon we buggered it up?" James murmured.

“There’s always next week,” Peter said, hopefully.

Sirius grunted and crossed his arms over his chest, looking rather childish. It was getting near the end now; an hour had passed without so much as a chime from the balcony.

“What’s wrong with him?” Mary asked after another reading wrapped up and the priests began to prepare the bread and wine—which really was real wine, not that anyone was given enough to get drunk off of, of course.

“Dunno,” Remus said, and she gave him a look that said, ‘you’re full of shit’.

It only took a few minutes for the church to begin moving. First the professors and staff present approached the priests and received their sacramental food and drink, then the year sevens, the year eights, and so on.

By the time it was their turn, Sirius was well and right pissed. They stood up from their pew and followed each other toward the priests’ altar in one great line, Sirius with his hands behind his head and dragging his feet.

“Can’t believe we got the time wrong,” he muttered.

“Don’t be so gutted, Black,” James tried, “maybe there’s just a delay.”

“Oh that’s it!”

Lily, who had ended up just ahead of Remus in line, spun around to face the four boys, her red brow deeply creased, lips were pinched. “This is a church, even you lot should have some sense of decorum!”

“Careful, Evans, or you’ll turn red all over,” Sirius said, making James and Peter snigger. Lily, beyond words, stepped forward so suddenly that Remus jumped back, slamming his heel down on Sirius’ foot. There was a sound between ‘OI!’ and ‘AUGH!’ but no one heard it, because at that very same moment, a booming voice echoed from the heavens above.

'HEY HEY MAMA SAID THE WAY YOU MOVE!
GONNA MAKE YOU SWEAT GONNA MAKE YOU GROOVE!'

Three hundred heads and open mouths looked up at the same time and Led Zeppelin delivered—blasting their lyrics from every direction.

'AH AH CHILD WAY YOU SHAKE THAT THING!
GONNA MAKE YOU BURN GONNA MAKE YOU STING!'

The sounds seemed to ricochet like they were hitting each organ pipe and reverberating through the very bones of the church. Every guitar strum made the walls thrum, and any and all thought of prayer was forgotten. People stood up, looked around in confusion, some even covered their ears. Sirius only beamed, grinning from ear to ear like a kid on Christmas. If James hadn't thrown an arm around his best friend's shoulders, Sirius probably would've launched himself into the air triumphantly right there in the aisle.

Remus, still in a state of shock that they'd done it—that he was actually listening to Led Zeppelin in bloody church—turned to the girls, taking in the range of emotion on their faces as they were continuously serenaded with the song's start and stop *a capella*. Each of them were, like Remus, utterly stupefied, but out of all of them Mary seemed the most amused, her mouth dropped open into awe. Marlene looked horrified as like with most things, she took Communion quite seriously, and had her hands clasped over her mouth. Lottie's head was shifting from left and right, like she couldn't decide what direction the sound was coming from. It was Lily that really surprised him though; unlike everyone else, she was looking down at the ground, her expression as equally dumbstruck as it was perturbed.

"We did it, wolf-man!" Sirius jeered next to Remus, grabbing onto his shoulder and shaking him as he rocked his head back and forth in time with the song.

"Don't call me wolf-man!" Remus snapped, as the song hit its second bridge.

'HEY BABY WHOA BABY—PRETTY BABY!
DARLIN' MAKES 'EM DO ME NOW!'

As though they'd finally realised that they indeed weren't hearing things, the faculty and ministers came to life, swarming the crowd of students from the front of the church, opposite to the balcony.

"TAKE YOUR SEATS! TAKE YOUR SEATS!" One of the department heads was shouting, though they could barely be heard over the swarm of talking and shouting that had begun alongside the music.

Eventually most of the students began to turn and shuffle back to their pews, some of them sitting with more enthusiasm than others. A

considerable amount of people were still standing, and Remus watched as ministers rushed down the aisles in their robes, dodging students and being chased by teachers and staff alike.

Wanting to enjoy themselves but not draw any extra attention, Peter, James, Sirius, and Remus returned to their seats as the student body grew more excited and enlivened by the music.

“You’re going to be in so much trouble!” Lily called down the pew after them, but each of the boys were busy singing along or else tapping their foot, Remus included.

“Can’t hear you, nark!” Sirius shouted back. “Music’s too loud!”

Lily looked like she might pop like a balloon as Mary took her arm, cooing something into her ear while hiding a smile herself. Lottie had disappeared across the aisle and was now sitting in the lap of her boyfriend, another year eleven boy named Mickey Truman. A passing minister stopped to berate the two for their ungodly show of affection, but the pair paid no mind, pretending that they couldn’t hear over the noise. Marlene appeared utterly still in her seat next to Lily. Her eyes were closed as though she were meditating. Perhaps she was converting to Buddhism too.

Remus slid away from the girls as far as the pew would allow. As infuriatingly grandiose as Sirius Black could be, he had decent taste in music, and Remus wanted to listen. He wasn’t the only other one either; around the church other kids had started head-banging to the song or otherwise singing. None of it sounded good—most of the kids had resorted to just belting out or wailing along to whatever words they knew—but that didn’t matter. They had turned another dreary Sunday morning into a rock concert without the instruments, and everyone was connected by it, whether they wanted to be or not.

Sitting a few rows back with the rest of the year thirteens, he spotted Benjy Fenwick laughing at the incredulous scene before him. The amusement on his face made him wonder if he’d be as entertained knowing that it was four of the students he was responsible for that had set it all up while breaking curfew. Benjy was cool enough, he’d probably get a kick out of it before giving them detention as his role of dorm monitor decreed he must. Less cool than Benjy, but not any less amazed, Davey Gudgeon was elbowing the two boys sitting next to them, trying to shout something over the music. Remus had a sneaking suspicion that at least one of the words was ‘Sirius’ or ‘Black’, undoubtedly more infatuated with Sirius than Sirius was with

himself. Even Ms. Hooch, one of the only teachers not on her feet and shouting at the rowdy upper-secondaries, was gently bobbing her head in one of the first few rows. Aside from the rest of the staff, everyone was having a good time.

Well, almost everyone.

Snape sat one row ahead of them on the opposite side of the aisle and turned to glare with those squinty eyes of his. James caught his gaze and used both hands to flip the miserable boy the bird, earning himself a sharp reprimand from a passing teacher who'd gotten caught in the crossfire and assumed that he'd been the one getting flipped off in the first place. Luckily for James there was too much chaos for the teacher to stick around and soon they were all back to grinning like victorious idiots in their pew. Remus scanned the room again, hoping to catch a reaction from Mrs. Buchanan, but every now and then the music teacher would be absent from church, and today the choir had been led by a year 13 student in her place. Without their normal melodies and without any real official to lead them, the choir stood awkwardly in their robes, exchanging glances like they expected someone to come up with an explanation for the sacrilegious music.

They probably would've preferred "Stairway to Heaven", Remus thought cheekily.

"This is so fucking cool," Sirius said from his spot next to Remus, head-banging and strumming his fingers in the air as though he were playing guitar.

"Yeah," Remus said, still looking around, "cool."

'ALL I ASK FOR WHEN I PRAY—
A STEADY ROLLIN' WOMAN WON'T COME MY WAY!
NEED A WOMAN GONNA HOLD MY HAND—
TELL ME NO LIES, MAKE ME A HAPPY MAN…'

Chapter End Notes

'The Grand National' is the biggest horse race in the UK.
A 'hi-fi' is just another term for stereo.

The song is "Black Dog" by Led Zeppelin (1971). The song at the beginning is also low-key one of my favourite rock ballads. KISS covered it in 1991 but nothing beats the original for me.

Chapter 12: Halloween, 1975

Chapter Summary

First Halloween at Hawkings! One of my favourites to write and really uplifting for the soul.

Chapter Notes

CW: References to smoking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Say there's a girl,
Who's new in town;
Well you better watch out now,
Or she'll put you down;
'Cause she's an evil chick,
Say she's the witch!

- "The Witch" The Sonics, 1965

The interruption had only lasted for about three songs, as Sirius predicted, but it remained a topic of conversation throughout the upper-secondary students for much longer than that, and as a consequence the boys of dorm 4A had become silent celebrities. Everyone knew that Sirius and James had had a hand in the music, and by extension, Remus and Peter too; but without any proof none of the teachers were able to crack down on them. More than once in the following week Remus received high-fives from kids he didn't know while walking to and from his lessons. It was a funny feeling, being famous by association—though the word 'infamous' was probably more applicable.

Oddly enough, Sirius didn't seem disgruntled by losing his cassette when the hi-fi was eventually found and confiscated. He kept saying he'd get it back sometime, along with the rest of whatever he'd lost to the school over the years. Remus figured the list included several rubber snakes and enough gag toys to choke a whale.

The second hi-fi they'd borrowed remained in the corner of their dorm room over the weekend, covered by a towel. It hadn't taken the school long to discover that the set-up had come from the AV room, but

luckily Peter was pretty good at playing dumb, and everyone just assumed that whoever had done it had jimmied the door to get in. They had to change the locks though, and Peter was pretty protective over his clubroom keys after that.

“Did you tell Francis we had his sex tape when he threatened to kick you out?” Sirius cackled while teasing Peter mercilessly over breakfast the following Monday morning.

“How do you know it belong to Francis? It could be anyone's!”

“We could always play it again and see if we can catch a name.”

James snorted and reached for his tea. “The tape said it was from 1972. I doubt Francis had much game at thirteen.”

“Maybe someone in the club had a dirty habit of leaving their tape recorders under their parents’ beds.”

“Please shut up,” Peter groaned, as Sirius and James shared an evil look. When Sirius turned back to his breakfast James brought his cup to his lips and took a sip before gagging spectacularly;

“Oh my god, what—”

“That’s *my* cup,” Remus said, snatching the mug back.

“What’d you do, Lupin, pour the entire sugar tin into your tea?”

“Keep it up and I’ll put salt in yours.”

“You’re going to end up with diabetes.”

Despite James’ distress over his rampant sweet tooth, the last week of October had came and gone with next to no fighting. Now that Sirius was no longer basting rock and roll all hours of the night, Remus had managed to settle in, though he did so reluctantly. Ever since the successful prank in church the boys had come to a quiet understanding (pun intended) and Sirius rarely played his music without making use of the headphones anymore. This led James and Peter to become quite comfortable leaving them in the same room alone together without the worry of WW3 breaking out. Apparently, playing Switzerland in your own bedroom was much more involved than one might think.

The real shock came when Remus realised he was almost disappointed

by Sirius' willingness to use the headphones. Whether it be late in the night, when the others were fast asleep and Remus was only one awake, or during their free-time during the day, Sirius was always lying back in bed, eyes shut and ears covered, the only sound that of the turntable's crackling needle. It was finally James who broke the dorm's silence when he put a record on while the boys were sitting around playing a mock game of poker. They had nothing to bet with, so whoever won got to pick the next song. Remus, who had always been sort of shit at card games, managed to win twice and put on *Who's Next* both times, only slightly jealous that Sirius had the record. James ended up taking the most rounds, and Remus was surprised to find that the sportsy boy did have decent taste in music—he appreciated The Kinks a lot, and Bad Company as well. It was Peter who took the final round though, and they finished with his favourite, Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love", which Remus had never heard before but enjoyed immensely.

Missing Sirius' music might've been worse, if the Black family heir wasn't so intent on playing the part of the diabolical mastermind. Only a few hours into the Monday morning that followed Communion, the rest of Hawkings discovered why they'd taken a second stereo.

Remus was in Literacy with Sirius and Peter when Professor Flitwick's lecturing was interrupted by feedback from a speaker. It started just as an echo at first, distant and haunting, but as the volume rose, so did the heads of every kid in class. It was happy chaos after that, as their professor tried to keep order while Sweet's "Teenage Rampage" played overhead.

"They couldn't have picked a better song?" Remus' seat partner, Jodie Gagnon, said.

"It *is* a good song," he fired back.

Each day the music appeared in a different building. First it was the Agrippan Block, then the Galilei Block was assaulted by the soothing rock and roll of Alice Cooper, followed by Manfred Mann in Le Fay Hall, and finally ending with Thursday when the year 10 girls' gym lesson ran alongside a repeating tape of Tom Jones' "She's a Lady".

The most genius part, in Remus' opinion, was how they'd positioned the stereos. Utilising the school's extensive vent system, the boys left the hi-fi within the walls and ceilings, running a single extension lead to power it each time. Anyone just going about their day wouldn't notice the stray cable at all and being able to place the stereo within

any vent on any given floor made things much easier to swap around.

Along with his roommates, Remus participated in every switch, the last one being Le Fay Hall to the gym, where the vents there were too high up for anyone but him to climb into even if they were standing on each other's backs. As entertaining as it was to listen to rock music when they were supposed to be learning, come Friday the joke had turned a bit stale, and they'd mostly lost interest in the thrill that came with secretly shuttling the heavy stereo from building to building. Really, Ms. Hooch's discovery of the hi-fi in the vent just outside the girls' change rooms was a welcome deterrent. Though Sirius did lose another cassette as a result.

After that, the boys were simply free to be excited for Halloween. The arts and design students had gone all out this year, commissioning huge batches of ghostly sheet costumes and furry werewolf get-ups as their first term project. That Friday, students walked around with painted faces, fake teeth, and varying levels of enthusiasm. In his Modern Biology class Remus had three vampires, four pussycats, a mime, the Lone Ranger, and two kids who'd cut holes in their bed sheets as an excuse to run around shouting 'boo' at everyone. Terry Webb had even come as Her Royal Majesty the Queen.

Remus had neglected to dress up, partly because he'd never had much interest in the spooky holiday, and partly because Sirius had teased him so incessantly about going as a werewolf. He'd been fully prepared to spend that evening on his own with a book and maybe a spliff; his roommates could do as they pleased. Unfortunately, he'd neglected to tell Lily Evans of his plans beforehand.

While Sirius and James had already disappeared after dinner with Peter in tow, chittering about something to do with Salazar House, Remus made his way back to his dorm where he found himself waylaid by the red-head as she cradled one very large pumpkin to her chest.

"Remus!" Lily cried, approaching him with her regular, chipper attitude—the one she tended to have when not around James or Sirius. Remus turned to her, almost impressed she was managing to hold herself upright with such a burden.

"Alright, Evans. What are you wearing?"

Lily looked down at herself, or more accurately, at the pumpkin. Below that she was dressed in a blue dress with red slippers and white

tights. Her red hair was braided down either shoulder, ending with two big blue bows.

“It’s my Halloween costume. I’m Dorothy—from the ‘Wizard of Oz’.”

“Oh.”

“Are you not dressing up?” She asked, smiling, and Remus noticed the heavy blusher painted on her cheeks in big circles.

“No,” he said, “Halloween’s not really a favourite holiday of mine.”

“Oh. Does that mean you’re busy?”

“Er… no?”

“Brilliant! I need you to be my pumpkin partner.”

Remus tilted his head. “Your what?”

“My pumpkin partner!” Lily repeated, unperturbed. “Lottie and Marlene are already paired up, and which would normally leave me with Mary, but she’s already gone off with some year twelve boy named Johncy and left me without a partner.”

“A partner for…?”

“The pumpkin carving contest,” Lily said, rousing Remus’ memory. “Houses Dorset and Rowena do it every year. Anyone can join in. We use the pumpkins Professor Arbor grows over the summer.”

“Oh…” Remus said, scratching his head. “Well I was just going—”

“Please Remus?” Lily asked again, the heavy pumpkin not inhibiting her ability to shine those big green eyes at him. “There’s a prize,” she prompted, “enough sweets to last you until Christmas.”

Remus dropped his head back to squint at the sky. The sun had already gone, leaving them under that faint blue dusk you got right before nightfall in the autumn months.

“Fine.”

“Great!” Lily said. “Follow me!”

And Remus did, taking the pumpkin from her and only regretting it when he realised that Dorset House was at the very end of House Lane

and the trolleys had stopped running for the evening.

“Why didn’t you ask Snape to be your partner?” He asked as they walked. “Isn’t he your friend?”

He'd seen the pair of them together on campus more than a handful of times. Most of the time Snape seemed content to let Lily chatter while glaring at anyone who got close enough to invade their bubble. More than once Lily had played the role of diffuser between him and Remus’ roommates, often opting to drag Severus away before any of the boys’ jeers got him too riled up. Remus only had two lessons with Snape, Modern Biology and History, and they sat on opposite sides of the classroom for both, much to his relief.

“Ha, Sev,” Lily chuckled, pumping her arms to keep up with Remus’ strides, “he’s not interested in things like this. Couldn’t get him to wear a white sheet even if I wanted to.”

Suppressing the urge to say that Snape might’ve looked better with a sheet over his head, Remus nodded with pursed lips. “So I guess you're just prefects together then?”

“Oh no, Sev's my oldest friend. We're neighbours back home so I've known him for years.”

So it was a friendship of convenience then. Remus couldn’t relate. He’d never held onto any friends he’d known growing up. They’d all been kids of government officials or public ministers, exactly the kind that he'd spent the last four years avoiding. There had been a few guys at the other schools, but no one he'd bothered to keep up with and nothing compared to Tomny.

“He’s sort of a prat, you know,” Remus said, offhandedly. “A real self-important nob.”

“He’s not really,” Lily retorted. “His dad only owns a shipping company back in Liverpool.”

“So he’s not well-off?”

“Well… no, he is.” Lily brushed a lock of red hair out of her face. “He’s just not like others.”

Remus raised an eyebrow. “You mean like Potter and Black.”

“Yes! God. They’re insufferable. I don’t know how Peter does it—and

now you! Honestly, you should've just asked for a room change, Remus."

It would be a lie to say that he'd never entertained the idea during those first few weeks, but things were at least bearable now. "You don't think I'm like that?"

"Hm?"

"Like them. Rich—poncy."

"No," Lily said, honestly. "I mean… you don't exactly dress like them."

Remus looked down at his regulation Hawkings' uniform, grey slacks, a red polo, leather loafers. He'd never looked more like James and Sirius.

Lily caught his look. "I mean when you arrived," she amended. "Did you come here because of… with some help?"

Remus suddenly felt rather indignant. It was one thing to be labelled a yob in a room full of other yobs, and another to be one around the precious, minted few. And then he remembered her reaction the very first day they'd met, and it hit him.

"You think I'm poor."

"No!" Lily said quickly. "I just meant like, you're smart—was there some sort of arrangement with your marks or tuition or…?"

"My dad's a state Minister," Remus said. "He heads MAFF's department for animal welfare."

"Oh." Lily looked down at her shoes again, then back up. "I see. Sorry, Remus. I didn't mean to offend you or anything."

Remus felt a sudden surge of self-loathing rise in his gut. He *never* used Lyall's position to grandstand—and had never needed to, especially around his friends back in London—but two months at Hawkings and he was already feeling the sting. For so long he'd told himself the teasing he got after showing up in dirty clothes with a dusty old trunk was his reward. *I'm nothing like you,* he'd thought, as others whispered about him behind his back. Now, he felt like an idiot playing both sides.

“You didn’t,” he said guiltily, adjusting his grip on the pumpkin. “And don’t worry, even if you had, Black would still have you beat several dozen to one.”

Lily smiled shyly at his poor attempt at a joke and they continued on to Dorset House with only talk of the contest, which Lily did most of. The girls dorm, which was normally decorated in its House colours of yellow and brown, had been dressed up with the most vigorous Halloween decorum Remus had ever seen. Fake tombstones decorated the lawn, complete with paper-mache hands made to look like the living dead popping out of the grass like spring daisies. Cotton fluff was twisted into every tree and branch, and orange, black, and purple paper streamers covered every window and doorway. Real candles were scattered about the front steps and windowsills, leaving behind small waterfalls of wax while fake bats hung from the ceiling. Under normal circumstances the dorm wouldn’t have permitted any boys inside at all, but thanks to the holiday the lower floor was filled with students from every House, most dressed up in costumes. Though the Dorset dorm monitor was prowling the hallways and staircases, dressed in a Greek toga robe and making sure no one tried to sneak up the stairs for a bit of unsavoury fun.

Remus had grossly underestimated the turnout for the contest. There were over twenty teams, each pair with their own pumpkin to carve. Plenty of other students piled into the cosy common room to watch, surrounding the tables that had been set up for carving and walking across the tarps meant to protect the floors. Music was playing from a hi-fi across the room—Supertramp—and the room felt warm from the tightly crowded bodies, despite the ample amount of space.

Lily led Remus to the centre of the room, next to Marlene and Lottie, where he was finally able to drop off the heavy pumpkin.

“Hi ya, Remus,” Lottie said. She’d painted her face with orange and black stripes to look like a tiger. Next to her, Marlene waved over the chatter while wearing a red and white football jersey. Remus had no idea which team it belonged to, and he didn’t ask.

One of the Dorset girls eventually got up onto a couch in the centre of the common room to explain the contest. There were only three rules; no knives were to be used, instead the students were left to de-gut and carve their pumpkins with various other utensils raided from Rowena and Dorset’s kitchenettes. Any pumpkin gut throwing (at least inside the dorm) would be met with time penalizations. Finally, only one team member could be touching the pumpkin at a time, and they

would be blindfolded while the other gave instructions on their behalf. Halfway through the pair would switch and when time was up the best pumpkin was declared the winner and awarded a prize.

Remus, horrified that he'd been tricked into a very non-traditional carving contest, rounded on Lily. "You can be blindfolded first!" She said through a guilty grin. "That way you're really only scooping the guts."

He groaned, but let Lily put the blindfold—a yellow Dorset House tie—around his head all the same. "Wait," he said, waving his hands out in front of him, "how am I supposed to get into the thing?"

Before Lily could answer him, a whistle was blown and the room dissolved into madness. There was instant laughing and squealing from every direction, and with only ten minutes before Lily was to switch with him, Remus fumbled to find his pumpkin.

"Here Remus!"

Lily shoved something into his hands and he ran his hands along it until he realised it was a double-pronged carving fork.

"Watch those fingers!" One of the judges shouted.

"Lily what the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"Crack it open!" She cheered.

Remus grunted and began running his hands along the top of the pumpkin. He could still see light from around the edges of his blindfold, but he was going to lose a finger if he wasn't careful.

"I'm not sure this is any safer than a knife!" He moaned, answered only by Lily's gleeful laugh.

It took nearly half the allotted time, but Remus finally managed to skewer the pumpkin enough to crack open its top, using the rough stem to pry the lid off. Not a moment later he lost the carving fork, and Lily shoved him an ice cream scoop. It took him barely thirty seconds to abandon the utensil in lieu of his own hands, which he used to scoop out the guts and drop them on the table top. The music had gotten louder and it was now just a roar, making his heart rate rise until it was just slamming against his ribcage.

"One minute!"

“Remus hurry!”

The pumpkin guts slipped and squished around his fingers, but he was already too committed to the act to stop. When the whistle blew he was almost panting, his face flushed as Lily removed his blindfold for the partner switch.

“Tie it on me!” She squealed. Remus did so, getting a decent amount of pumpkin in her red plaits in the process.

As Lily and Lottie stepped up to the table for their turn the whistle blew again and Remus scrambled to get Lily something to carve with. He ended up choosing the same ice cream scoop, which at least had a sharp edge good for chiseling away the pumpkin’s surface.

“Do the eyes,” he shouted, “they’re just circles!”

Lily grinned, her head tilted upwards as she brought her fingers down across the pumpkin’s slippery surface.

Sight now returned, Remus looked down at himself to find his shirt and shoes were soaked with pumpkin innards, but he was hardly the only one; Marlene had a pumpkin seed stuck to her forehead and several in her hair.

Students started to get considerably more rowdy toward the end of the competition. Everyone was shouting at those blindfolded with various tips and tricks and a group of kids who had of course, started a pumpkin gut war, were being chased by the Dorset girls shouting in defence of their precious common room. Remus found that he was enjoying himself, especially when he noticed how Lily stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth when she concentrated. She managed to get two decent eye holes and a lopsided mouth which she fumbled with blindly until she managed to stick a piece of pumpkin in to look like a tooth.

Near the very end, while the blindfolded partners were scrambling to finish their masterpieces, the presiding judges called for candles to be lit. After lending Marlene his zippo, Remus lit his own candle and dropped it into the base of his and Lily’s pumpkin. It was definitely ugly, but they’d carved it blindfolded without so much as a proper knife, and neither of them had ever claimed to be an artist. As he stared at the messy face, an idea popped into Remus’ head, and he reached one grubby pumpkin-hand into his pocket.

“Lily, here,” he whispered, a single lighter click later, “take this.”

“What is it?” She asked, about to remove her blindfold.

“Just put it in the pumpkin’s mouth.”

Lily’s eyebrows knit together over the yellow tie, but she did as he asked and Remus smugly dropped the pumpkin’s horrible misshapen lid on top just as the final whistle blew.

“Hands off!” One of the Dorset girls shouted and the music quieted. “The judges will commence their judging!”

Standing back with his messy hands clasped innocently behind his back, Remus swallowed a smile as Lily pulled off her blindfold to inspect their pumpkin. Instantly her eyes bulged and she gasped. “Remus!”

“That’s brilliant!” Lottie laughed, as other students gathered around to inspect the messy table. Lily raised a fist and batted him on the shoulder, making him flinch back, a now more brazen grin on his face.

“Out of the way, judges coming through!”

Three year 13 girls appeared next to them and stared down at the lumpy pumpkin, covered in the remnants of mushy orange insides with two sorely misplaced eyes and a single lit cigarette held between its tooth and upper lip. They stared at first, before bursting into giggles and moving on, pointing at the cigarette while all the other students did the same.

“You nutter, we could’ve won!” Lily moaned.

“We might still,” Remus said, smugly.

“We’ll be lucky if they don’t tell a teacher what you did.”

“It’s Halloween, Lils,” Lottie crooned, “nothing wrong with a little special effects.”

“Thank you, Lottie.”

“It was kind of funny,” Marlene surmised.

“Not you too, Marls.” Lily covered her eyes. She was whinging, but when she finally looked up again she only shrugged. “Oh well, there’s always next year.”

After a few minutes of deliberation, the judges stepped up onto the

common room sofa once more. Second place and the prize of several chocolate bars went to a pair of girls from Bronte House for their attempted rendition of a pumpkin clown.

“And first place goes to…” There was a slapping noise as the whole room gave a drum roll on whatever surface was closest. “The pumpkin with a nasty smoking habit!”

A cheer went up, and Lily joined in despite herself, throwing her hands into the air in celebration.

“Remus the genius!” Lottie shouted, grappling onto his arm. Kids were hooting and laughing, turning their spooky painted faces into masks of glee. Remus was passed a pillowcase that dragged the floor with enough sweets to feed the whole British Army, and as he moved about the room, others patted him on the back and asked him and Lily when they were going to share. At some point, while their backs were turned, the pumpkin’s cigarette vanished.

* * *

Apparently not much of a partier, Lily lasted about a half hour after the contest’s end before asking Remus to walk her back to her dorm. Marlene had already agreed to go off with Lottie in search of her boyfriend, Mickey, and the pairs went their separate ways on Dorset’s front steps.

Making his way down House Lane, Remus carried their pumpkin in front of him, grateful that its heavy insides had been replaced with a winner’s badge that read “Least Ugly Pumpkin, 1975”. Lily carried the pillowcase containing their winnings, rocking her head back and forth as though she had a song stuck in her head.

“Thanks for being my partner, Remus.”

“No problem. Felt sorta nice.”

“To win, you mean?”

“Yeah…” And it had. He’d already partaken in enough Halloween chocolate that he didn’t even mind that someone had pinched one of his cigarettes.

“Sorry if I interrupted some plans,” Lily said, though she sounded

more happy than regretful.

“You didn’t,” Remus shook his head. “It was good.”

A moment of silence passed between them. Remus could hear more music far off, coming from one of the other dorms. It was joined by the odd far-away hoot from an excited student, and occasionally Lily would wave to others as they passed them in the road.

“You finish that history paper yet?” She asked.

“Not yet,” Remus sighed.

“You’ve still got time. Professor Binns is pretty kind when it comes to due dates.”

“Hm.”

“I could help you if you'd like. We could work on it together in the library tomorrow. Or any day really. Exam prep starts in November, and it’s always good to study with friends. We could quiz each other.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“HI YA LUPIN!”

Remus nearly jumped out of his skin at the shout while Lily launched herself about three feet across the pavement. They both spun round to find James and Sirius standing there in black cloaks, a pair of ugly green masks drawn up on their heads.

“Jesus Christ,” Remus gasped. “You could’ve said someth—”

“SORRY LUPIN!” Sirius interrupted gleefully, dashing forward to snatch the carved pumpkin from his arms and sprint away with it. James followed waving a baseball bat over his head.

“Black, you horrible bastard!” Lily screeched, running a few paces after them before nearly tripping over the pillowcase.

“Can’t stay to chat, Evans!” Sirius called, his voice slightly muffled now that he had pulled his mask down over his face. “Got pumpkins to pulverise!”

“Gourds to gouge!” James supplied, hooting as he ran.

“Jack’s to crack!”

“Squashes to… To *squash!”*

Remus approached Lily as the two bolted away into the dark, shaking his head lightly.

“Those arseholes,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “They stole our winning pumpkin.”

“Oh well. S’just a pumpkin.”

“Remus, they’re going to ruin it!”

“They can’t make it any uglier,” he snorted. “At least we kept the sweets?”

Lily moaned something that sounded a lot like an exasperated ‘ugh, boys’, but as they started down the road again, carrying the pillowcase between them, Remus didn’t miss the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Chapter End Notes

'Who’s Next' is an album by The Who, produced in 1971.
'MAFF' stands for "Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food". It was the UK department responsible for exactly what it entails and was replaced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in 2002.

Note: For the sake of story, both Lily and Snape are from Liverpool and Sirius is from Bath, while the rest of our main characters hail from London. And for those of you who know your LGBT+ music history, don't look too deeply into James' love for the Kinks. (Or do, hehe.)

Author's Note: Thank you so much for reading this far! Comments mean the world to me and I love hearing what you think. It really propels me to keep writing. Cheers and love <3

Chapter 13: Spectacular Sweet Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Sirius' sixteen birthday begins somewhat modest and of course, ends with a bang.

Chapter Notes

CW: Brief references to smoking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

People stared at the makeup on his face,
Laughed at his long black hair, his animal grace;
The boy in the bright blue jeans,
Jumped up on the stage;
And lady stardust sang his songs,
Of darkness and disgrace;

And he was alright, the band was altogether,
Yes he was alright, the song went on forever;
And he was awful nice,
Really quite out of sight,
And he sang all night long…

- "Lady Stardust" David Bowie, 1972

November 3rd was their first Monday back to school after a weekend of Halloween-related festivities (and clean up). Coincidentally, it was also Sirius Black's sixteenth birthday.

Woken up by James and Peter as they threw back his bed curtains, Sirius seemed perfectly delighted to be body-slammed into his mattress, returning their shouts of admiration and delight with laughter of his own. Remus rolled over and squinted in the light before sitting up on his bed; he'd stayed up late and forgotten to shut his own curtains again. Despite his generally poor disposition in the mornings, it was almost funny to watch them tussle, but when Sirius caught his gaze, Remus hid his interest with a yawn.

Sirius' birthday breakfast was fit for a king. James had talked one of the dining hall's cooks into whipping up a plate of Dutch cream

waffles and they'd slathered them with every topping available in the kitchens. Half expecting Sirius to make a big show of it, Remus was surprised by how exceptionally modest he appeared throughout the meal, even after they'd gotten half the dining hall to sing him happy birthday. Thanks to their adjoining schedules, Remus spent his entire morning bearing witness to Sirius' exceptionally normal behaviour. He'd assumed that with an ego as big as his, Sirius would go around demanding everyone sing his praises, but apart from the occasional birthday wishes from other friendly students, things were remarkably standard. Mrs. Buchanan did get the entire forms class to sing but Sirius remained quiet and humble, thanking everyone apart from Crouch, who'd elected to serenade him with his armpit.

Remus didn't speak to Sirius much during their lessons. He'd wished him a quiet happy birthday over breakfast, which Sirius had accepted graciously, but still he remained sceptical. He'd always been indifferent to his own birthday, perhaps Sirius was the same?

By the time lessons let out that evening, Sirius had disappeared. Assuming it was just a result of his continuated aversion to private study hour, Remus thought nothing of it until supper when James informed him that Sirius had gone off for a scheduled phone call with his family.

"They make a big thing of it," he said, over a mouthful of peas. "Call McGongall's office and make her fetch him like she's his personal assistant. Honestly he's just lucky his parents don't make the trip themselves just to spite him. They haven't since Reg graduated out of primary anyway."

"If they're so terrible, why answer the call in the first place?" Remus grumbled, pushing his food around his plate. Both James and Peter shared a look.

"They're his family," Peter answered. "And it's his birthday. Expected, isn't it?"

Remus wouldn't know. He'd spent his last birthday in a different dorm room, plotting another escape. The incident with Mr. Wright had occurred only a few weeks later.

Later that evening Sirius returned to their room and was met with leftover dinner (roast chicken, mash, and beans) and a small lopsided chocolate cake James and Peter had whipped up in the dorm kitchenette.

“Sorry it’s not a big celebration,” James said, after they'd presented the cake.

“Don’t need a fancy party,” Sirius said, “just need my mates.” He planted himself down on the floor with his dinner box, back pressed up against the side of his bed. James sat across from him leaning up against his own bed with Peter next to him. Remus took a spot in the centre of the floor between the four beds, side-eyeing Sirius while picking at a sweets wrapper and tearing it into little pieces to keep his fingers busy.

“So, how’re Mum and Dad?” Asked James.

“Same old, same old,” Sirius mumbled, shovelling pieces of chicken into his mouth.

“They didn’t give you any crap?”

“Tried a‘course, but it wasn’t anything new. Mostly just blagged because I picked music again as a spare. They wanted me in Russian.”

Peter snorted. “What do you need Russian for? You already know French and German.”

Remus looked up from his shredded wrapper. “You speak French and German?”

“And some Italian,” Sirius said, slurping up a string bean. “*Ancora stupito?”*

Remus looked away again, surprised. Here he was, just trying to get a passing mark in Biology, and this tosser spoke four languages.

“Lotta good it does me in the Scottish countryside though.” Finished with his meal, Sirius wiped his mouth and set the dinner box aside. “Apparently Reg’s bringing my birthday present over.”

Both James and Peter raised their brows. Remus also listened keenly, as he always did when Sirius’ elusive brother was brought up.

“They got you a gift?" Peter asked. "Thought you were cut off still."

“I am. Doubt it’ll be anything *good.* Probably just something else that’ll make my life more miserable.”

Remus didn’t think Sirius Black had much of a miserable day-to-day, but he really had no idea what happened outside of the school’s

grounds. Over his two months at Hawkings Remus had gathered that Sirius' family was very wealthy and that they'd provided extensive donations to the school every term since he and Reg had arrived—probably the reason why Sirius never got threatened with expulsion no matter what he pulled—but he'd also gleaned that he didn't like discussing his family much. Despite his apparent good fortune, Sirius ate the same things as the rest of the student body, opting out of the more expensive meal plans, wore regulation clothing and pyjamas even on off-days, and hardly ever visited the commissary. When he ran out of pens or lost his last rubber, he'd just borrow off of someone else. The band posters and music collection had all come out of James and Peter's trunks, and the only things he'd brought from home that he seemed to value were a few books (Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, William Blake—Sirius really leaned into the idea of the tortured romantic). Above all though, Sirius treasured his stereo and records, all of which had been gifts or else handed down from some cousin that was also estranged from the family.

As though Sirius had been reading his mind, he said; "Andy called me too."

James perked up. "She did?"

"Yeah, it was cool. She said my birthday present is going to be late though. Dora's been keeping her busy with colic and Ted's having trouble at the factory. She says they might strike soon."

"That's too bad. Sorry you gotta wait for your present."

Sirius just shrugged. "I don't mind."

"Andy always gives the best presents," Peter said, kindly.

"Yeah she does," Sirius agreed, "but she hasn't gotten out much because of Dora, so I don't mind waiting."

Dora was Andy's daughter, which made her Sirius' cousin once removed. After getting pregnant at twenty Andy married her factory worker boyfriend Ted, which effectively ejected her from the supremacist family. Their daughter was still just two, and apparently a real riot act of a kid.

"Well you don't have to wait for our gifts!" James said, before he and Peter got to their feet and dashed over to their respective trunks. They returned with two gifts; James' was obviously an album, wrapped perfectly with a slightly squashed red bow on top, while Peter's was

more of a box shape and wrapped in his father's company's newspaper, *The Daily London Local*.

Sirius tore into the presents—*several* records from James, the highlight of which was absolutely Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy,* and a new suede jacket from Peter, a bit oversized to leave some room for Sirius to fill it out as he grew.

"Thanks lads!" he said, jumping up to put on the Zeppelin album.

"I knew you were missing that one," James said eagerly, taking the vinyl's sleeve from Sirius to read-over.

Remus felt rather ruffled after that. He knew he shouldn't ought to feel guilty over not having prepared a gift, but it still felt poor to be left out. It took him until the b-side of *Houses of the Holy* before he'd worked up enough courage to drag his half of the Halloween winnings out from beneath his bed.

"Cheers, Lupin!" James and Peter cried, already digging into the sweets. Sirius smiled at him too, gently, before picking up a roll of Toffos for himself. As if to break the ice he tried ragging on him for joining the pumpkin competition, but it was hard for any of them to take him seriously with with his mouth half stuck together with toffee.

They ate sweets until they were going to be sick and followed that up with the cake, which deflated in the middle the moment James took a serving knife to it. They ate it anyway of course, and when they were done Sirius pulled out a bottle of whisky, courtesy of Peter's older brother, Simeon.

"You got Peter's brother to buy you booze?" Remus questioned.

"It's a birthday gift. Simeon's got all the best hook-ups," Sirius said, uncapping the bottle with his teeth. "Ain't that right, Pete?"

"Stuff it, Black. Just 'cause it's your birthday doesn't mean I gotta listen to you blag."

Peter's brother-issues aside, the whisky felt nice going down. Remus felt only slightly buzzed by the time they finished off the bottle, and while both Sirius and Peter seemed to be holding their liquor well enough it was clear the flimsy drinker among them was James. Potter was currently splayed out on Sirius' bed, upside down, school tie around his head (though he'd done that before they started drinking),

giggling about how a knot in the wood of one of the bedposts looked like a nob.

“I’m never going to be able to unsee that now,” Sirius said, lying next to him.

A knock came from the door—only audible because the record had finished and no one had elected to turn it over yet—and Remus got up to answer it. Just as he twisted the door handle Sirius shot up and shouted; “No, don’t!”

But it was too late. Remus already had the door open and was staring down another boy, his hair every hint of raven black as Sirius’. He looked Remus up and down, raising a single eyebrow the way Sirius often did, only his gesture was somehow even more critical.

“I’m here for my brother,” he said, in a manner that was much too severe for a fourteen year-old.

Remus, head still swimming from the booze, stepped back and allowed him inside. Regulus Black was slighter in the shoulders and shorter than his brother, but that could just have been chalked up to age. His dark hair was combed immaculately, not long or tousled, but he had the same grey eyes and sharp cheekbones.

“Hi ya, Reg,” Peter said, currently sorting the leftover of Remus’ sweets into colour-coded piles.

When Sirius saw his brother enter he sat up on the bed, an expression of annoyance on his face. “Just when we were having such a good time.”

“I brought your gift,” Regulus said cooly, indicating the single present bag he was holding. It was entirely a muted grey and appeared distinctly un-celebratory. “Mum figured you’d never collect it if she sent it directly to you.”

“Oh well, she’s right about that,” Sirius said, standing while James turned over onto his stomach to get a better look. “But you know, Reggie, you should really stop playing errand boy for our dear mum and dad.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “I just came to bring the gift.”

“I’m surprised they bothered to prepare anything in the first place.”

“Do what you want with it,” Regulus said, dropping the bag by Sirius’ bed. “I’m leaving.”

“You don’t want any cake, Reg?” James called and Sirius stepped forward, slinging an arm around Remus’ shoulders.

“Yeah, hold on baby brother, have you met Lupin yet? He’s our newest roommate, and as thus you must pay your respects. Elders and all that.”

“Funny, coming from you."

“Yeah," Remus said. "I don’t think I’ve ever seen you pay respects to anyone.”

“Ignore him,” Sirius told his brother, fumbling to push Remus away by the face. “Time to stick out that tongue and lick some boots!”

“Why? He’s just another roommate—the last one left suddenly enough, I’m sure he won’t last either.”

Despite his drunkenness, Sirius turned stoney and James got up from the bed, grabbing him by the arm before he could so much as take a step toward his brother. With a little more urgency, Regulus backed up to the door and yanked it open, glancing back at Sirius only once before disappearing out into the hall.

“Bah,” Sirius scoffed after he’d gone, shaking free of James’ grasp. “Holier-than-thou little git.”

Ignoring the bag, Sirius threw himself back onto his bed and tucked his hands behind his head. With no siblings himself, Remus didn’t really understand how the usual rows went, and stepped up to the side of the bag to peer inside. “You really don’t want to know what it is then?”

“It’s not going to be Zeppelin tickets, so I don’t care. You open it if you’re so curious.”

Remus shrugged and reached down into the bag. Sirius remained disinterested, and busied himself by flipping the record, but both James and Peter crowded in close. From inside the bag, he drew out a single black box, tied around the middle with a luxurious black ribbon. The box’s label read the name of an expensive department store and Remus was suddenly bombarded by the image of several pretty boxes piled high in his mother’s closet. The memory fled as

quickly as it arrived, and he was left to open the box, pushing aside the fine tissue paper.

“It’s a suit,” he said, surprised. He’d hardly ever seen Sirius wear anything but his school uniform or Godric-red button-up pyjamas “What do you need with a suit at boarding school?”

“For yearly portraits maybe?” James suggested, peering over Remus’ shoulder to get a look at the fancy garb. “They usually take them just before winter holidays. They let us dress up, if we wanna.” James mumbled this last bit to Remus.

“I don’t need it,” Sirius said gruffly. “I told you it wasn’t going to be a good gift. I’m going to wear my uniform like everyone else. Might as well toss it into the fire in the common room.”

Turning back to his bed, Sirius crouched down to reach beneath it and began shuffling aside trunks and school things before withdrawing another box, this one made out of cardboard and considerably more shabby than the one gifted to him by his parents. Looking back down, Remus ran his fingers over the suit’s soft silk. The suit seemed perfectly fine—extravagant really. Sirius would probably look like some sort of Dorian Gray if he put it on. Pretty prick.

“Is that them, Sirius?” Peter asked. The other two, both probably used to Sirius’ family’s finery, had already lost interest in the gift and were currently crowded around the dingy shoebox, expectantly.

“Yeah. Little Bob-John delivered today, lads.”

“Isn’t Bobby Johnson in like year eight?” James asked, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Yeah, and the kid’s a certifiable evil genius.” Sirius sat upright again with the shoebox between his hands. He lifted the lid to reveal several paper bog rolls, each one bound up at the end with a single black string sticking out one end. “Homemade firecrackers,” he grinned. “Just a few, nothing too wild. I say we take that crap present and use one of these to blow it to hell.”

“You are *not* blowing anything up in our bedroom,” James said, sobering up instantly.

“Not *in here.* We’ll go out into the woods a bit. ‘Least that way we can leg-it away after we set ‘em off.”

Remus leaned back, setting the suit box aside. “I’m starting to think you’re determined to break each and every curfew.”

“Oh c’mon,” Sirius groaned, “don’t try telling me you don’t want to go out and ‘blow off some steam’, Lupin?”

He winked, and Remus felt his toes curl as he inevitably caved.

* * *

“How long have you been planning this?” Asked Remus, as he lifted his leg over another tree root. They’d started first on the forest path that would’ve led to the dining hall, but then Sirius had taken a sharp dive into the trees and left his friends to scramble after him. They’d left the suit in the end, only after James had taken the time to explain that ‘blowing up clothing’ didn’t make a lick of sense.

“I wanted them for Halloween, actually,” Sirius said, “but Bob couldn’t get everything ready in time. Really it’s lucky that we have them tonight. One bottle of whisky just doesn’t seem like enough, does it?”

“So we turn to pyrotechnics?”

“Nothing so fancy, Lupin. These are just going to go boom.”

Once again Sirius Black was showcasing his love for anything and everything loud.

“Mickey thinks you’re right mental, Sirius,” Peter said, nearly tripping over his own feet in the darkness. Sirius whirled on him instantly, eyes wide.

“You told your sister’s boyfriend about our *plan?”*

“Mickey was my friend first!” Peter protested, truthfully. Lottie’s beau had been a member of the AV club with him for a number of years, but come year ten Mickey had returned to school with a considerable growth spurt and made good use of it on the pitch with James, trading his comics and telly privileges for a girlfriend and football boots.

“You’re going to lose your right to our evil schemes, Pete,” James said. He’d since removed the tie from his head, but had tripped or fallen over the most tree roots out of all of them.

“Reckon here’s good enough,” Sirius said, stopping in a shallow clearing and setting the box down on the forest floor. If Remus looked back he could just make the street lamps of House Lane through the trees, but it was still considerably dark.

“Bollocks,” Sirius snapped. “I forgot a light. James?”

“Lupin has a light,” James said, cheerily. “Don’t you, Remus?”

Scoffing, Remus shouldered James lightly and pulled Tomny’s zippo out of his back pocket, passing it along to Sirius. It occured to him as he did so that it had been over a full day since his last cigarette. It meant he was sorely due for another, but it also sort of felt good not to be thinking about smoking at all hours of the day. Maybe it was a good idea to cut back.

Withdrawing one of the firecrackers, Sirius held it aloft and pinched the homemade fuse, flicking the zippo's flame to life.

“How loud do you think it’s gonna be?” Peter asked anxiously.

“Dunno. Maybe cover your ears?”

James did so. “Just make sure you throw it away from us.”

“And here I thought we were going to play a round of hot potato. Get back, numpty.”

Sirius brought the flame toward the fuse and it sputtered to life immediately. Remus got a split-second shot of Sirius’ eyes widening in the orange glow before he hucked the explosive across the clearing and immediately jumped back toward the boys. As they began shouting in varying degrees of distress, Sirius grabbed hold of Remus and shoved him in front of himself, cackling. Remus grabbed him back, determined not to lose an eye to any possible flying shrapnel, but James and Peter had already joined in with the shoving, and soon they had hands all over one another, grappled in one big circle, wincing and waiting for the bang.

That did not come.

Sirius stood up, releasing Remus’ jacket and frowning. “Bugger. Bad batch. Bobby owes me twenty quid for that, the little shit.”

James opened both eyes again, straightening up to his full height next to Peter. “Reckon all of them are duds?”

Sirius went back to the middle of the clearing and pulled out a second firecracker. “Only one way to find out.” He lit it and chucked it after the first, rushing back to his friends, only this time he did not half-throttle Remus in the process.

They listened to the hiss of the fuse burning down, and then collectively released a breath. Sirius stomped his foot cartoonishly, moving forward. “Another d—”

BOOM!

Remus wasn’t sure which one of them gave the shrillest shriek. It could very well have been himself, after flinching back so violently he ended up on his butt in the dirt. The firecracker had gone off like a rifle round, only five times as loud and ten times as blinding, and they all had stars in their vision from the explosion’s bright flash.

“Blimey,” James breathed. “What did Bob put in those things—kryptonite?”

Sirius was beaming. “Dunno! It’s a secret recipe. C’mon lets light another!”

Significantly more interested now that they’d seen evidence of the homemade explosive’s firepower, the four boys crowded around this time when Sirius lit another firework. He passed it to James quickly, who flung the explosive a good distance into the trees. This time when it went off, they were all ready.

BOOM!

The boys whooped, egged on the chaos, and Remus was not immune to the contagion of it all. In the darkness he was grinning, reminded of how it had been to watch Tomny or one of the others toss cheap bottles of booze into already burning rubbish bins and watch as they went up with a great whoosh of orange flame.

“I wanna throw one!” Peter said.

“Okay!”

Remus watched as the boys rushed back to the box. On the third boom he didn’t even flinch, but he sure did scream when a hand came down on his shoulder.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK YER DOING?” A voice roared, followed by

the blinding light of a flashlight torch that turned his roommates into deer in headlights. Snapping his head sideways, Remus found a very disgruntled-looking man, his stringy grey hair falling over a pair of hunched shoulders. When he shouted, spit flew from his mouth. He made to dash away, but the man held firm, keeping hold of him by the back of his collar despite being a good bit shorter than the fifteen year-old.

“It’s Filch,” Peter squeaked. Both Sirius and James moved closer together to hide the box of firecrackers behind their shoes. It was a good effort, but they all knew they were caught.

“Students out of bed after hours!” Filch barked, making Remus shrink down in his jacket. “Violating noise limits by setting off illegal explosives!”

“They were just little firecrackers,” Sirius said, but Filch only shook his flashlight at them.

“March!” Filch ordered, pointing back toward the road. He tossed Remus aside and strode right up to the boys, shoving them apart and picking up the box of fireworks, tucking them under one arm and pushing them all forward with his flashlight.

They trudged on together, each with sore and sour expressions. Filch walked behind them through the trees like an executioner marching prisoners toward the gallows. He was surprisingly quick despite the uneven terrain.

“Can’t believe he found us so quickly,” Sirius muttered bitterly under his breath.

“Think Bob could’ve ratted on us?” James asked.

"No point, he'd lose his whole enterprise. Had to be someone else."

There was a small gasp and they all turned to Peter, who was looking very guilty even in the low light. “I never mentioned it I guess… but someone might have overheard me talking to Mickey yesterday…”

“Pete!” Sirius exclaimed.

“No talking!” Filch spat from behind. The boys puckered again, but Sirius now knew he’d been wronged and that was cause enough to disobey.

“Who’d you tell?” He hissed.

“I didn’t tell, he just overheard us and made some snarky comments.”

“*Who*, Pete?”

“Snape.”

BOOM!

Somewhere behind them the dud firecracker went off—a delayed reaction. Filch gave a screech much louder than any of them and nearly took a tumble into the dirt. All four boys turned around, trying to suppress their snickers, and the caretaker blinded them with the light of his torch, lashing out a spit-fuelled snarl.

“You’ll be in detention for the rest of the school year if they don’t let me hang you from yer toes first!”

Their laughter dissipated instantly, replaced by sour frowns. Throwing a hand up to shield his eyes, Remus turned to Sirius next to him, who met his gaze, amusement gone. “I’m gonna kill him,” he snarled.

Remus wasn’t sure whether he meant Peter or Snape.

Chapter End Notes

'Bog rolls' are just another term for empty toilet paper rolls.

Happy (sorry) birthday, Sirius, haha!

Chapter 14: Snivellus Takes a Shower

Chapter Summary

The boys give new meaning to 'Slimy Snivellus'.

Chapter Notes

CW: References to smoking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And the man in the back said, “Everyone attack!”
And it turned into a ballroom blitz;
And the girl in the corner said, “Boy I want to warn you—
“It’ll turn into a ballroom blitz!”
Ballroom blitz! Ballroom blitz! Ballroom blitz! Ballroom blitz!

- “Ballroom Blitz” The Sweet, 1974

November 1975

The punishment for their rather loud indiscretion was three week’s worth of detentions, all of which were to be carried out before or after lessons and every Saturday morning. They were separated of course, so as to discourage any further insurrections. Sirius was sent back to Mrs. Pince, their prickly librarian, in hopes that the library’s quiet atmosphere might soothe his cutting tongue. James, half afraid he was going to lose his spot as football captain, personally volunteered to be Ms. Hooch’s faithful dog for the entirety of November and spent his detentions polishing the gymnasium floor or otherwise scrubbing the mildew off the undersides of every one of the rowing team's boats. Poor Peter, who nearly rivalled Remus when it came to being a horrible morning-person, was forced to wake up at the crack of dawn to help Professor Kettleburn—Hawkings’ Agricultural Department head and resident farmer—water, feed, and muck-out the school pens.

It was apparent to all of them, even him, that Remus was getting off easy with his punishment. Though his Saturdays were spent reshelving books in the library with Sirius, most of his detention hours were spent with his forms teacher, Mrs. Buchanan, doing whatever odd jobs she could think up the day of. According to Sirius, Sheila disappeared

nearly every second weekend, though no one had the faintest idea as to where she went. It was Hawkings, so there were some rumours of course, the craziest of which was that she was British Intelligence and was only placed at the school to keep an eye on the next generation of politicians and title-owners. During the afternoons he organised music sheets or polished and restrung instruments Remus almost always entertained the idea of asking where it was that she was really going, but every time he got up the nerve to broach the subject, Mrs. Buchanan would direct his attention to scrubbing the dried saliva out of the tubas, and he learned to stop asking after that.

“You’re just in a glorified forms class,” Sirius complained, still nursing the sore ankle he'd gotten falling off one of the library ladders. It wouldn't have happened at all if he hadn't been trying to show-off to a group of sixth form girls who’d been sneaking glances at him over their homework.

“Well, they’ve got me doing real manual labour,” Peter moaned. “A goat bit me yesterday—I actually bled!”

“You’re lucky I didn’t make you bleed first, Pete,” Sirius growled. “It’s all your big mouth’s fault that we were caught in the first place. Really between you and Lupin I—”

“The firecrackers were *not* my idea,” Remus snapped. He’d been angry with Sirius ever since his birthday, and they’d spent most of their shared time between detention and lessons making subtle jabs or else ignoring each other entirely. This seemed like a great step back in progress to James, who Remus suspected had been secretly keeping tally of every moment he and Sirius had talked civilly with one another.

Well tough, Remus thought. Sirius was already a wanker, but now he’d gone and lost Tomny’s lighter too.

After marching the boys back to Castle Hall, Filch had made them turn out their pockets in case they were carrying any other illicit articles. Having left his cigarettes behind, Remus’ pockets were empty, but James lost a lucky Arsenal trading card and Peter had been forced to give up a few chocolates leftover from the Halloween stash, which he seemed pretty sorry to lose anyway.

When Filch made Sirius hand over the lighter, Remus had seen red. He’d spent several long seconds trying to picture what might happen if he just whacked the caretaker and took the zippo back. But in the end

he did nothing and just let himself simmer in enraged silence while they waited for Headmistress McGonagall to arrive for their late-night lecture. A year ago, that kind of restraint would've been beyond him. Apparently Hawkings College was having an effect. Unfortunately, that restraint lasted only so long.

Remus' anger hit a new height when they returned to their dorm room and he'd attempted to give Sirius an earful for losing his only connection to his London life.

"Stop blaming Pete, it was your bloody idea in the first place!"

"You're just pissed that Filch took your cheap lighter!" Sirius shouted. "Well here, have mine if you're so pressed!" Sirius threw a silver-plated lighter down onto Remus' bed before storming back to his side of the room. Immediately Remus picked it up and hurled it back, *hard,* and it cracked against the wall only a few centimeters from Sirius' head, making them all flinch in shock.

"Bloody nutter!" Sirius exclaimed.

"Up yours, Black!"

In the end it was James 'ever-so-empathetic and yet still somehow completely out of touch' Potter, who came between the two of them, diffusing the argument as he always did by promising to get Remus a new lighter to make up for the one he'd lost. Unable to explain why the cheap zippo was so important, Remus threw himself down onto his bed and pulled his curtains across to block the rest of them out. It was late, but he wasn't tired, and he laid awake later, listening to James and Peter murmur quiet happy birthdays to Sirius from across the room.

Things didn't start looking up again for Sirius and Remus' relationship until the end of November. Detentions now finished with, the boys of dorm 4A found themselves with more free time than they had in several weeks, and quickly this turned into talks of how they were to get Snivelling Severus back for tattling to Filch and ruining Sirius' birthday. After his contributions with the Communion prank, the other boys were keen on including him in their talks of mischief, and Remus found that he didn't mind sitting around in a circle and talking about ways to inconvenience others.

The meetings reminded him of sitting on the floor of Tomny's place and listening to other hooligan boys regale the group with tales of running from the fuzz or causing panic or devastation elsewhere. For

the most part he'd been content to sit back and listen, asking Tomny questions that always earned him either a cheeky answer or a flick on the forehead. Back then all the boys had seemed larger than life, but something about his roommates brought out a competitiveness in Remus that he hadn't known existed. The detentions had worn down his anger toward Sirius and they were almost amicable again, a fact that was only reinforced when they eagerly shared an opinion or idea for a prank. They were alike that way—both wanting to prove that they were the smartest person in the room.

It was easier for Remus to picture his life being so different than it had been back in London when they were like that; record on, old Halloween sweets spread out between the four of them, spitballing ways to turn Snape's sneer into a cry for help. Peter became the official note taker, scribbling each idea down on a scrap pad as the other boys said them. He filled the margins with little doodles of Snape in varying stages of distress, which Remus thought were actually quite good, a skill he practiced mostly while redrawing the characters in his comics.

"We could put worms in his food," Peter said, nibbling on the tip of his biro. "You know, because he's such a slimy git."

"Kid's stuff," Sirius rebuffed. "Might as well put a frog down his trousers and watch him dance."

"I think a frog would be pretty funny, actually."

Sirius shook his head. "Gotta be funnier. I want other people to laugh."

"At Snape," Remus drawled, quietly snapping his fingers in his lap. So far he'd managed to contain himself to one cigarette a day, but by the end of the night he was always itching to put something between his lips. There was chocolate; that seemed to curb some of the cravings, but one more Galaxy Bar and he'd lose his dinner to the toilet bowl. What did people even do with their hands without cigarettes?

"Of course at Snape," Sirius said. "Dickhead deserves it. Did you know I heard him bragging to Travers that he'd had a hand in 'putting us away'? He made sure I heard it too—cocky prick. Almost socked him one right then and there."

"We should ruin one of his precious science experiments," James offered brightly. "He's almost always got one going in Slughorn's room."

Remus nearly laughed. “Lily said he spends all summer shut up in a garage doing experiments.”

“Probably taking all the neighbourhood cats apart and putting them back together again, the freak,” Peter said, sarcastically.

The record finished and Sirius got up to flip it. When he turned around he was pinching his forehead and squinting as though he were trying immensely hard to concentrate.

“We must just be going about it wrong,” he continued. “What’s—Lupin quit that snapping! What’s something Snape needs above all else?”

“A good smack?”

“A girlfriend?”

Remus thought instantly of Snape’s greasy black hair. “A shower.”

“Yes!” Sirius said, pointing at him. “Imagine—Snivellus standing before a crowd, wet as a drowned rat.”

“Well how are you going to that? Snape’s not just going to walk into the lake because you told him too.”

“How ‘bout you work with me a little and we’ll figure it out!”

“The lake’s not a bad idea though,” James said, nearly the most eager out of all of them to teach Snivellus a lesson. For him, the dislike for Snape went beyond just a fowl attitude and nark-like tendencies; Lily Evans, the proper prefect girl and subject of James’ deepest affections, was also Snape’s childhood friend and confidant. How she put up with such a foul git was beyond Remus, but Lily would’ve said the same thing about putting up with James, who couldn’t help but stare whenever she and Snape walked by together. Despite his obvious interest in Lily, neither she nor any of the other girls had offered up just what it was that he’d done to evoke such hatred, and all three of the boys still seemed as lost as ever.

The group was quiet for a while and Remus settled himself back against the floor to stare up at the ceiling. Sometimes the prank-planning operations ended like this; without a conclusion, but it never took long for the boy’s interests to be piqued by another idea, promptly commencing another meeting.

Eventually the record ended once more, filling the room with the soft crackling of the needle as it skipped over bare plastic. Sirius dropped his head back off the edge of his bed, staring up at the ceiling as Remus was. From his spot on the floor, Remus could see him perfectly, though Sirius did not look at him. Instead he let his head rock back and forth as though he were entertaining a thought. “We know Snape loves seeing other people miserable—”

“Normally he’s the one making them miserable,” James grumbled from his own bed.

“He made Marlene cry the other day,” Peter said. “Started saying all that nasty stuff about her family again.”

James scowled bitterly and shook his head.

“What’s wrong with her family?” Asked Remus.

“Nothing,” James insisted, “but they’re… not exactly as well-off as Hawkings’ general consensus.”

“So she’s poor?”

“Well, middle class. She’s from Southwark. Her dad’s a steel worker and her mum runs a tailors shop.”

“How can she afford to go to school here then?”

“She had an aunt that left her money for school, so her tuition’s prepaid,” Peter explained. “Lottie visited her once and said their house was fine but Marlene was still embarrassed.”

Well, who could blame her? Remus thought. It must've felt horrible to grow up around kids used to such finery who always got everything they wanted while others teased you for being unable to join in? He was hardly an exception. Remus may have not had very present parents, but he had Giles and his friends. If anyone had tried to come at him over them he knew exactly how he’d react; no one could’ve blamed Marlene for crying.

“What I’m hearing is that it sounds like our civil duty at this point to give Snivellus a taste of his own medicine,” Sirius started. “Potter, you still in good with that old bird in the kitchens?”

“Her name is *Norma,* and she’s the one who made your wonderful birthday breakfast, you insensitive sod.”

“Oh, well, I bet it’s just wonderful when she leaves those wrinkled lip-prints on both of your cheeks.”

“You’re just jealous she doesn’t call you a ‘dashing prince with eyes like a fox’.”

“Definitely jealous, that.”

James and Sirius smirked at each other from across the aisle and Remus spotted that twin-like glint of mischief in their eyes. They always matched, Sirius and James. Couldn’t have looked more different; Sirius with his fair skin and grey eyes and James with his brown complexion and blinding smile, and yet they were like long lost brothers, able to understand one another so well it was as though they could see right into each other’s minds. Remus reckoned that they would be friends for a very long time.

“Okay then,” Sirius said, turning over and swinging his legs off the side of his bed. “I think I know what we need to do. Pete, get your pen ready.”

* * *

The set up had been the trickiest bit, and even that required only a bit of convincing from all of them. James had volunteered to do all of it, but Sirius was determined that they all play a part, including Remus, who was responsible for accompanying Sirius to the primary block and to, of course, fund the whole affair. That might’ve proved hard, had kids not been so easy to bribe with leftover Halloween chocolate.

It was the perfect circumstances for Sirius’ plan really. As a prefect, Snape would be expected to take the occasional weekend shift on the western half of campus, organising and overseeing activities for the younger primary kids who couldn’t be expected to spend a whole weekend looking after themselves. The teachers didn’t do it, as they only worked during the school week, and making use of the prefects meant that the primary caretakers got a break. It sounded a lot like unpaid labour to Remus, but apparently the job looked good on university applications.

It only took Sirius a few honeyed words to get the prefects’ schedule out of a twelfth year girl, and that told them that Snape’s next trip with the kiddies would be in the primary gymnasium, on the last Saturday of November. He’d be supervising alongside Lily, of course, a

fact that seemed to both thrill and worry James. After that it had just taken a bit of careful planning the morning of.

That, and the bacon grease.

James showed up at the gym with a note from Ms. Hooch (lovingly penned by Peter) stating that he was to take those kids interested and run them through a few simple football drills on one side of the gym. Snape had thrown a fit of course, but Lily, unable to argue with an official note, left James to it and took to ignoring his existence all together. She supervised the left half of the play floor, which held an extensive climbing gym and even a trampoline. The third year kids they were watching screeched and hollered happily as they played, never going any higher on the ropes or bars than Lily would allow.

Staying in his corner obediently, James spent a good amount of time just showing the kids how he could get the football from the ground, to his head, to the back of his neck, and back down again whilst Snape elected to stay in the centre of the gymnasium to make sure James and Lily never got within twenty meters of each other. Conveniently, it also kept him far away from the kids, who clearly had as little love for him as he did for them.

When Sirius, Remus, and Peter showed up at the gym, it was all completely circumstantial. They'd just come to visit their friend and watch him give a lesson to the future stars of the Hawkings' football team; and, they'd brought drinks!

"Just take it, Severus!" Sirius said, holding out a canned fizzy pop toward Snape, who looked as though he'd just been asked to swallow a slug. They'd all been startlingly kind to Snape since appearing in the gym, but both he and Lily remained unconvinced.

"You probably poisoned it," Snape hissed, making Sirius laugh excessively.

"I didn't poison it, don't be so silly, Sev."

"Then you shook it to increase the pressure so it'll explode. I'm not touching anything you try to give me, Black."

Sirius shrugged, conceding defeat. "Suit yourself." He cracked the can himself (there was no explosion) and took a long sip.

Lily had initially declined the drink James offered, but took one from Remus after watching Sirius' display. "What are you guys doing here?"

She asked, clearly suspicious. “Potter was bad enough, did you really come all this way just to mess with Sev?”

“We’re just visiting a friend on a free-day,” Remus said innocently. “And personally I think I missed the kids. They make me feel so tall.”

“You’re already tall, Remus.”

Looking rather pale and puckered in Salazar green, Snape stormed up to them. “Lily, aren’t drinks prohibited in the gym?”

“Oh.” Lily looked down at her open can of fizzy drink, a look of immediate distress flashing across her face. “That’s right, only water in the gym.”

“Don’t be such a fuddy-duddy, Sev, it's not like we're going to spill them!” Sirius called, returning from the other side of the gym. James appeared behind him with several kids clinging to his arms and legs like he was a piece of the gymnastics equipment. Somewhere between the fizzy drinks and piggy-backing children around the monkey bars, Peter had disappeared, putting the rest of the prank in action while the two prefects were distracted.

“You aren’t even supposed to be here!” Snape snapped. “And don’t call me ‘Sev’!”

“Severus, then,” Sirius said, drawing out the ‘s’ and making Snape wrinkle his mouth in disgust.

“You probably faked that letter from Ms. Hooch just to come here and piss around.”

“You calling us liars?” James said, going to straighten up only to pulled back down as one of the year 3 boys grappled him by the neck.

“Let’s just ignore them, Sev,” Lily said quietly, peeking a glance at James. “They’ll leave eventually.”

Disregarding her, Snape scoffed. “Liars? No. You might actually have to be clever for that. You’re nothing but a bunch of mangy strays who exist only to bring down the school’s reputation.”

“Watch yourself, pisshead,” Remus bristled, crunching his drink can. Snape rounded on him, eyes wide in mockery as though it were the first time he’d realised he was there at all.

“Aren’t you the one who came in with holes in all your clothes and two black eyes?”

“Who said anything about black eyes?”

Snape gave a very ugly sneer. “Must’ve just seen some dirt on your face and assumed. Pick that up living in the gutter?”

“Sev!” Lily snapped. “That’s enough.”

“Yeah Sev,” Sirius cooed, “not making much of a role model for the kiddies, acting so nasty and uppidy.” He stuck his tongue out for good measure and several of the kids copied it while moaning and sneering at him. Snape glared back at Sirius but ignored the kids.

“You’re no better, Black. Four years now in ‘forms for fuck-ups’? Must be a new record. I’m sure Buchanan is just waiting for you to botch something in front of her so she can toss your arse. Guess not everyone can graduate out of being a waster.”

Both James and Lily stepped between them at the same time, Lily in defense and James looking like he might actually strangle Snape with several children hanging off his back, but before anyone could do anything, Peter’s voice called from across the gym;

“*Oh no!* Danny’s stuck!”

The whole group turned to look and found one of the third years at the very top of the climbing rope, nearly touching the gym’s rafters. The rope was hung next to the gym’s wall, where a ladder could be used to climb up and down when one got stuck, but Danny’s tiny arms would never have reached. He’d fall to the mat and if he was lucky, only break an ankle or two.

On cue, Danny began to wail his little heart out, really hamming it up —tears and sobbing—the whole. works In shock, Lily dropped her fizzy pop, letting it splash across the maple floor as she streaked across the gym.

“Danny—Danny! I-It’s okay! We’ll get you down!”

Danny cried harder while Peter gave his best horrified-face and Remus had to bite his cheek to keep from smiling.

“Care to help the poor lad, Potter?” Sirius asked.

“Love to, but I’m actually a little pinned down here,” James said, lifting an arm up so a little girl dangled off the floor and squealed. “How about you, Lupin?”

“Not so good with heights actually,” he said, coughing to cover a laugh. “Black?”

Sirius shrugged. “Not sure what help I’d be. I’m just a no-good waster.”

Unable to keep it in any longer, James dipped his head and was nearly taken to the ground by the weight of the kids as all three of them broke down in laughter.

“Looks like it’s up to you, Sev,” Sirius snickered. “Don’t want poor Lily to deal with it all by herself, do you? I mean, you are the prefect here.”

Snape scoffed, but Danny’s cries had only gotten louder. Across the gym, most of the kids had gathered around the mat, some looking horrified at the current state of their friend, others bouncing up and down like they couldn’t wait for their turn. Lily was halfway up the ladder, but appeared to be stuck, her knees shaking as she stared down at her feet. It didn’t take much observation to realise that she probably did have a very real fear of heights.

At the sight of Lily’s own distress, Snape huffed and started across the play floor, pushing past Peter as he came to join them.

“Little buggar got up there real fast,” he grinned.

"C'mon I want a front row seat," Sirius said, as they all followed Snape across the gym. They made it just as Lily was coming down the ladder, looking rather pale as Snape replaced her at the rungs.

“I’m coming, so stop crying!” He snapped, starting up the ladder at a fine pace—one skinny hand after the other.

“Yeah, Sev!” Sirius cried, fisting the air. “You go, bro!”

“Don’t slip!” James called, and Lily spun around to slap him in the shoulder.

“It’s not funny! If you hadn’t come and distracted us—”

“Distracted you? I stayed on my side of the gym!”

“Potter, I swear—!”

“Shut up,” Sirius hissed, swatting at the air between them, “you’re going to miss the best part!”

“What—” Lily whirled around, and Remus got a full view of the look of devastation on her face when she finally spotted the *pièce de résistance* to their evil plan, hanging just between little Danny Sharpe and the ladder. There was no time to warn anyone even if she wanted to; Snape had already grabbed hold of the climbing rope and ordered Danny to climb onto him. The six year-old reached out, reluctantly, but rather than grabbing onto him, Danny grasped a single white string, near-impossible to see from the gym floor, and yanked hard.

Snape looked up, and almost in slow-motion, the bucket rigged to the rafter above him turned over, dumping out fifteen litres of grey-brown bacon grease, now half solidified into the foulest sludge imaginable. The grease poured down like the world’s nastiest waterfall and hit Snape square in the face, arching out around him like a disgusting umbrella.

Down below, kids shrieked and scattered to avoid the remnants of Snape’s folly while the boys reeled back to avoid getting soaked. Poor Lily, who’d stared at the whole affair with more fear than she’d shown on the ladder, got splashed with grease up the front as it smacked into the floor, leaving her gaping with an expression that said she was only seconds away from losing her lunch—which was understandable, since the congealed grease smelt worse than a butcher’s house.

A few seconds later, while Lily was wordlessly mourning her dignity, little Danny Sharpe expertly shimmied down the rope and landed on the grease-covered mat, completely intact and grinning with a smile that was missing both front teeth. The kid deserved every last bit of Remus’ Halloween sweets for his performance and bravery.

“Someone get this kid an award!” Sirius cried, nearly falling over himself with laughter. James and Peter were just as done-for, and Remus was also bent over, unable to get the image of Snape dripping with grey ooze—his limp hair greasier than ever—out of his mind. The kids, a perfect audience sharing in the trick, sprinted around the room screaming and hooting with laughter, rubbing their fingers into the grease-coated floor or pointing at Snape, who’d yet to come down from his slippery ladder.

Recovering from her shock, Lily spun on them, her face a mask of

fury. “You awful—” she shrieked, peeling her stained blouse away from her body, “loathsome—horrible—*absolute messers!”*

“That’s us!” Peter crowed from the floor. Sirius helped his best friends to their feet, wiping the corners of his eyes with the back of his hand and James looked to Lily, almost wincing at the state of her clothes.

“We didn’t mean to get you, Evans, we just—”

Unwilling to hear anymore, Lily advanced on him, shoving her finger so close to James’ face that he went cross-eyed through his glasses. He might’ve had more time to fear for his life, had the horrible squeaking of wet shoes not cut across the the kid’s chatter, followed by a gagging sound.

Snape had made his way down the ladder, dripping bacon grease down his back, shoes squelching on every rung until they finally met the floor. When he whirled around bacon fat flew out of his hair and spattered more of the wall.

“Disgusting!” He roared, before clapping a hand to his mouth and heaving again. “What the fuck is this?”

“The taste of sweet, sweet revenge,” Remus said, and Sirius beamed while Lily turned her shocked expression on him. Perhaps a small part of her had hoped that he’d agree with her forever, that he’d be the same sort of sensible person she'd thought Miles had been. Unfortunately for her, turns out their previous roommate had been just as much a messer as the rest of them.

All for one and one for all.

Glancing around like he wasn’t sure which one of them to blame more, Snape finally settled on Remus, who returned his nasty look with a glare of his own.

“It’s what you deserve,” he said, “nasty git.”

Storming the few feet across the gym, Snape fisted both hands in front of him, top lip lifted in a snarl. “I’m going to fucking k—”

A gob of fat hit Snape upside the head and exploded again, spattering the ground just ahead of Remus and making him jump back. Greasier than ever, Snape whirled to find Sirius, hand coated to the wrist with fat and running his tongue across his teeth. “Sorry Sev,” he mused, “hand slipped.”

With a horrible growl, Snape scooped up a handful off the floor himself and sent it across the room, but Sirius dodged easily and Snape only ended up splattering several of the kids, who blinked in confusion.

"Woah, Snape, the kids too? Geez." Sirius looked to the third years; "I think this guy needs to be taught another lesson, don't you guys?"

That was all it took for the kids to get the idea. Before Lily or anyone could stop them the grease began flying, and no one was safe.

“Stop! Stop! That’s enough!” Lily shouted, before taking a shot at the back of the head that sent her red hair up over her like a damp curtain. She turned away, hands over her face, before sprinting to the wall as every one of her students joined in on the chaos.

“Food fight…?” Peter asked dubiously, fat glob of grease in hand, and several kids screamed in response;

“FOOD FIGHT!”

There was no cover, only open gym, but the saving grace for the rest of them was that most of the kids were simply interested in punishing their most miserable prefect leader. Covering his head, Remus made to dash across the room to join his friends, but only succeeded in gaining a splat to the shoulder from James.

“Sorry, Lupin! Was aiming for the greasy toff!”

“S’oh—*kay!"* Feet coming out from under him on the slippery hardwood, Remus crashed to the floor and a cacophonous hoot of laughter went up from the third years who were still shrieking with glee as they covered the room in mess. A hand appeared over him—Sirius, who was stained with filth all over but looking as though he’d just won the lotto. He helped him up, and Remus cringed at the feeling of his sticky back, almost heaving at the smell *(oh god, the smell)* but all was forgotten when he turned to find Snape on the ground pinned under a dog pile of grease-covered children, slamming his fists on the ground.

“Get off of me, you miserable brats!”

But the kids did not move and little Danny Sharpe was left to sit on the very top like a king on his filthy throne. All four boys approached, covered in their own disgusting vengeance, but revelling in the sight of their enemy getting his just deserts. Over the sound of the kids

laughter and Snape’s gripping, Sirius tutted;

“You’ll do well to remember, Snivellus, just what kind of messers you’re taking the piss with. Good luck with your shower, ya bloody nark.”

Chapter End Notes

A 'biro' is just another term for pen.

Pranks are fun to write but definitely challenging! Excited to go forward with more of them!

Chapter 15: Felix Felicis

Chapter Summary

Term 1 of Year 11 comes to a close and Remus learns something new about Sirius.

Chapter Notes

I'm putting this chapter out early because it's got some of my favourite scenes!

CW: Smoking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well in the middle of the night on the open road,
The heater don't work and it's oh, so cold;
You're gettin' tired baby, lookin' kinda beat,
The music off the street drive you off your feet…

- "Once Bitten, Twice Shy" Ian Hunter, 1975

November passed, and Snape didn't so much as whisper in any of their directions. He glared—Remus didn't think he was capable of any other expression—but they were silent glares, full of loathing and contempt. After discovering the doors to both of the gym's shower rooms had been inexplicably jammed, Snape's walk back to his dorm had been met with plenty of confused and disgusted stares. It would've been a more genius plan, had he not been the only one.

Rightful in her anger, Lily shunned them for the better part of the week that followed, and not even Remus was immune to her wrath. While Sirius and Peter remained indifferent, content to ride the wave of infamy they'd garnered after shaming Snape, James had only become more distraught over his and Lily's already frayed relationship. He sought her out before and after classes to apologise and even tried bringing her cups of tea at breakfast which were ignored or else thrown in the bin. Finally, when Lily's pencil kept breaking during quiet study, James slid down the table and offered his own. Lily took it silently before snapping the pencil in half and getting up to march across the room to the wall sharpener with her own. Her friends all stifled their shock and laughter behind tight smiles as

James sadly slunk back to his seat. As he did, Sirius pushed a roll of sellotape in his direction with a hopeless shake of his head and James started taping his pencil back together in the middle.

"She hates me," he sighed.

"Nah, she already hated you, mate," Sirius pointed out. “Can’t get much worse than that."

"What about despised or repulsed?" Peter added.

"There's no way this is helping," Remus said.

"What I *meant,"* Sirius drawled, "was that hate is a strong word, sure, but there are other more powerful emotions."

"Such as?"

"Desire, passion—*lust*."

"Dear god."

"Nothing to do with God, Lupin!" Sirius grinned, clapping a hand on James' shoulder next to him. "This is plain old animal magnetism, and clearly Evan's abhorrence is just a thinly veiled disguise for how badly she wants to shag our dear friend Mr. Potter."

Despite Sirius' confidence, James' luck with Lily did not improve. Remus didn't bother to ask if her invitation to study for end of term exams still stood, but it did feel rather odd to spend every geography lesson next to a seat partner who was so keen on pretending that he didn't exist. It wasn’t until several days later, when Remus discovered he’d forgotten his textbook that Lily finally broke her silence.

“Lily,” he whispered, “Lily, can I borrow your text? I forgot mine.”

She didn't answer at first, and Remus accepted that he'd just have to struggle through the worksheet without, but finally Lily's voice whispered back; “Generally people say sorry rather than pretending to leave their textbooks behind.”

“I didn’t—” Remus stopped, because he’d forgotten how good it felt to be snapped at. "I'm sorry," he tried, and Lily huffed lightly before sliding the textbook between their desks.

After class he apologised again—with more than just two words—and that was that. She never outrightly said it, but eventually he got the

feeling that Lily did think the prank was funny, once she'd at least gotten the grease stains out of her uniform and they'd scrubbed the gym to a shine. She wouldn't come around the other boys, but Remus was allowed to join her and Marlene for exam prep, which he didn't really care for but didn't want to her offend her by refusing.

"Sev is still angry, you know," Lily said a few days later, while sipping hot chocolate out of a styrofoam cup. They were on break and had found a single corner bench in the dining hall to sit at. The window behind them overlooked the sloping hill that dipped down toward Castle Hall's front lawn, and dozens of kids were out in the winter air, throwing snowballs, tackling one another, and generally just being carefree idiots. Naturally Sirius, James, and Peter were among them, currently engrossed in a snowball war with Barty Crouch and a few other Salazar House boys. Remus thought he'd caught a glimpse of Regulus near the beginning, but when he'd looked up from his book next the youngest Black brother had vanished, his presence replaced by a small group of girls who were watching outside the line of fire, huddled close like a waddle of penguins.

"Snape's always angry," Remus said, dropping his arm over his knee, which he kept propped up on the bench between them. He'd finished his own hot chocolate already and wanted another, but couldn't be bothered to make his way back across the dining hall to get it.

"Not always."

"Well maybe he'd be less pissy if he could find joy in something other than the suffering of others and his chemistry set."

There was a short silence as Remus finished his chapter and started another.

"I don't really know why he does it," Lily said finally, her head turned to the window, watching the snowball fight. Looking up from his page, Remus watched as Peter took a nasty blow to the back of his head, knocking off his cap. Moira Thurnberg broke off from the group of girls to rush forward and kneel next to him in the snow, patting his head sympathetically. Despite the snow coating his neck and hair, Peter looked pleased as punch.

"Why he only takes pleasure in misery?" Asked Remus, as he thumbed the edge of his book.

"No—well, yes, but I was talking about the kids actually," Lily looked down at her hot chocolate, swirling it with a coffee straw. "Being a

prefect isn't always just looking after the primaries, but it's a big part of it. And he's always so miserable when we go. The kids really don't like him either—I think he just does it because I wanted to."

Remus had read the same passage twice while listening to her. "You're saying he took on being a prefect just to stick to you?"

"I guess it does sound rather conceited when you put it like that."

That came out wrong, Remus thought, before sighing. "No, it makes sense. You clearly like it, and he likes you and… you like him." He paused, searching her face. "Don't you?"

"I do!" Lily said. "I-I mean I do like it—being a prefect. It's just… sometimes I wish he wouldn't insist on always doing everything together."

Remus tilted his head to the side pointedly and raised his brows. Lily caught the look and straightened up. "He doesn't always step on my toes though. Sometimes he's very helpful. I've known Sev since we were seven."

"Was he a git back then too?" Remus asked, snarkily. Lily looked down at her cup ruefully and Remus felt another small twinge of guilt.

"He has it rough at home," Lily said. "He's never actually said so, but his dad… I've only met him a few times, but he was always horrible to Sev."

Grinding his teeth together, Remus looked back to the window and squinted in the brightness of the sun reflecting off the snow. "So?"

"It's sad, Remus. I saw him hit Sev once."

Remus snapped his book shut. "So what if it's sad? There are plenty of horrible parents out there. Doesn't mean he gets to be rotten to every poor sod he comes across." Remus had never been hit—at least not at home—and he'd secretly wondered if things would be the same if Lyall had just boxed his ears a bit; but it was always as though he couldn't be bothered. Instead he regarded Remus like he was a germ, not to be touched or looked at. *Ship it off, get it out of the house, make it as though anything he touched was wiped clean, and then maybe life would be bearable.*

He'd done the same thing to Hope after she died. At least that was a

real excuse; Lyall was stuck with Remus.

“I didn’t mean to be insensitive,” Lily said, and Remus snapped his eyes back to her.

“You weren’t,” he answered bitterly. “Anything but, actually.”

More deflated than before thanks to his little outburst, Lily sat back on the bench, uncharacteristically quiet and picking at the rim of her cup. As she looked back out the window Remus followed her gaze; James and Sirius were arm in arm, parading around the girls with stiff legs like army men. Snow covered them from head to toe, and Crouch and the others were long gone, though leaving in victory or defeat, Remus wasn’t sure.

Stopping just in front of the girls, James dipped Sirius like a dancer and then unceremoniously dropped him into the snow. Sirius retaliated by knocking his legs out from under him, and they went down in a pile.

“You can’t tell anyone I told you about Sev,” Lily said.

Remus looked from James and Sirius to the grey sky. It had started to snow again.

“I won’t.”

* * *

Friday 19th December 1975

With their revenge against Snape long since cooled, the only thing able to cheer Sirius up after school portraits was his birthday gift from Andy, which had arrived just as their last week before Christmas holidays was coming to a close. Over a rather loud and screechy phone call, Sirius (and most of Godric House) had been warned that if he didn’t wear the suit he’d been sent and look like a proper Black heir, he would be pulled out of his dorm to live in a private room for the remainder of the school year. So, Sirius wore the suit, because (according to James) Walburga Black tended to make good on her promises.

Sirius had returned to the common room, hair impeccable, wearing the fine suit, and looking like someone had just snapped one of his

favourite albums in half in front of him. He was the only one of them that had his portrait that day, where Remus, James, and Peter would be forced to clean up for their photos the next afternoon.

“Don’t you look spiffing,” James said over his playing cards. Sirius gave him a nasty sneer and slumped down on the empty couch cushion next to Remus, who was busy playing a round of whist with Peter and James.

“Mum says hi,” Sirius said sarcastically. Walburga had called once more that morning just in case Sirius hadn’t gotten the message the first time. Maybe Remus did have it easier; at least his father would’ve never shouted loud enough for half the school to hear.

“Dunno why she calls just to yell,” James said, setting down a card on the coffee table between the two couches. Remus followed with a card of his own. The two of them were playing as a pair against Peter and were somehow still losing.

“Guess yelling at dad gets boring after a while,” Sirius said, nonchalant.

Peter tutted. “Remus you can’t play that card, we’re playing with diamonds.”

Remus snatched the card back. “I thought clubs was trump?”

“No spades is trump,” James said.

“I thought you said this game would be easy.”

A few turns later they’d lost and James threw down his hand as Peter began to reshuffle. Beside him, Sirius was bouncing his leg and staring out the window as he twisted the end of his dark hair between his fingers. Trust Black to have enough energy at all times that not just one nervous tick sufficed.

“Mail came today,” James said finally, sipping a cup of tea. All three boys looked to Sirius, who was still lost in thought. “Sirius?”

“Hm?”

“Mail came today.”

Glancing back, realisation dawned on Sirius’ face as James turned around to reach behind the couch, coming back with a brown

envelope the length of his forearm. The address written across the front read out Sirius' name in elegant handwriting, and beside that was a single kiss mark in black lipstick and a small smear that looked a lot like creamed spinach. At least Remus hoped it was creamed spinach.

"It's from Andromeda," Sirius said after James had passed the gift over.

"Well go on then!" Peter chimed. "Open it!"

Wasting no time, Sirius ripped open the envelope's end and dumped its contents out onto the table in front of them. Out of it poured an album—just a little 45 LP—several sets of guitar strings, and a folded up letter. Before Sirius even had touched the gifts he snatched up the paper and unfolded it. He smiled, reading it over, and then passed it along to Remus as though it were second nature.

Surprised, Remus looked to Sirius, but he'd already moved on to the gifts, leaving him to flip the letter over to read;

Sirius,

Sorry for the wait on your birthday gift, but Bowie didn't drop this LP until the end of November anyway and trust me it was worth the wait. Also, I hope those guitar strings work. Ted says that Tony Iommi, the lead guitarist from Black Sabbath uses the same ones. Maybe I'll have to give you some lessons next time, huh? Sorry I don't know when 'next time' will be, but in the meantime have fun jamming out, little cuz.
Make sure you sing a song for me.

Much love,
Andy, Ted, and Dora

Another kiss mark had been left at the bottom of the letter. Remus looked up from it to find Sirius reading the back of the LP, *Golden Years*. When he flipped it over to reveal the front cover, even Remus had to admit that Bowie looked good.

Reaching for his tea, Remus set the letter down and James immediately snapped it up, glancing it over before passing it along to Peter. There were no secrets among the boys of 4A, that was for sure.

"I miss Andy," Sirius said, glancing between the strings and the LP.

"She always knew what to get me."

“I didn’t even know that Andy could play the guitar,” Peter said, glancing up from the letter.

“Yeah! Really well too. Ted used to be in a band—he was the drummer—but he stopped when he got that job at the auto factory.”

“Wish I had cool cousins,” Peter said, and James elbowed him.

“Want some of mine?” He teased. “I'll even trade you for Sim.”

“Simeon is *not* cool."

Remus automatically disagreed. Tall, blonde—but not in the same helpless, cherub-like way as Peter—Simeon Pettigrew would’ve been hard-pressed to not be a local celebrity at least. He’d only ever seen the oldest Pettigrew sibling a few times, the last being in mid-November, when he and Sirius had caught him snogging a pretty dark-haired girl behind the stacks of the reference section of the library. They’d almost stayed to watch but Mrs. Pince caught them slacking on their detention duties and had ordered them back to work.

“You’re right, Pete,” Sirius said, “your brother isn’t cool. He’s the *coolest.*”

“You lot have been licking his boots since last year!” Peter exclaimed. “One party in some ruddy field and suddenly he’s the best thing since sliced bread! I swear if Sim was our age you’d never talk to me again.”

James and Sirius exchanged a shared glance, eyebrows raised. Peter looked aghast, and both of them snorted, and dropped their heads down in laughter.

Peter slapped the deck of cards against the table and threw himself back against the sofa. “Bunch of bloody traitors...”

* * *

The next day Remus returned from getting his portrait taken feeling stuffy and irritated. They had to wear their full uniforms for the pictures and the formal school blazer always made him feel like a ponce. He’d tried to rebel slightly by not bothering to comb his hair,

which since summer had grown into a mess of pale brown curls, but one of the secretary ladies organising the show had pulled him aside and slicked it back from his face with a comb until Remus was sure he looked downright horrible. Tomny and the others would have killed themselves laughing if they saw him now.

He'd been thinking about the London boys a lot these days—or at least, more than usual, which was almost impressive. Exams were over with, and though Remus was pretty sure he'd failed both Biology and Foreign Languages, all he could think about was taking the train back to London and heading straight to the East End. Maybe he'd just stay there. He couldn't be sent back to Hawkings if no one could find him.

Feeling fidgety, Remus tossed the blazer onto his bed. It caught on one of his fingernails and he hissed, looking over the raw skin he'd been chewing down to the quick since the start of exams. Smoking only once a day had worked in November, mostly due to the fact that he'd hardly ever had the time to sneak off between lessons, church, and detention, but since the start of December he'd been particularly antsy. The early snow of the Scottish Highlands made him feel trapped inside, and though he'd never admit it, he actually missed the pissing rain that came with London winters.

Caving, Remus slid the window between James and Sirius' beds open and lit a cigarette. He'd only done it a few times inside the dorm, but James and Peter were still getting their photos taken, and Sirius had detention again—or at least that's what he'd been told.

The dark-haired boy came out of the bathroom just as Remus had taken his first drag. They both froze when they spotted each other, Remus next to the open window, a burning cigarette between his lips, and Sirius, looking staunchly surprised to see him.

"Sorry," Remus murmured, straightening up. "I'll put it out."

"No, it's okay." Sirius came forward and stopped next to him to fiddle with the stereo. His wardrobe hutch and music setup sat just in front of the window, and Remus had always had to bend over it to blow the smoke outside. They were so close he could see the little dot of orange from the tip of his burning cigarette reflected in the gold of Sirius' earring. Luckily, Sirius picked an album quickly and set it under the needle before sliding onto his bed. Propping himself up on his pillows, he tucked his hands behind his head and closed his eyes, one foot bobbing to the music as he held it against the other knee.

Remus watched him, licking his lip to taste the cigarette tang, before looking back out the window. *Fine, have it your way then, weirdo.*

The December air floating through the window was cold, but Remus was unbothered by it after Sirius' sudden entrance had left him feeling very warm and embarrassed. For a long time the only sound came from the stereo and his own hammering heart echoing in his ears. Sirius had put on *Abbey Road* and John Lennon's voice drifted around the room at a low volume.

'I want you,
I want you so bad;
I want you,
I want you so bad,
I want you so bad it's driving me mad…'

Keeping his eyes closed, Sirius just rocked his head back and forth as he lay there. It was hard not to let his eyes drift toward the fidgeting, and despite the music, Remus felt the growing need to fill the silence between them. He had no intention to say what he did, hardly thinking much at all, but the words he'd been suppressing since the beginning of the year spilled out anyway.

"I like music, you know." Remus immediately winced at how lame he sounded.

Sirius popped open one grey eye and yawned. "Oh yeah?"

"Mhm."

"So I guess Sheila's classes are having an effect? She'll be so pleased."

"I liked music before that."

"Then it was just good luck you got dropped in our laps," Sirius said cheekily. "Got a favourite band?"

"The Who," Remus said, too quickly. "The Who…"

"Ah, yeah, they're good. Got a mad man for a drummer."

"I know, right?!" Remus exclaimed, before clearing his throat and taking a drag.

"Andy saw them live once."

"She did? Oh god..."

“Yeah, front row in London. The guitar player smashed his Les Paul and tossed her the tangled strings.”

Remus could’ve melted on the spot. He cleared his throat again to calm down. “What's your favourite band then?”

“Don't got one.”

Remus blinked. “Really?”

“Really,” Sirius said, closing both eyes again.

Rolling his cigarette between his fingers, Remus struggled to respond. He’d expected Sirius to say Led Zeppelin, or The Sweet, T. Rex, The Doors, Bowie—*something* that could've prolonged the conversation. Between all the music he listened to, he'd thought Sirius was bound to have a favourite. He had everything memorised by heart, too. You could’ve picked up any album from his collection and Sirius would’ve been able to tell you what number a track was, who wrote it, and every damn lyric in the entire song.

It was insane that he didn’t have a favourite.

“So why’s that?” Remus asked finally. “You listen to so much music.” More than anyone he’d ever met. “Why don’t you have a favourite band?”

“ ‘Cause it’s gonna be mine.”

“Yours?”

“Yeah,” Sirius opened his eyes to smirk up at him, “my favourite’s gonna be me and my band. Because my band's gonna be the best.”

“You don’t have a band.”

“Not yet.”

“Well who’s even gonna be in it? Or are you just gonna recruit our entire class to be your backup orchestra.”

“Maybe. Why, you wanna join?”

Remus shook his head and turned back to the window for a deep drag. “Tosser.”

Sitting up on his bed very quickly, Sirius’ response was so sharp that

Remus nearly flinched. “I’m serious, you know.”

“About starting a band?”

“Okay you missed the perfect opportunity to make the ‘yes, you’re Sirius’ pun—but yeah! If Elvis could do it why can't we?”

"Did you actually just compare us to *Elvis?"*

"You gotta dream big to be big, Lupin. So whadda say?"

“I can’t.”

Sirius frowned. “Why not?”

“I can barely play a whole song!”

“You’ll learn.”

“No, you’re crazy—completely mental.”

“Good,” Sirius said, “mental makes art. Just look at Van Gogh or Iggy Pop.”

Remus looked away again. “So that’s the plan then? You're gonna be a musician?”

“Yup.” Sirius popped the ‘p’.

“Jesus fuck.”

Sirius’ smirk spread as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Okay fine, you don’t have to say yes right now—learn your craft first and then we’ll talk.” Standing up, he knocked his hip into Remus’, making him drop ash on top of the stereo.

“Oi! That was your fault,” he said, wiping it away.

“Can I have one?”

Remus glanced over to find Sirius watching him through those long eyelashes. “You ever smoked before?”

“A few times at school, and Andy would always let me bum one when we snuck away at family things. She gave it up when she got pregnant, but I didn’t see her much after that anyway.”

Straightening up, Remus reached into his back pocket and withdrew his carton of Embassys, Sirius watching his every move with silent interest. When he held out the cigarette Sirius took it and tucked it between his lips before leaning in, touching the tip of it to Remus' own cigarette. Eyes shot wide at the sudden closeness, Remus reeled back so quickly his hand hit the record making it skip. "What are you *doing?"*

"Uh, lighting it?"

"I have matches."

Reaching into his other pocket, Remus passed the matchbox over before awkwardly turning back to the window, trying not to grind his teeth over the cigarette. Sirius gave him a pointed look but struck up a match, and Remus noticed the purple nail polish on his left hand; probably Mary's doing. He remembered her saying the pair of them used to date, but that couldn't have meant much in year 10, could it?

Licking his fingers, Sirius smothered the match with a satisfied smirk and dropped it out the open window before taking a long drag, glancing up to Remus out of the corner of his eye. Remus met his look and something in his gut squirmed.

"I fucking hate Christmas," Sirius said, breathing out the smoke. "I'd cancel the whole thing and stay here if I could."

Remus nodded quickly, agreeing with him. "Why don't you? Lily said some kids stay to study." Outside the window the winter sun was just disappearing over the trees.

"It's mostly the year thirteens, and besides Mum would hang me." He made a similar gesture while holding his cigarette between two fingers. "Too many guests come over at Christmas, makes me want to tear my hair out. What about you?"

"Huh?"

"Does your dad throw massive parties around the holidays?"

"What? Er... no."

"Lucky. So it's just you and your dad then?"

"Sorta. He works a lot... but I've got Giles and the dogs."

"My mum hates animals," Sirius said, stifling a yawn. "Reg has a dog—Kreacher, don't ask about the name. Got him as a birthday present when he turned eight, after that Mum swore them off. Good thing too, he's a miserable little thing. Bet yours are better."

He glanced at him, smiling handsomely, and Remus quickly turned to the window. He'd been stuck staring at Sirius' hands ever since he'd put out the match; long and slender, perfect for guitar plucking. Pretty, really... If boys' hands were supposed to be pretty.

"This is what you've been doing, right?" Sirius asked, indicating to the cigarette. "When you disappear."

"Yeah."

"You been smoking for long?"

"Two years or so." Almost an exaggeration.

"But you're like, fifteen."

Remus frowned, annoyed to be called on his bluff. "And you're sixteen and a bloody 'heir'. What's your excuse for acting like such an oik?"

"Touché," Sirius smirked, unfazed, flicking ash out the window. "You know, I didn't actually think you'd last."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Lupin. I only meant here—at Hawkings. You were so bloody determined to hate everything I assumed you'd just punch someone and get yourself tossed out on your sorry rear. For a while there I thought that someone might've been me, to be honest."

"Well *someone* didn't exactly make it an easy transition."

"Fair enough."

"You mean 'touché'."

Sirius knocked Remus with his hip again. "So he's funny, too?"

" 'Too'?"

Sirius shook his head. "Why the Who?"

“Hm?”

“Why are they your favourite? What makes them the best?”

“Oh… well… They’re just…” Remus almost bit down on the end of his cigarette again. No one had ever asked him *why* he liked the Who; really he was just lucky if anyone knew enough about music to recognise the name. When he thought about why he liked the band, the memory of sitting in his mother’s room, watching them play for the first time—that was what came to mind. Normally Remus hated the memories, but that one was a high he’d secretly been chasing ever since.

“They’re… chaos,” Remus said firmly. “And chaos is—”

“Rock and roll.”

He looked at Sirius sharply, and for once, matched his grin. “Yeah.”

“Maybe that’s my excuse then,” Sirius said. “I cause a bit of chaos now, and maybe one day, it’ll turn into rock and roll.”

Remus pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek. “That’s some goal, Black.”

“Well? Aren’t you going to wish me luck? Might be a rougher transition than you just switching schools, you know.”

Still leaned over the hutch, Remus let out a breath and looked down at his own hands; a cigarette pinched in his right hand while he fiddled with his thumbs. Sirius was next to him, stretched out almost to the window sill over the stereo, lightly tapping in time with the music while holding onto his own cigarette. He doubted he even realised he was doing it, but his timing was perfect, and Remus was already enraptured.

“No,” he said finally, “you don’t need luck.”

Chapter End Notes

'Whist' is a trick-taking card game. It’s usually played in pairs, unless you're as good as Peter, haha.
The term 'ponce' just refers to a pretentious or effete man.
The song Sirius plays is "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" from The Beatles' 1969 album 'Abbey Road'.

Now that this first term officially over, I wanted to thank you for sticking around this far! If you couldn't already tell this story is going to be pretty long, but I'm excited to go on the journey with you. Let me know if you have any constructive criticism or ideas in the comments, I'd love to hear them or else just chat! Also, my tumblr and tiktok is the same username @motswolo. I'd love to chat more Harry Potter and wolfstar there if you're so inclined!

And enjoy my wolfstar crumbs :)

Chapter 16: After the Storm Blows

Chapter Summary

Remus returns home to London for the holidays and meets up with some old friends.

Chapter Notes

CW: References to illicit drugs and drug-use.

We delve back into oc's this chapter. I hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bright lights, Soho, Wardour Street,
You hope you make friends with the guys that you meet;
Somebody shows you round,
Now you've met the London boys,
Things seem good again, someone cares about you…

- "The London Boys" David Bowie, 1966

Walking out of Kings Cross station on the evening of December 21st, Remus found Giles and the Rolls parked and waiting for him. The old driver opened his arms like he was going to give him a hug, but only side-stepped him to grab his trunk instead. Remus almost smiled. He'd secretly missed the little game they had; the old man would play at getting too close but would always swerve past him at the last second. Giles was good with boundaries when he wanted to be.

"I wouldn't believe it if you weren't standing in front of me right now," the driver said, wheeling the trunk to the car's boot. "Four months, and the only word we got was about a few lacking marks. There was something about illegal fireworks, but nothing fatal, right? Hell, I'd almost started to wonder if they had the right Lupin."

Remus rolled his eyes, but didn't bother correcting him as he stepped over a puddle just outside the station. "You should really try and make this comedy act of yours into a living, Gil."

"And leave you behind? Never. That school must be something. It's almost cause for celebration."

“Yeah, not like it’s Christmas or anything.”

Remus opened the back door of the Rolls and got inside, joined a moment later by Giles in the front. It was a familiar scene, sitting behind the driver and staring at the wisps of red hair that peaked out from beneath his cap.

As they drove back to Blackheath, Remus watched the city roll by. He, James, and Peter had all left Sirius at Kings Cross, where he’d be joining his darling baby brother for their train west to Bath. The train ride would probably feel endless, especially since Sirius could hardly keep still in the weeks leading up to Christmas holidays. They’d spent their last few days at Hawkings finishing off the last of Remus’ cigarettes and sharing stories of holidays’ past. Sirius had more to share, having more family, and some of them were downright awful while others were quite funny.

It was during one of these conversations while Sirius regaled him with his Uncle Alphard’s last Christmas at his parents’ manor—the old man had given a swift exit after toasting Christmas dinner with a vivid story of the time he’d promised his brother-in-arms that his wife would never be lonely and then went on to sleep with the old lady after his buddy’s untimely death—that James slammed the bedroom window shut and ordered the two smokers from the room so that he could clean for the holiday room-inspections.

Afterwards Remus had taken Sirius to one of his hiding spots, a small tool shed behind the Agricultural building, where they took their time and shared a spliff. He’d almost considered taking him to the astronomy building, but decided at the last moment to keep his favourite spot to himself a bit longer, just in case he ever needed a private place to escape to.

They continued sharing, and Remus learned that Alphard had died in ‘73, and had apparently left money aside for his favourite nephew rather than let his family get their hands on it. Walburga had been livid, of course, but there was nothing to be done about it. Sirius only knew about the money because Alphard’s other favourite family member, Andromeda, had received a good sum, which had allowed her and her new husband to buy a house in London. Sirius wouldn’t have access to the money until he was eighteen, but because he was born the year before the rest of them, he’d be of age before their first term in year 13 was up.

“Why *are* you older?” Remus had asked stupidly, taking his turn with

the spliff and then passing it along to Sirius, who still had a goofy look on his face after talking about Andy and the time she spent three months on the road as a groupie for T. Rex. “Shouldn’t you be a year above the rest of us?”

“Mum kept me home with private tutors until I was ten,” Sirius said. “Hated it a‘course, but didn’t really think there was much else to be done at the time. Then I overheard her and dad saying they were going to send Reg to this school—far away, in Scotland. So naturally, I threw a fit. Thought it was bollocks that Reg was getting to leave and they wanted to keep me there. Now I know it was all about being the heir. Mum wanted me close to make sure I was only getting taught useful things—but I was too smart for her damn tutors, and just ended up making their lives a living hell until they all quit, and she finally had to send me off. Reg and I started at Hawkings at the same time, but they put me in year five just in case I was secretly inept.”

"And are you?"

"Inept? Oh, obviously."

Remus chuckled took the spliff back after Sirius had had a pull. “So you’re like… 'smart' smart then?”

Sirius had only lifted those dark eyebrows and waited for his next turn with the hash. Remus regretted later not pushing him into revealing his marks, too curious over how he managed to skip every study hour and never do a lick of homework and still keep his spot at the esteemed college. It was probably the money.

When Giles pulled the Rolls into the estate driveway Remus hopped out, marching past the doorman who’d come to greet him and directly up to his room. Dusty was waiting for him of course, and despite the fact that his bedroom was at least four times as large as the one he shared at Hawkings, it felt distinctly cramped. He spent the entire next day roaming the estate’s grounds with Dusty by his side, visiting the other dogs and taking a few of them—Kelos, Seabiscuit, Padfoot, Zenyatta—out into the pastures and beyond. Padfoot, the most energetic of the pups, raced around Dusty like a rocket, his silky black coat catching the snow off the lawn and turning him into more of a dalmatian than a coonhound. Dusty got along well enough with the rest of the dogs, no longer the runty size he’d been at birth, but almost all of them were half his age now, and Remus could see the way his friend was slowing. He’d have to ask Giles to keep an extra good eye on him.

The first two days of Christmas break passed and Remus saw neither hide nor hair of Lyall Lupin. He'd only stayed home at all because he was knackered from the train ride, not because a butler had reiterated his father's poor that threat should he even think about venturing back into the city he'd be more than just sorry. Of course this had little effect on the Lupin heir, who only shot the manservant the bird and told him to sod off. If his father wanted him home he should be around to threaten him himself.

Lyall's absence didn't bother Remus. In fact it almost made him more willing to remain at home. Let him stay away; it only meant there was to be no discussion of any poor marks. He kept himself busy with the dogs or school-reading until he'd let himself grow suitably stir-crazy.

Unwilling to be miserable on Christmas Eve with only Dusty and Giles for company, Remus finally cut through the neighbouring yards and legged it the entire way to the nearest tube station. There he caught a train to East London where the winter rain collected in the potholes and cracked cobbled streets. He had to pull the collar of his jacket up around his neck to keep out the chill—it was a familiar feeling at least. He'd dressed himself in his old clothes including his steel-toes, but was surprised to find that they were tighter in the toes, almost pinching, and his jacket was horribly snug in the shoulders.

Every yob he passed watched him warily, their eyes squinted in the cold and their heads shaved almost to the scalp. Tomny had shaved Remus' head himself back in late June with a pair of rusty clippers, and he'd kept it short all summer, but now with his curls he just looked like any other lanky fifteen year-old who had no business walking around the End on his own.

The real shocker had been when Remus realised he'd walked a street too far and had to turn around. Tomny's building, which was almost always crowded out front with smokers and kids hanging out, was now quiet and deserted, and he'd walked right past it while engrossed in his own thoughts. From outside on the building's steps Remus could hear a radio chattering from an open window on the ground floor, but it felt too calm to be the same rowdy hang-out spot he remembered.

Remus walked up to the building's door buzzer—which only worked every now and then—and pressed the number to Tomny's flat. It sounded and a second later the intercom clicked on.

"Who's this?" A voice called, female.

“Lupin,” Remus said. “Looking for Tomny.”

There was silence, then a bit of muffled whispering over the intercom before the door next to him buzzed aggressively. Letting out a sigh of relief, Remus opened it and took the creaking stairs two at a time until he was banging his fist on the door of Tomny’s old flat, heart racing. The door was opened by a big guy with shoulders like a truck who glared up at Remus—he wasn’t a tall truck—through a heavy brow.

“I’m ‘ere to see Tomny,” he said, in what he hoped was his best bovver-accent. He hadn’t had to use it in a while.

The guy looked him up and down once, almost like he wanted to shut the door in his face, before a girl appeared behind him, smacking her hands into his shoulder.

“Get out of the way, Vint—Tomny says it’s fine.”

Vint stepped back to allow her past and she stopped next to him, her eyes opening wider when she got a full look at Remus. “Well aren’t you just a cutie,” she said, leaning on the door frame. Remus recognised her as the same voice over the intercom.

She was wearing a lot of makeup around her eyes, but rather than looking like those scrubber women you could see on the End’s street corners in the wee hours of the morning, she seemed to suit it. “Your name’s Remus, right?" She asked. "Where’d Tomny find a little string bean like you?”

“Uh…”

“Stop pestering and let ‘im in, Tonya.” a voice called. Tomny.

Tonya dropped her head to the other side and pressed her lips out into a pouty smile as both she and the truck stepped back to allow him past. Nodding briskly, Remus made his way down the familiar hall into the kitchen where the last person he’d spoken to was Seesaw, and then beyond that into the flat’s living room. Last time he’d seen it the room its floor had been covered with old mattresses and dingy couches, usually with a body occupying each one, but now all of that was gone, cleared out and leaving the place less like a cramped trap house.

He didn’t get the chance to take in much of the room beyond that though; the moment he stepped across the threshold Lee had him bent over in a headlock, grinding his knuckles into the top of his head.

“We was wonderin' when you were gonna show your face again, lil' git,” Lee said, but he was laughing, so Remus laughed too, trying to bat him away with his fists.

“Get off ‘a me, ya bastard!”

“You heard him, Lee!” It was Doss next, who pulled Remus from the headlock and crushed him to his barrel chest until he’d squeezed a groan out of him and nearly fractured a rib. There was a slap on his back from someone else, and though he couldn’t see who while being crushed, he could still hear the room’s laughter.

“That’s enough, let the poor plonker walk free.”

Doss dropped him and Remus stretched out his shoulders, turning around to find Tomny standing right there in front of him, one arm across his chest while the other was propped up against his lower lip, his entire face lit up with a smile. The sun-bleached golden waves that he’d sported during the summer were now gone thanks to the dreary London winter, leaving his hair a muted brown that was buzzed close on all sides. Apart from that, Tomny looked as he always had; faded blue jeans and a tan jacket—though Remus did notice the rings under his eyes and stubble growing on the hollows of his cheeks and his jaw. Both made him seem older—more tired.

“You look like shit,” Remus said to the boy—man—just for old time’s sake.

Tomny’s smile turned into a smirk. “And you look like a right little boffin.”

Remus shook his head, and a moment later they were hugging in that same friendly, boyish way they always had. Tomny was still taller—though not for long he suspected—and he cupped the back of Remus’ head lightly with his hand, using the other to clap him on the back. When they finally pulled apart Tomny punched him lightly in the shoulder.

“You went and grew on me again, Ol’ John, you bastard.”

“Yeah, soon I’ll be able to see that bald spot on the top of your head,” Remus quipped, earning him another jab.

As Tomny stepped back Remus took his chance to look around the room. Most of the faces were familiar (Lee, Doss, another bloke named Craig, even Seesaw in the corner) but there were others like Vint he

didn't recognise. There still couldn't have been more than ten of them all together though, a stark difference from the old flat that had once been so crammed with people that drunken bodies would pile up on each other in the hallways and bedrooms. It was strange to see it so empty.

"C'mon, Lu," Tomny said, taking his shoulder, "sit down."

Letting himself be guided, Remus followed him to the other side of the room and sat down on a corner seat of one of the sofas as Tomny took a seat in a recliner that was more patchwork than original fabric. A TV sat quietly in the other corner, its rabbit-ears turned toward the stained ceiling.

"You got a telly," Remus commented, suddenly more nervous now that he was sitting and all eyes were on him. Lee and Doss settled in beside him on the sofa while the others took a load-off on various couches and kitchen chairs that had been brought in to fill up the room.

"Yeah," Tomny said, glancing at the TV. "Never had one before, but 's good for a distraction. Lots changed around here since you'd gone."

Remus, who had already been getting a sense of the changes, felt an extra knot begin to form in his stomach. "Flacky not with you?"

Tomny held his gaze. "No."

"Oh. Too bad. Would've liked to see the little shit."

Tomny smiled. "So how was the swot school?"

"Yeah," Lee said, shouldering Remus on the couch. "Thought you were gonna get yourself tossed out by Halloween?" A few of the boys laughed, and Remus did too, trying to keep his expression unreadable.

"Well, it was…"

"A bleeding nightmare most likely," Doss interrupted.

Lee nodded in agreement with his friend. "I bet they had you reading all sorts of poncy shit."

"Now, now," Tomny said, "Lu likes to read, you all know that."

"Any pretty mares, Lupin?" Lee asked. All of them, Tomny included,

leaned in a bit more. “Got a girlfriend?”

Now Remus could’ve just said no. He could’ve told them the truth: that most of the girls at Hawkings were more interested in a certain arrogant raven-haired bastard than they’d ever be him. But he didn’t.

“Yeah,” Remus said casually. “She’s back home with her family for Christmas. Really… sort of pretty for an upmarket gal.”

“Well she got a name?” Tomny asked, eyebrows raised.

“Er… Lily.”

Tomny nodded and Lee elbowed Remus. “So does that mean you ever —you know?” He made a vulgar gesture that made the rest of them snicker. Remus tried a laugh, but it was really more of a cough. Luckily he was saved by Tonya, who strode into the room with a mug in one hand.

“Shut up, Lee,” she said sweetly, “not everyone wants to share their escapades with a dosser like you.”

“Oh c’mon, Ton. I’m only tryin' to get Lupin 'ere to tell us about his pretty girl.”

“There’s enough pretty girls right here in London to reject you.” She handed Tomny the steaming mug—coffee. “You don’t need to embarrass the kid, too.”

“That’s half the fun,” Tomny said, smiling up at Tonya. “Lu’s been gone for months. He needs a good hazing.”

“You lot are so mean.” Tonya leaned down toward Tomny’s upturned face and kissed him.

Oh.

Remus turned to the TV while Lee and Doss shared a sarcastic look, though no one else seemed to bat an eye. It could only mean that the public displays of affection were a common thing. When they finally pulled apart, Tonya sat down on the recliner’s arm and crossed her thin legs as Tomny put an arm around her waist and sipped his coffee.

“You stayin' in London for the holidays, Lu?” He asked.

Nodding, he said; “Until the fourth.”

“So you’re goin' back then?” Seesaw said, his first words since Remus had arrived. He’d been busy rolling spliffs on a small table in the corner. There were other traces of drugs around the room; scattered ash trays, faint traces of a white power in the lines of the coffee table. That was normal, at least.

Remus licked his lips at the question. Going back felt like the easiest option, somehow, and that surprised him. School wasn’t exactly a favourite past-time, but for a toss-out he wasn’t all that bad. He’d also left Hope’s records under his bed. It felt wrong to leave them there.

“Yeah,” he said. “Dunno for how long, but I’d rather there than home.”

The boys, ever sympathetic to someone with a rough home-life (if they only knew where he’d actually grown up) nodded their heads.

“You could stay here though,” Lee said.

Remus looked around. *Could he?* The flat felt so different compared to August.

“How about you tell me what’s been happening since I left first,” Remus said, firmly.

Everyone sat back in their chairs and deferred to Tomny then. Even Tonya, who’d been busy running her fingers across the short hair at the back of his neck, stopped and looked.

“The Irish moved in to this part of town just before Halloween,” Tomny said finally. “They took over, remade the rules. All the guys work for them now, even Burrin.”

“So you work for them too, then?”

Tomny nodded, his lips almost pursed. “Not a bad gig, even if the… transition was a bit rough.” He forced a chuckle and the rest of the boys shared it.

Having never been around during a take-over, Remus wasn’t entirely sure what a ‘transition’ looked like and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. The summer before had been quiet, as their side of the End had been controlled by a gangster named Hill. Guess Hill was gone now, though.

“So where are the rest of the lads?” Remus asked, rubbing his hands

together for a bit of warmth. It was always cold in the flat in the winter.

“Other houses, other groups. Things have been more spread out recently.”

Remus understood. He felt he should be grateful, at least, that most of his friends were still around for him to find. Tomny really needed a damn phone.

After that everyone was quiet until Tonya clapped her hands together, addressing the room.

“Right well, Remus can stay as long as he wants, to visit, but if you’re clearing out tonight I want you all out within the hour.” She spoke with intense surety, like she’d been around forever, though Remus had never heard of her before today. All of them listened though. One by one they stood up and began trickling out, each saying goodbye to Tomny and then Tonya, like they were the heads of some sort of mob family.

Maybe they were, Remus realised. Though they couldn’t be that high up the food chain if the Irish had just come in. And Tomny had never been interested in actually joining a group; he’d rather spend his time as the middle man, which was a more precarious place to be, but offered him the freedom to keep his own autonomy.

“I’m cooking tonight,” Tonya told Remus, after he’d shared a fat spliff with Seesaw. “You like ham, Remus?”

“Lupin will eat anything,” Tomny called, “ ‘cept his vegetables. I once watched him eat raw chicken, though.”

Remus made to swat at him from the couch. “It was not *raw!* It was just a little pink in the middle…”

Tonya stood up from her spot on Tomny’s recliner. “Then you’ll love the ham. Really I’m just trying to make up for not cooking tomorrow. The boys lost a bet with me last week, so they’re doing Christmas dinner.”

Remus raised his eyebrows and Tomny shrugged. He didn’t think the delinquent knew what a whisk was, let alone how to cook an entire holiday meal. Though, he supposed, that was part of the joke.

Tonya turned and made her way toward the kitchen, and as she left

Tomny took a cheeky swipe at her bum. She seemed unfazed, only stopping in the kitchen’s doorway.

“Remus, Tomny said you like music, yeah?”

He nodded, tongue in-cheek. “Yeah, I do.”

“Cool. 'Top of the Pops' has a special on tonight. We should watch it together.”

Chapter End Notes

The song at the beginning, "London Boys" was originally released in 1966 when Bowie was still working with his band The Lower Third. The song was re-released in May 1975.

Lots of slang here:
A 'yob' is generally regarded as a thuggish, working-class or uncultured person.
A 'bovver-accent' is typically connected to rowdy gangs of teenage youth.
'Scrubber' is a negative term for a woman with a lot of sexual partners. Can also mean prostitute.
A 'trap house' is a place where illegal drugs are sold/kept.
'Plonker' means stupid.
A 'boffin' is an expert in some field of science and can also be used as a tame insult such as 'nerd'.

Much of Tomny's gang is curated fiction and will be going forward. However, a group of Irish gangsters did make a push for London's east side in the mid-70's. Hill is also based on a real gangster.

Chapter 17: Christmas, 1975

Chapter Summary

Christmas passes. All is well.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking & recreational drugs. References to gang affiliations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Are you hanging up a stocking on your wall?
It's the time that every Santa has a ball;
Does he ride a red nosed reindeer?
Does he turn up on his sleigh?
Do the fairies keep him sober for a day?

- "Merry Christmas Everybody" Slade, 1973

It wouldn't be until years later, during some talk-show interview that he was definitely too sloshed to remember, that Remus would name the evening of December 23rd 1975 as the first time he realised that he wanted to do music. Of course at the time he wouldn't remember the actual date, or even that he was just fifteen. All he would remember was how it felt to be laid out in front of the telly with his friends, taking it all in. He'd never been as much in line with Bowie's creative insanity as Sirius, and it may have not been the 'rock star' moment, but that evening, in a dingy East End flat, his love for Queen was born.

They were scattered about the living room, bellies full of dinner courtesy of Tonya, who had turned out to be a fantastic cook. Most of them were smoking, Tonya included, though her cigarette was long and skinny, like the ones Remus had only seen in movies. She was draped over Tomny's lap and snuggled up with him under a blanket, but had slipped her toes out and tucked them up under Remus' thigh for a bit of extra warmth.

Top of the Pops had started as it always did, with the hosts giving a jaunty thank you for everyone tuning in during the holidays. Remus thought Rod Stewart's bit was quite good for a pop song, but both Lee

and Doss had spent the entire promo calling him a poof and a knob-jockey until Tomny finally snapped at them to shut up so everyone could hear.

It was just the six of them, Remus, Tomny, Tonya, Lee, Doss, and Vint (who'd yet to say more than a few short grunts all evening), and they all seemed happy enough to be there, but Remus could tell the only one actually enjoying the music was Tonya. She knew all the songs, and sang along to Sweet, Mud, and Bowie—which Sirius would've definitely gotten a kick out of—before serenading Tomny with Hot Chocolate's "You Sexy Thing". Doss tried whistling when she got up to dance, but a single sharp glare from Tomny was enough shut him up again. Not that Tonya seemed to care much; they were all drunk or high anyway. Lee had produced a very large bottle of whisky which Remus had graciously partaken from. It reminded him of Sirius' birthday, only this whisky tasted like it'd been made in a grimy bucket, which it may very well have been.

Tonya's drug of choice was something she called 'stardust', which Remus only realised later was cocaine. She offered him some, but he'd declined so he could remain coherent enough to watch the amazing finale he'd been promised in the show's intro. Tomny, Doss, and Vint did take her up on the offer though.

When the finale started and Queen's promo video came on, Remus was almost disappointed. He'd listened to the band before, and seen them live once on *Pops*, but he'd never been much interested. That train of thought ended roughly around the second verse of "Bohemian Rhapsody". It didn't matter if they were wearing makeup or bloody satin jumpsuits—it was like the band had reached into his soul and yanked on his vocal cords. He didn't know the song, but he hummed anyway, and soon all of them were into it—even Lee and Doss, who'd never cared much for music in the first place.

Tonya of course knew every word; Remus was almost jealous, but he'd hardly watched or listened to any new music since getting to Hawkings. Now he was kicking himself for it—how could he have missed such a masterpiece? Sirius was going to lose his mind when he heard it; maybe he was watching the same programme right now.

The moment the song was over Remus wanted to play it again, and again. Luckily, Tonya was the coolest girlfriend Tomny had ever had. Not only had she been responsible for the TV, but she was able to wheel out an entire turntable out from their shared bedroom.

“I got one of Tomny's other mates to rescue it from the bins outside and fix it up for me,” she said gleefully, standing aside to do another line while Remus set up the needle and tuned the speed. When she handed him Queen’s *A Night at the Opera* album, Remus put it on immediately, and the record didn’t stop spinning until they’d all fallen asleep in the wee hours of the morning.

When he woke up the next day everyone else had gone apart from Vint who was still passed out on one of the sofas, and Tonya, who was sipping coffee and reading Peter’s father’s paper, *The Daily London Local,* at the dining table.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” she said. There were fresh flowers in a tiny vase in front of her that almost made Remus question if he’d woken up in Tomny’s flat at all. The power women had, really.

“Mm,” Remus groaned in response, rubbing his face. He was going to be nursing a hangover for a while, but it wasn’t the worst he’d ever had. While smiling at him, Tonya gestured for him to sit, which he did.

“Coffee?” She asked, opening the fridge and withdrawing a carton of eggs. Remus grunted again and after lighting the hob she poured him a cup and passed it over. He sipped it and instantly grimaced and Tonya gave a little giggle before passing him a small bowl of sugar and some milk from the fridge. Coffee had never been Remus’ favourite, even with plenty of sugar, but at least it warmed his stomach. The flat was always freezing in winter and sweltering in the summer.

“Where’s Tom?” Remus asked, clearing his throat. His voice was still scratchy from the embarrassing amount of singing he’d done the night before.

“Dunno,” Tonya shrugged, cracking a few eggs into a pan to sizzle. She was wearing a pair of flannel pyjama bottoms and an oversized t-shirt rolled up at the shoulders that must’ve been Tomny’s and her dark hair was up in a bun, held in place by a pencil.

“He just leaves you here?” Remus sipped his coffee again, shuddering less this time.

“When it suits him.” Tonya started whistling, twirling her spatula around in her hand. Eventually she looked back over her shoulder and smiled. “How long have you known Tomny?”

“A while," Remus answered, "since I was a kid.”

”Are you not still a kid?” She smirked. “Well, I’ve only known him since Halloween. I was living in Paris before here.”

Remus tried not to let his awe show on his face. Paris felt like another world, even for someone who’d been raised as he had been. Not that Remus had ever been on something as fancy as a plane. Trains were shit enough.

“So… how’d you end up with a yob like Tomny?”

“Because I’m so hot?” She smiled over her shoulder again and he blushed into his coffee. “Tomny’s hot too, don’t you think?”

Remus made a noise in the base of his throat as Tonya turned off the hob. “I’m only joking. I met Tomny outside some bar in Shoreditch. Bit of a wild night if I’m be honest. Here, eat.”

She dumped a plate of eggs in front of Remus and handed him a fork, which he took eagerly. “Thanks,” he mumbled as Tonya took her spot across from him, going back to her paper. She was circling addresses for rent.

“You and Tomny looking to move?” Remus asked between bites.

“Just me. Tomny wants to keep the flat, but I’m not exactly in love with the area.”

“Fair enough,” Remus said. He was secretly happy that the flat wasn’t going anywhere, though it couldn’t have been easy for a pretty girl like her to walk the neighbourhood around on her own. Tonya looked good without makeup too, he noticed. All eyes, a warm brown, with a pouty mouth.

“Are you French then?” Remus asked, trying to fill the silence with conversation. Tonya shook her head.

"Malheureusement, non. Just a traveller. I was born in St Petersburg actually, but I grew up in Brighton.” Tonya circled another address. “Where are you from, Remus?”

He could’ve smacked himself. Conversation indeed. The entire time he’d been running with Tomny and the others he’d had one rule: no backstories. Feigning disinterest in others’ histories usually kept them from asking after his, but one term at a poncy rich-kid school and he

was already violating his own code.

“Southwark.” It was the answer he always gave when people got too interested. “Nowhere special.”

Tonya nodded, sipping her own coffee. “Your mum must miss you. How old are you anyway?”

“Mum’s dead,” Remus said cooly. “And I’m sixteen.” Or he would be, in three months. “How old are you?”

Tonya jutted her lower lip out, but didn’t apologise for bringing up his mum. Others almost always did, like it was a natural reaction to wince and apologise over his mum catching phenomena during a bad spell. Lily had apologised up and down when Remus had first told her about Hope, though all he’d said was that she’d passed when he was eleven. Despite his reluctance to offer more, Lily had still fawned over him for the rest of the day like he was a jessie made of glass. It was irritating somehow, and Remus found he liked Tonya’s reaction better.

“I’m nineteen,” she said. “Never thought I’d date someone as young as Tomny.”

Remus made a face. “Tomny turned nineteen in November.”

Tonya smiled but didn’t correct him, and he was left feeling as though he'd missed the joke.

“What are you doing for Christmas, love?”

He shrugged, having almost forgotten that it was Christmas Eve. “Don’t really feel like going home.”

“Wonderful,” Tonya said, picking up the newspaper and straightening it out. “You can stay with us then.”

“Really?”

“Tomny won’t mind. I'll wager he misses you. A lot. Talks about you enough anyway.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Tonya folded her paper and took out another cigarette from the carton she’d left on the table, sticking it between her lips and lighting it. “It’ll be good. Even if the boys are total shite at dinner. I’ve got more records, you can play your pick.”

Remus nodded slowly. “Cheers.”

Tonya blew the smoke out her nose and smiled. “Cheers. Now finish your eggs.”

* * *

It was hard for him to wrap his head around Tonya, who was both overbearing and somehow also completely blasé about most things. She had insisted he tell someone where he was going to be staying, even if it was just a neighbour or some bum that lived in the alley nearest to his house in ‘Southwark’. Generally Remus’ go-to when it came to enigmatic people like her was to sit back in indifference or ignore them all together; but he had a feeling Tonya wouldn’t take well to being snubbed, so he took the money she gave him and walked three streets over to the nearest working phone, kicked out the bum out of the box, and made his call.

Giles wasn’t very happy when Remus rung him, but he’d picked up on the third ring as always and at least sounded relieved to find out that he wasn’t dead in a ditch somewhere. That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to lecture though.

“You should come home. You did good at that school. You can pick up any poor marks, he’s not going to worry about those.”

“He doesn’t worry about anything unless it concerns work or his dogs,” Remus shot into the phone’s receiver. “He’s not even going to be there if I come back, so I’m staying.”

“Lad, you shouldn’t throw away—”

“Just wanted you to know I wasn’t dead, Gil. I’ll call again later.” Remus hung up the phone.

By the time he’d returned to the flat Tomny was back with Lee and Doss and Tonya had another record going. “Remus is staying for Christmas,” she announced as he entered the living room, slinging her arm across his shoulders despite being almost a foot shorter. She smelt good—like vanilla—so he let her.

All the boys nodded in approval of Tonya’s announcement, and Remus felt his chest tighten in admiration and gratitude for his friends.

“And I expect everyone to get him a present,” she added, making Remus moan and pull away.

“No, don’t,” he insisted. He didn’t need anything, not from them. "It's already Christmas Eve."

“No, I reckon that’s fair,” Tomny said from across the room, while fiddling with the television’s antenna. “We didn’t get you anything for your last birthday, Lu. Christmas seems fitting enough.”

“I can’t get you anything, though.”

Tomny turned back to look at him and raised a brow. “I don’t remember asking for nothin’.” He glanced at Lee and Doss. “Did you?”

Both boys feigned ignorance and shrugged, and just like that the conversation was over.

Christmas Eve at the flat was humble and noisy, with plenty of food, drink, and dope to go around. Several people Remus didn’t know showed up later on but he’d already taken some pill from Seesaw that made his head buzzy and ended up passing out until noon on the 25th. When he woke up Tomny gave him two very large cartons of cigarettes while Lee and Doss had gone in on a copy of *A Night at the Opera*—apparently they’d slipped out the evening before and made it to the shop ‘just in time’. Even Tonya gave him a gift, which turned out to be a pair of round sunglasses that she said made him look like John Lennon. There had been a stiff bag of spliffs too, courtesy of Seesaw’s nimble fingers, and that had been enough to leave him almost weepy for the rest of the day.

They ended up watching *Top of the Pops*’s Christmas Day special, but none of the acts were as good as Queen, so they’d turned it off before the end and played Remus’ own copy of *A Night at the Opera*. No one complained, despite the fact that they must’ve listened to “I’m in Love with My Car” about twenty times at that point, and none of them had so much as a rusty beater to speak of.

Things became more quiet after Christmas, with the rest of the boys returning to work—whatever that meant now that the Irish ran everything. Without Flacky around Remus was the youngest of the crew, and the only real child left among them. It would’ve been a harder pill to swallow, had he not liked hanging with Tonya so much.

She’d never once left the flat while Remus was there and yet her energy never waned. After giving up her kitchen (and Tomny would

never have argued that it was indeed *her* kitchen) to the boys on Christmas, Tonya rushed in to save them after someone had shouted that the turkey was on fire. Charred or not, they all seemed happy with the meal, which was certainly more food than any of them were used to having at one time. Remus tried hard not to compare it to the full tables in the Hawkings' dining hall.

On New Years he and Tonya found themselves alone in each other's company, after Doss had shown up with a message for Tomny that had him practically running out of the flat. The interaction had set Remus instantly on edge, but Tonya managed to distract him with a spliff and a book. Like him, she was a ravenous reader, and already they'd spent days sitting next to each other, devouring the small collection of literature she kept tucked up in Tomny's closet and only stopping to eat, sleep, or get high.

"Do you ever leave the flat, Ton?" They were dancing alone in the living room while the turntable played an Eagles album, which Remus had initially balked at—the dancing bit, not the Eagles, they were fine—but he was drunk again and Tonya was very pretty.

"It's cold outside," Tonya hummed, "and at least this way I get to keep you out of trouble."

"What makes you think I need to be kept out of trouble?" He kept his hands knotted behind Tonya's waist as they swayed to the music, cheek leaning against the top of her head, breathing in the smell of vanilla.

" 'Cause the rest of 'em are always in trouble, and you'd just follow them into the heart of it. Tomny says you're too loyal, Remus."

He mumbled into her hair; "No such thing as too loyal."

"It is when you're a baby."

"I'm not a baby. And you're not a babysitter."

"Maybe not, but I like keeping you here. It's like my job."

The song ended, and a moment of silence passed over them as Remus processed what she'd just said. Somehow the conversation felt too akin to the one he'd had with Lily at the beginning of term. He went to pull away, but Tonya held him to her by the neck, more grown and sure of herself than the red-haired girl.

“Don’t do that. Don’t pull away. We’re dancing.”

“Never wanted to dance,” he grumbled. He knew that Tonya was blitzed again, but everyone who came around the flat was high. It was like the entry fee: get blasted or gassed off your ass or get out.

“Tomny just doesn’t want you mixed up in any of it,” she murmured into his neck.

“That’s stupid,” Remus said, glaring at the wall behind her. “He had never had a problem with me coming along before.”

“Things are different now.”

How different? Why won’t any of you tell me?

Another song had started, and he found himself following Tonya’s lead, swaying to the melody as they clung together. When she spoke again her voice was still soft, but she wasn’t mumbling like she normally did when she was high.

“The other boys wanted to take you along, but he wants you clean so you can go back to school.”

“He wants me to go back?” Hearing the words aloud almost hurt.

“ ‘Course. It’s a good thing—getting an education.”

“Do you have an education?”

Drawing back from his shoulder, Tonya shook her head, looking up at him with painted eyelashes. “Dropped out when I was fourteen.”

“And then what?”

“And then I stowed away on a train to Amsterdam.”

Remus raised an eyebrow. “Amsterdam?”

“Mm… Something like that.” She smiled, and Remus shook his head, thinking how unfair it was that she was able to dispel a bad mood so easily.

“I’ve never really been out of London,” he confessed.

“You’re out now though, right? Where’s your school?”

“Scotland.”

“Scotland’s pretty.”

“You’ve been?”

“No, I hate the rain. It’s why I leave here so often.”

He snorted and Tonya resumed their swaying again, humming along to the song. She’d broken out this pretty halter-top dress for the evening, and in comparison Remus looked like a bum in the oversized shirt and jeans he’d borrowed from Tomny.

“Where to next, then?” He was getting caught up the same way he did with Tomny, the way he almost had with Sirius. Maybe if he knew enough about them, he could share in a bit of their blissful delirium.

“Dunno,” Tonya murmured. “Maybe somewhere in Asia. I look a bit Asian don’t I?”

“Er…”

Tonya laughed but neither confirmed nor denied. “Just one day at a time, Remus. We take everything one day at a time.”

There was a short clatter from the front door, and Tonya went rigid in his arms before Tomny appeared through the kitchen, stumbling as he struggled to take off his remaining boot. Remus stopped swaying, wondering how he must look with his arms around the waist of his friend’s girl, but Tonya only smiled pensively, relaxing back against him as Tomny tossed his boot across the room.

“You high?” She asked.

Tomny nodded, giving a thumbs up, and moved right past them to collapse into his patchy recliner. Tonya’s smile turned into a grin, and as another song started she leaned her head into Remus’ chest and let herself stare at her boyfriend. “We’re dancing.”

“I can see that,” Tomny said casually. He had a beer in his hand that Remus hadn’t noticed he’d brought with him. He used his teeth to pry the cap off before spitting it across the room.

“Do you want to join?” Tonya asked.

Tomny shook his head, holding up one hand. “Don’ let me interrupt.”

“Fine then, be boring.” Moving her arms from his neck to behind his back, Tonya smiled up at Remus, who felt as though his heart might beat right out of his chest. They stayed that way until the song ended, just the three of them in the whole flat, maybe even the whole world.

When he was finally released Remus slumped back onto the sofa and reached for the spliff he’d left in one of the flat’s many ashtrays, lighting it up and taking a deep drag to calm his sudden nerves. Tonya stood before him and he passed the hash cigarette along, watching as she held it between her fingers in that elegant way of hers and looked down at him like he was a puzzle she hadn’t quite solved yet.

“Like a button…” she murmured, cocking her head to the side and taking a drag. “I still dunno how you found him.”

“I didn’t,” Tomny chuckled, just as Remus realised she hadn’t been talking to him, “Lu found me.”

“How romantic.”

“Oh stuff it,” Remus scoffed, and Tonya stuck out her lower lip, looking to Tomny.

“He’s so cute. Can’t we keep him?”

“No,” he said into his beer, “and you best be careful. He’ll read ya like a book, that one.”

Tonya smirked. “I think I’d like to be read. Bet if you’re a good enough story someone’ll remember you. They might even fall in love, just a little bit.”

Remus wasn’t sure about love, but he couldn’t imagine ever forgetting this. It was too strange. Too wonderfully odd.

“Is this the part where one of you confesses your undying love for me?” He asked, before covering his mouth to hide his guilty smile. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Oh, I think you did,” Tonya said, and soon they were all laughing.

“This ain’t church, posh boy,” Tomny said, “can’t help you wiff any confessions.”

Staunching her laughter, Tonya took a second drag and leaned down at the waist until she was eye to eye with Remus on the couch.

“I don’t need a church to confess,” she said, before cupping his chin, pressing her lips gently to his. It was a ghost of a kiss, so brief he could've imagined it, but it was his first, and Remus was dumbstruck.

After she pulled away, Tonya placed the spliff between his lips and pressed both hands to his cheeks. “*Bonne année,* Remus. *Dis à ta petite amie imaginaire que je suis désolée.*”

She kissed him once more, on the forehead this time, before giving a dreamy smile turning to wander back toward their bedroom. As she went, she sang;

“*Any way the wind blows…*”

The door closed behind her, and the flat went quiet.

“Now I suddenly feel left out.”

Gaping like a right idiot, Remus spun back around on the sofa to find Tomny watching him from the recliner, his eyebrows raised like he was impressed.

“Tom, I…”

“Nope,” Tomny said very suddenly, holding up a hand. “Don’t worry your pretty head, I get it.”

“You get it…?”

“Mhm. It’s jus’ women, y'know?”

No I don’t know, he thought.

“Yeah, totally,” he said.

Tomny sipped his beer again and smiled around the rim. Once he’d pulled the bottle back, Remus’ eyes found the little scar on his upper lip.

“I tell you what though, Lu,” he said, “yer sumthin'. Really sumthin'.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed Christmas, next chapter we will be back at school in the 1976 new year xx

A 'beater' is just a rust-bucket of a car that barely runs.

A 'hob' is like a stove top.

Chapter 18: The B-side

Chapter Summary

Remus returns for his first term of the 1976 school year. Girlish shenanigans ensue.

Chapter Notes

No trigger warnings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blue eyes, blue eyes,
How come you tell so many lies?
Come up and see me, make me smile,
Or do what you want, running wild…

- "Make Me Smile" Steve Harley & Cockney Rebel, 1975

Monday 5th January 1976

Remus had been at his father's for less than two days before Giles had loaded his trunk back into the Roll's boot and drove him to Kings Cross. He dragged his feet across the platform, eerily aware of how close he was feeling to that very first day he'd left for school. He'd been less sure of things back then, and was fully prepared to hate all of it, but somehow that had proved harder than expected. Going back to friends and the easy flow of a schoolboy's day-to-day stung, because he knew what he was leaving behind. And there was no guarantee that any of it would be waiting for him next time either. He was on the outside again, playing double-life and unwilling to let so much as a single hair of them cross.

He'd already prepared himself to feel worse upon seeing the other boys so cheery and excited to be going back to school—despite the ungodly hour of the morning—and it might've proved more than he could handle, were they not such fucking nobs.

The moment they spotted him, James and Peter pressed their noses to the window and began waving frantically to flag him down. Remus paused to wave back, and just then Sirius' face appeared through the glass, grinning pompously. He raised a hand to wave back before ever-

so delicately twisting his wrist to flip him the bird.

Remus shook his head with a pinched smile, before mouthing ‘fuck you’ back at him.

‘Fuck you!’ Sirius returned through the glass, smiling.

“No, fuck you!”

‘FUCK YOU!’

“FUCK YOU!”

“Oi! Stop that foul shouting!”

Remus clapped a hand over his mouth as a train attendant approached through the crowd, whistle already tucked between his teeth. Others waiting on the platform stared back at him, clearly disgruntled by the foul yelling, and before the attendant could catch up with him, Remus quickly scuttled aboard and made his way down the aisle to his friends’ carriage compartment, sliding open the door.

“Good morning, you stupid nobs,” he announced, just as Sirius launched a football straight at him, giving Remus barely enough time to duck and avoid getting smacked in the gob.

“Good morning to you too, pet!”

James jumped up from his spot on the bench and clapped him on the shoulder. “Nice reflexes, Lupin!” He congratulated, before shoving past to retrieve the ball from the aisle.

“You never give anything a rest,” Remus said, stepping into the train compartment and lifting his trunk up on the rack above their heads. “You’re such an arse.”

Sirius grinned and slumped down in his seat slightly, dark hair sticking to the vinyl behind him. “And how’d you arrive at that conclusion?”

“Resentful observation,” Remus said, taking a seat on the padded bench next to Peter and smacking his open palm in greeting. “Hey, Pete.”

“Hi ya, Lupin. Did you have a good holiday?”

“Oh yeah. You?”

“Mhm. James and I—”

“We went to Devon,” James interjected, appearing back in the compartment with his football tucked under one arm, sliding the door shut behind him. “Mum decided we should get out of the city so we went to the house there.”

“We went too,” Peter said, excitedly; “James and I got holiday houses next door to one another on the beach.”

“You two should come next year,” James offered. "It's still cold but real nice."

“Oh yeah, I’m sure mum would love that,” Sirius scoffed. James reached up to yank on his long hair and Sirius punched him in the arm.

“What did you get for Christmas, Lupin?” Peter asked, disinterested in the rough-housing.

“Cigarettes,” Remus said, and both James and Peter’s eyes widened. “Kidding.”

Sirius snorted, and a moment later the train’s whistle blew.

When they arrived back at Hawkings College, Remus was struck by the fact that the campus was somehow more dreary than he’d remembered. The snow wandered between wet slush and frozen ice depending on the time of day, and everyone’s breath came out as a small haze in front of their noses. It was damn cold, but students still dismounted their buses from the station, greeting each other with rosy cheeks while chattering away with the same merry energy that came with the passing holiday.

“Do you see them?” James asked hopefully, after they’d collected their trunks.

“Who?” Remus asked.

“He means the girls,” Sirius drawled, dropping an arm around James’ shoulders. “And no I don’t, but it’s bloody freezing and I’m starving so let’s just go get dinner and worry about your ginger problems later.”

Even after dinner, the bus, and train ride, neither Remus nor Sirius had said very much about their holidays, but both James and Peter were full of stories, which Sirius seemed happy enough to listen along

to. The Potters celebrated Christmas along with other Hindu holidays such as Diwali, though James was away at school a lot of the time, so they'd always tried to make the December break extra special along with their close neighbours, the Pettigrews, an exceptionally normal upper-crust British family. The two households had a tradition of celebrating Christmas dinner at the Potters' and New Years supper at the Pettigrew's and invited most of their friends to make it a big affair, something Remus could hardly imagine. The closest thing he'd ever come to a party in his home were the Sunday afternoon teas his mother used to put on, but he'd been so small then, he could hardly remember.

Having been one of James' best friends since primary, the Potters sent along a Christmas gift for Sirius, which he unwrapped after dinner, discovering several rock and roll magazines and a whole songbook of sheet music for the piano.

"Sorry, I thought I'd told her you'd stopped playing the piano," James winced, after Sirius had unwrapped the gift.

"No," he said kindly, "I love it. Tell mum thanks."

James nodded, and passed along a small tin to Remus. "It's Christmas baking," he said, and Remus opened the tin to find several milky-white squares.

"It's called barfi," James continued. "It's made with coconut—sort of like a fudge. I told mum you liked sweet things. She says hi."

Remus thumbed the tin, feeling warm inside. "Thanks."

James nodded and carried on. To him, passing along his mother's holiday baking seemed like a perfectly normal thing, but it had never occurred to Remus that James might've been thinking of him while at home with his family. He'd thought of him, but only in passing really. Now he almost felt guilty, but somehow he doubted someone as good as James Potter would've minded. He was too busy enjoying his holiday and family time to be worried with such a thing. In fact, the only one who might've been able to relate to Remus' Christmas was Sirius, and he'd given anyway nothing so far.

It wasn't until later that evening, while Peter was off meeting with his AV club and James had popped off to the library to return an overdue book, that Remus was able to approach Sirius on his own.

"You watch any 'Top of the Pops' over the holidays?" He asked, feeling

awkward. He was sitting on his bed and had called across the room rather than getting up and approaching the other boy directly.

Sirius looked up from his bed. He was reading, and until that moment Remus hadn't realised it was his copy of *The Great Gatsby*. A tape was going quietly in the stereo next to him, some psychedelic ballad that made the speakers sound as though they were underwater.

"No," he said, bouncing his foot off his knee as he always did. "Mum doesn't like TV much."

"Is there anything she does like?"

"Don't think so."

"Oh… well, Queen played." Remus began picking at his bed comforter. His announcement at least, seemed to get Sirius' attention.

"Oh yeah? Were they any good?"

"Yeah! It was just a promo, but the new song… blimey."

Sirius sat up on his bed eagerly, his black hair tousled from his pillow. "I haven't listened to their new album. Andy promised to send it to me for Christmas, but it hasn't arrived in the post yet."

Remus was moving before Sirius had even finished. "I got it right here —a friend gave it to me for Christmas, too." Pulling out the album, which he'd secretly stashed next to his bedside table while unpacking, he crossed the dorm room to where Sirius was already setting up the stereo and turntable. He passed it over, and Sirius paused to take the cover in, running his fingers along every edge.

"So bloody cool," he murmured.

"Wait until you hear it. Put it on! Oh, and start with the b-side."

"It's sacrilegious to start a *first play* with the b-side."

"Just trust me."

Sliding the record out of its sleeve, Sirius set up the needle and stepped back as the familiar crackling filled the room. Immediately, he dropped down to the floor and laid back on the rug, staring up at him with excited glee.

"Well, Lupin? You gonna lay down?"

Remus looked to his bed questioningly. “I thought we’d—”

“No,” Sirius said, shaking his head vigorously, “not for a first play. Trust me.”

“Alright.” Dropping down beside him, Remus settled in just as the music started. It felt a little odd to be lying on the floor of their own bedroom, but he forgave it under the pretence that it was just another one of Sirius’ odd musical quirks.

They made it through the entirety of “Prophet’s Song” without uttering a word, though it took Remus nearly half of the eight-minute song to really relax. When he did he found it was easy to stare at the ceiling and drift off with the music, but he was too conscious of Sirius lying next to him with his dark hair splayed out like a halo. They didn’t look at each other, didn’t speak even as the second song turned into the third, but the music had enough words for the both of them anyway and eventually, as the opening chords of “Bohemian Rhapsody” poured out of the stereo, Remus closed his eyes.

This was why Sirius had wanted to lie on the floor. There, there were no sideways glances to gauge anyone else’s reaction or to make sure they were enjoying themselves. There it was just you and the moment when you first heard a song that might change your life forever. It was the most solitary anyone could feel in the presence of another person, and yet with Sirius beside him and Queen in the air, Remus didn’t feel lonely at all.

As the song ended and Freddie Mercury’s voice filtered out and the gong was hit, Remus bit his lip over a smile, opening his eyes and blinking in the light of their bedroom as he turned to look at Sirius; “I thought it was brilliant when I first heard it. None of my friends back home really understood how good—”

Remus had to stop. Not because the next song had interrupted him, or even because he’d realised that that moment was the first time he’d openly offered any information about his London friends; he had to stop because Sirius was crying.

Watching Sirius Black cry was a lot like watching a parent cry. Even as a child you know that they must do it, that they have the capability —that they’d have to cry sometimes otherwise they’d just explode, but seeing it and imagining it were two very different things. Sirius wasn’t balling, wasn’t even weeping really, but Remus faltered anyway and glued his eyes back to the roof of their bedroom. He stayed like that,

too afraid to say anything, until “God Save the Queen” had finished and the crackling needle went silent. Finally Sirius sat up, and Remus caught the quick gesture as he wiped his face on his arm.

“It must’ve been amazing.” Sirius spoke with his back to him, and Remus was struck by how small it seemed, hunched over in his school uniform.

“Oh… seeing them? Yeah.”

“They played that song, didn’t they,” Sirius picked up the album cover to read it, “ ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’?”

Remus nodded. “They looked amazing, too.”

Some silence passed, and then in a small voice, Sirius whispered; “I can’t wait.”

“Wait for what, Sirius?”

Suddenly straightening up, Sirius whipped his head around. The tears were gone, replaced with that infectious grin of his. “To write songs like that.”

“Oh.” Remus sat up next to him and stared down at the album in his hands. “You write songs, then?”

“None like that. None that are good enough to show anyone. But one day.”

Remus nodded again, automatically, but the understanding escaped him. Music for him was… well, he wasn’t quite sure what it was, but it had never been a goal. Not like it seemed to be for Sirius. He’d never wept over music.

“Want to listen to it again?” Sirius asked, with no indication that he’d just been crying at all. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Remus bobbed his head in consideration and Sirius met his gaze with a small smile. He melted instantly and let out a Sirius Black-level sigh before dropping back down on the rug, hands behind his head.

“Yeah. Go on then. A-side's good too. Dunno what they were thinking with the car track though.”

* * *

Thursday 29th January 1976

Januarys in Scotland were almost as bad as Octobers in London. The sky over Hawkings did nothing but piss rain, and when it wasn't pouring it was snowing, which turned to mud and mush the moment it started raining again. Remus had never gotten so much use out of a pair of wellies in his life. Back home, he would've just traipsed around town in his bovver boots like the rest, but this far north, wet shoes were a death sentence. If you didn't make it across the berms in the early morning without getting your socks wet, then you were left with frozen toes for the rest of the school day and a considerably bad attitude, at least where Remus was concerned.

The start of second term and the overload of homework that it came with was not entirely bad, but perhaps only because Remus had finally broken down and joined the girls in the library. It was terribly embarrassing to face Lily those first few weeks after he'd claimed she was his girlfriend to Tomny and the rest, but he told himself that as long as Lily never knew, he could bear the shame. Besides, not taking Lily with him to study would've been an academic waste.

Though, if Remus was being honest, the real spurn to raise his marks did not come from Lily's constant pestering, but the fact that Sirius hadn't received a single red mark on any of his term one exams. He must've been exceedingly good at cheating then, as Remus had never witnessed him willingly (and of his own volition) open a textbook to review. He was fully prepared to get Sirius to fess up to his crimes until Lily dispelled his suspicions during one of their private study periods.

"He's just got a really good memory, Remus. He can look at something once and then tell you what it says word-for-word. It's infuriating, really. I mean, who would throw away such a talent? All he does is mess around with Potter and listen to music. If I had that power, nothing would stop me from being top of the year."

"You're already top of the year," Marlene pointed out. She had her blonde hair done up in a sleek ponytail, and Remus didn't miss the little sapphire stud earrings she'd gotten as a Christmas gift from her parents. It made him a bit squeamish, thinking about pushing a stick of metal through your ear lobe just for the sake of fashion.

"And I have to work for it just to stay ahead of tossers like Black," Lily

said. “Things come so easy to him, it’s unfair.”

“Careful Remus,” Mary said from the end of the table where was currently painting her nails with a bottle of nail polish she’d propped up on her textbooks, “she’s been whinging about Black’s marks since we’ve known the buggar. She’ll go on forever if you let her. I think she’s secretly in love with him.”

“I am not!” Lily shrieked, earning herself a sharp shush from Mrs. Pince as she passed their table. She smiled at the librarian in apology while Mary and Marlene shared a shameless smile.

Remus thought about what Lily said about Sirius’ memory; It made perfect sense really, in the way he seemed to be able to recall any lyric of any song or quote directly from a novel he’d only skimmed. Being constitutionally lazy might’ve been built into Sirius’ bones, but he could play a song on the guitar after barely glancing at the sheet music, and as much as it hurt to admit, Remus had never seen him get less than a ninety on any test. If Sirius fell academically short anywhere it was in his essays and take-home work, which he found unbearably boring and sometimes just neglected to hand in. It made Remus, who excelled at homework and dreaded tests, feel like a complete fool. But at least now he had an answer; Sirius Black wasn’t just some ordinary prodigy, he was a bloody genius.

“Remus? Remus, are you listening?”

“Huh?” Snapping out of his daze, Remus looked up from his Modern Languages text to find Lily missing from the table while Mary and Marlene stared back at him expectantly.
“Er, what was I saying?”

“You weren’t saying anything,” Marlene said, “you’d completely spaced out.”

“Oh, sorry… were you saying something?”

Mary gave him a sly smile. “Yeah, we were only asking if you had plans tomorrow.”

Remus bit the inside of his cheek, thinking. Tomorrow was a Friday and James had football practice on the school’s tiny indoor pitch in the evening, trying to get his team in shape for the upcoming season. Both Sirius and Peter had detention for supposedly cheating off one another on a maths assignment—though neither would admit who had actually copied who. Peter could’ve copied Sirius for the mark, but

Sirius could've also copied Peter because he couldn't be bothered to do the assignment in the first place. Their loyal reluctance to nark at least meant Remus was free to camp out in the dorm room by himself.

"No," he said honestly. "I was going to finish the geography homework."

"We'll help you!" Marlene said, uncharacteristically loud. She reigned herself in before Mrs. Pince could return to shush them and smiled widely. "We can do it together today if you'd like. Then you can… come hang?"

Remus' eyes tightened a little at 'hang out' only because it felt so strange to hear the words come out of a mouth as conservative as Marlene's. It made him instantly suspicious.

"I don't—"

"Please, Remus?" Mary said, her voice low but still pleading. "It'd make Lily very happy."

" 'Happy'?"

"Yes, you numpty, happy! It would make Lily very happy."

"But why—"

"Just because!" Marlene insisted. "You'll see when you show up."

He wanted to say no, but one look from the both of them and he caved—almost wincing. "Alright."

"Wonderful," Mary said, sharing a glance with Marlene that Remus couldn't interpret. Why did girls have to do that? Things would really be much easier if everyone just said what they were thinking. Boys did that—said what they meant—or else they just fought and forgot. It was much preferable to the constant mind-games girls seemed to prefer.

"You're not planning anything are you?" Remus asked, now very used to being pulled around by Sirius and the rest, but both girls only shook their heads.

"We'll meet you outside Rowena House tomorrow at seven," Mary said. "Oh, and don't tell Lily."

“Why shouldn’t I—*ow!"*

Mary kicked him hard under the table just as Lily returned with three fresh texts. She heard him cry out and frowned as she sat down.

“Are you okay, Remus?”

Remus shot a glare at Mary, who had returned to painting her nails. “S'fine. Just a paper cut.”

* * *

Remus was going to be sick.

“What do you mean it's Lily’s *birthday?"*

Mary and Marlene giggled like they shared a single hive-mind.

“You’re really sort of thick when you want to be, Remus,” Mary remarked. “I mean exactly what I said—it’s Lily’s sixteenth birthday. She’s lucky really, both Marlene and I have summer birthdays. Horrible to be away from friends on your birthday.”

Remus pinched his forehead. “But I don’t understand why I’m here.”

“Remus,” Marlene said, like she was correcting a child, “you’re Lily’s friend, too.”

He was?

If his negligence toward Lily’s birthday weren’t enough, he could’ve thought up a dozen more excuses as to why he’d been disqualified for the role of ‘friend’. Besides, Remus had more than enough friends already. He had Tomny, Lee, Doss… and of course there was James, Sirius, and Peter, even if they sometimes made him want to pull his hair out—but he wasn’t about to admit that to the girls.

Remus sighed. “I don’t get why you didn’t just tell me it was her birthday in the first place.”

“Because we weren’t sure you’d come if you knew, silly,” Mary said.

“I don’t even have a present for her.”

“You don’t need a present,” Marlene assured him. “Just come say

hello."

They both batted their big eyes at him, and Remus felt his shoulders sag in defeat. He could've pretended he didn't see them in the dark, but then Mary gave him a blinding smile. "We have booze."

A pause, then; "Alright…" Curse him for being so weak to life's little pleasures.

"Wonderful." Taking him by the arm, Mary marched him around the side of Rowena House with Marlene in tow. Remus nearly gaped when they stopped outside a single second floor window. It was left open despite the late January chill and he could hear a pop song playing. Before he could ask how they were supposed to get inside, Mary climbed up onto the electrical box just below the window and turned to look at him with a smug smile.

"Don't tell me you thought only the boys snuck out after hours?"

He didn't, but it was a rhetorical question anyway, so he answered with one of his own; "I thought boys weren't allowed inside the girls dorms?"

"You're not," she said, "but Lily's a prefect, and it's her birthday. Now get up here and help me up."

With a dramatic sigh, Remus climbed up onto the metal electrical box and locked his fingers together to boost Mary through the open window, then Marlene, who stuck her head back out after, probably just to make sure he hadn't hightailed it into the woods. Waving her off, Remus gripped the edge of the window, which was only at head-level for him now, and hauled himself up and into the bedroom.

Inside, he found that the girls' dorm was much like his own, with wooden wall panelling, four beds arranged in a square, and matching rugs and curtains. Though where the boys' were red and maroon, the Rowena colouring was varying shades of dark and navy blue. Decorations representative of the girls lined each wall and surface, including posters of celebrities, films, and photo frames with pictures of them and their families.

It was almost strange to see the photos: Lily and her sister on some green hillside, a toddler Mary with a handsome man that could only have been the father she was always going on about. None of the boys had any photos displayed apart from a polaroid of James and his parents, which he'd mounted to the wall amongst his favourite

football cards with a wad of chewing gum.

“Holy cricket!” A voice called, and Remus turned to find Lottie sitting up on her bed, a magazine in one hand, wearing a bright pink pyjama set and smiling from ear to ear. “I can’t believe you actually got him to come!”

“He didn’t make it easy,” Mary said. She’d appeared from the bathroom, holding a bottle of what looked like a very expensive red wine.

“Don’t bully poor Remus,” Marlene said, sitting down on her own bed. “He was actually very amicable.”

“Here Remus,” Lottie said, eagerly crossing the room to take his arm, “you can sit on my bed.”

Mary stepped past, trying to get the cork out of the wine bottle. “Don’t be a slag, Lot, you have Mickey.”

“Mickey’s not here,” she shot back, dragging Remus to her bed and forcing him to sit. The blue covers of Rowena house were covered with a bright pink, fleece blanket, and he felt instantly hot when he sat down.

“Where's Lily?” He asked, as Lottie plopped herself down next to him, pulling her heavy curls back from her face and neck.

“Prefects' meeting,” Marlene said.

“I swear,” Lottie interjected, “she never takes a break. Not even on her own birthday. Sad, really.”

Remus had already thought it before, but Lottie and Peter really were twins cut from the same blunt, oblivious cloth.

“She’ll be back any minute,” Marlene promised.

“Goddammit!” Mary moaned, slumping down on her bed with the wine bottle. She’d been trying to push the tip of the cork up with her thumbnail.

“Couldn’t find the corkscrew?” Lottie asked, and Mary gave a sour pout.

“No.”

“Give it here,” Remus said, eager to have his hands occupied.

Mary passed the bottle over and he pulled out his key ring, shoving the tip of his room key into the top at an angle the way he’d seen Lee do once to a bottle of cheap chardonnay, which had tasted more akin to sour dish soap than booze. He began to turn it, easing the cork up the neck of the bottle until it finally came free with a sharp pop.

“Oh Remus, you’re amazing!” Mary squealed.

Marlene sat up on her bed. “Where did you learn to do that?”

Remus shrugged, passing the bottle back. “A friend showed me once.”

“Remind me to give your friend a kiss if I ever meet them,” Mary said, taking the bottle to her wardrobe hutch across the way and pouring the wine into five kitchen mugs. Remus tried not to think about how excited Lee would be to get the chance to kiss someone as pretty as Mary, as she came back with four mugs of red wine and passed them around excitedly, swinging her hips to the pop music quietly playing off a small stereo set up in one corner of the room. David Essex had never interested Remus but it made sense that the girls liked him—he sung pop music and wore his trousers tighter than any average bloke would've dared.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Lily?” Marlene asked. “It is her birthday.”

“No need!” Lily called, slipping into the dorm room in a rush. “I’m in!”

Cheeks nearly as red as her hair, Lily stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Remus and pulled her coat tighter around her neck, as though he’d caught her indecent. “Remus!” She said in a shrill voice. “What are you doing here?”

What indeed.

“It was Marls and I,” Mary confessed happily, setting her mug down to help Lily out of her coat. “We told Remus to come.”

“They didn’t tell me it was your birthday,” Remus said, “sorry if I’m party-crashing.”

“You’re not!” Lily and Mary said at the same time. Lily smiled and shook the damp out of her hair, before crossing the room to sit on Marlene’s bed, hands in her lap.

“Thanks for coming, Remus,” she said, accepting the wine from Mary and sipping it easily. Remus tried to hide his surprise. Apparently Lily Evans wasn’t as straight-edged as everyone thought.

“Sixteen is an important birthday,” Lottie said, sipping her own wine. It turned her lips a purply-colour, and brought an instant flush to her face and neck. “And considering our Lils has grown so much in the past year—”

“Oh stop it, Lot, really,” Lily said, covering her face with one hand.

“No,” Lottie said, batting Remus on the shoulder. “You should’ve seen her in year ten. All she cared about was making prefect. She missed everything. Like even this party last June when we—”

“Drink your wine, Charlotte,” Mary said pointedly, using one finger to tip the bottom of Lottie’s mug up to her lips, effectively shutting her up before squeezing in between her and Remus on the bed.

“Sixteen is important though,” Marlene said, clutching her mug with both hands. “Supposed to feel different, right?”

“Well, I don’t feel any different,” Lily said. “When is your birthday, Remus?”

“March tenth.”

“We’ll have to celebrate it then,” Mary announced. “Sixteen is just as important for a fella as it is for a gal. I can’t wait until I turn sixteen.”

“Why’s that?” Remus asked, sipping his wine. It was bitter and gave him an instant headache, but he kept drinking anyway, assuming that he’d need to be at least slightly bladdered to survive the evening.

“Seems so grown up, don’t it? I mean, no one wants to date a fifteen year-old. But a sixteen year-old, that’s a woman.”

Marlene choked on her wine and all the girls dissolved into laughter. Mary was often more crude than she was funny, but she almost put Remus at ease the same way Tonya had. Like it was easy to be her friend.

The evening passed by like that for a good while, with Mary keeping their mugs topped up with all kinds of drinks—she even had vodka, which Marlene had balked at but Lily had taken in stride, almost like she had something to prove. Remus too, accepted every drink easily. It

was Saturday tomorrow, and it had been nearly a month since Christmas, which had been the last time he'd been properly pissed. Eventually he found himself lying back against Lottie's headboard, his legs entangled with Mary's. Lottie was lying on the ground, propped up on a pillow as she flipped through another magazine. Lily and Marlene were leaning up against one another on the opposite bed, each with a silly smile on their face.

"Too bad you're birthday's in the winter Lils," Lottie said from the floor. "It would've been nice to go for a stroll."

"While knackered?" Lily said, hiccuping a little.

"All we've done is talk and drink, which is fine I s'pose. My mum would still kill me if she found out."

"I've got an idea!" Mary said very suddenly, sitting up and raising her mug into the air. Remus flinched sharply when her knee got a little too close to the important bits. "We've never had boy in our room before—"

Lottie snorted. "Speak for yourself."

"Never had a boy in our room that was properly *invited,"* Mary corrected. "I think we should christen Remus."

Marlene blinked. "What are you talking about Mary?"

"Like pour the wine over him?" Lottie asked.

"No, she means like a hazing," Lily said, a shy smile on her face.

Remus backed up immediately. "No way." He'd been party to enough hazings with Tomny's crew. He didn't need one from girls who thought putting a purple shag rug in the bathroom was good taste, too.

"Not a 'hazing'," Mary scoffed," just a game. Like truth or dare, but if you refuse the question or the dare, you get a penalty."

"Sounds fun!" Lottie said, sitting up eagerly and joining Mary and Remus on her own bed.

"Birthday girl goes first," Marlene said, earning her a light shove from Lily.

"Yes!" Mary shouted. "Lily—*truth or dare.*"

“Truth!” Lily said quickly, before hiccuping again.

“Who was your first kiss!”

Lily gasped and looked at Remus, who got the distinct feeling that this was a secret kept only between the four girls.

“*Oooh*, you bitch!” She hissed, punctuating her vexation by snatching up a pillow and throwing it at Mary.

Mary caught the pillow with ease and kicked her legs out in glee. “Oh c’mon, Remus doesn’t care! Would you rather a penalty, Lils?”

Grimacing, Lily tipped her head down and mumbled something into her mug.

“Can’t hear you!” Lottie shouted.

“Davey Gudgeon!” She wailed. Remus barked out in laughter, before clapping his hand over his mouth. Davey Gudgeon was a right git, always flitting around Sirius and generally pissing off James, who despite his saintly-disposition, couldn’t stand Gudgeon’s desperate and clingy behaviour.

“Evans, you didn’t,” he wheezed, and Lily pressed her lower lip out in a pout.

“Fine, Remus,” she snapped, “who was *your* first kiss.”

“That’s not how the game works,” Lottie moaned. “It’s truth or dare.”

“No, let the birthday girl talk,” Mary shouted, waving her arms around like a lunatic.

Remus scoffed. “It’s no one you lot would know anyway.” And it was still fresh, barely a kiss. If he were anymore of a romantic, Remus might’ve pretended like he could still smell the vanilla of Tonya’s perfume.

“Doesn’t matter,” Mary protested. “We want the details.”

Remus swallowed, and shook his head. *No way*. You didn’t brag about kissing your best mate’s girlfriend to *other* girls. “Isn’t there a rule on using the same question twice?” He said, adjusting his legs under Mary’s.

“The prude’s got a point,” Lottie said.

“Fine then,” Mary said indignantly. “Remus, if you could kiss anyone here who would it be?”

He groaned to cover up his instant mortification. The question immediately brought the memory of claiming Lily as his girlfriend over Christmas. It was stupid; he couldn’t remember why he’d said it now. He didn’t want to kiss Lily—not that she wasn’t pretty, because she was; it was just that he didn’t want to kiss *anybody*—probably. At the very least kissing meant relationships, which meant less time with your friends and more time worrying about things like remembering stupid anniversaries, favourite colours, siblings’ names, or how they took their tea. Everyone should just make their own damn tea.

“Don’t I even get to choose dare?” Remus protested.

“No,” Lily said, “birthday girl rules.”

“You’re a sadist, Evans.”

Mary slapped him in the thigh, hard, but grinning. “Answer the question!”

“I can’t!” He couldn’t—what sort of question was that? Was kissing all girls thought about?

“Then it’s a penalty game,” Mary said lowly. “Lottie—grab his legs.”

Chapter End Notes

Literally sooo happy with this chapter. I love the girls with my whole heart, and Remus does too, even if he's slow to admit it, haha.

'Pet' is just used as a term of endearment.
'Diwali' is a five-day holiday also referred to as 'The Festival of Lights' and is celebrated by various religious groups throughout India and the world.
'Coconut barfi' is a delicious sweet often made for Diwali but also around Christmastime. Try it if you ever get the chance!
'Wellies' are rain boots.
'Bovver boots' are big chunky boots associated with gangs/ violence/the traditional 'bovver boy'.

Chapter 19: She Doesn't Love You

Chapter Summary

Remus returns to his dorm to find the others waiting for him. Sirius has an idea.

Chapter Notes

No triggers this chapter !

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I need you more than anyone, baby,
You know that I have from the start;
So build me up (build me up),
Buttercup, don't break my heart…

- "Build Me Up Buttercup" The Foundations, 1967

Sneaking back into his dorm late Saturday morning might have proved easier had he not looked like he'd been put through a dryer along with several tubes of lipstick. Mary's idea of a penalty had included receiving a smooch from each girl wherever they pleased (Mary had gotten dangerously close to his actual mouth) and then they'd refused to let him remove the makeup for the rest of the night. At that point all five of them had been properly knackered anyway, and Remus eventually fell asleep on the rug beside Lottie's bed, still covered in red smudges.

It had been slightly more mortifying to be woken up by Marlene, the only one of them not still sleeping or else moaning over a hangover. One of the girls had at least been kind enough to tuck a pillow under his head after he'd passed out but he still had to pop each stiff joint back into place. Marlene offered him a cup of tea, but it was already nearly midday and he knew that if he didn't make it back to his own dorm to throw up he'd never be able to look the girls in the eye again.

Practically crawling to the window, Remus left the same way he'd come in, jumping out onto the lawn to make the horrible trek back to his dorm without even tying up his boots.

“I have to give you detention,” Benjy said, when he’d headed him off on the second floor staircase. Remus only nodded and Benjy handed him a pink slip before letting him slink back to his room. The older boy had mercifully said nothing about the lipstick. His roommates were not so kind.

“Where the hell were you?” James demanded, the moment Remus walked through the door. The boys must have taken their breakfast in the dorm that morning, as there were meal trays piled up by the door. Another untouched tray sat on Remus’ side table, but the thought of eating made him instantly sick, and he pushed past James and ran straight for the toilet. After he’d finished hacking his guts he came out, wiping a warm cloth across his cheek to get the rest of the lipstick off. A shower would have to wait until he could stand without the room spinning.

Collapsing down on his bed, Remus draped an arm over his eyes, but when he finally withdrew it he found all three of them standing there while looming over him with eager or worried expressions.

“Fuck! What are you doing?”

“You dog, Lupin,” Sirius leered, leaning down and jabbing his fingers into Remus’ armpits.

“Get off me, you nob.”

“You gotta tell us where you were, Remus,” Peter said eagerly.

“Nowhere.”

“Like bloody hell you were,” Sirius cackled. “Just fess up, Lupin. Who’s lips were all over you last night?”

“No one’s!”

“Why didn’t you come back last night then?” James asked, looking exceedingly less amused than the other two. It made Remus wonder if they’d been taking bets on where he’d been.

“I just fell asleep,” he snapped. “Now if you don’t mind…” Remus tried to turn over in his bed to ignore them but Sirius grabbed his shoulder and hauled him back. It was just like him to feed off of every juicy bit he could sink his teeth into.

“You *fell* asleep?” Peter said, grabbing Remus’ legs to hold him.

“Where?”

“Let go of me, wankers!”

“I think I know where he was,” Sirius said, low and wicked. “It was Evans’ birthday yesterday, wasn’t it?”

Remus froze, and so did James. The brief pause in thrashing was all Sirius needed to know he was right.

“HA!” He laughed, releasing Remus for the second time and standing back to slap a hand over his eyes and howl. “No WAY! That’s so funny. Evans, Lupin? Really?”

Remus sat up on his bed very quickly and shoved Sirius away, but he only kept laughing. “You’re wrong, you dickhead!”

“Nuh-uh! Oh my god—Evans! HA!”

Remus looked to James, who was staring down at him with eyes like saucers. “You saw Evans?” He asked. Instantly Remus felt more guilty than he thought he should have to. It was just a birthday, and the kiss marks had been Mary’s idea—but clearly James was more worried than that.

“I only went 'cause I was asked,” Remus said slowly, feeling like a child confessing to putting gum in his hair or drawing on the walls. “It was Mary and Marlene’s idea. They just wanted to do something for Lily’s birthday.”

“Then where did the lip prints come from?” Peter asked.

“Penalty game,” Remus mumbled. “Truth or dare. We were drinking.”

“So you were drunk then?” James said this rather indignantly. Remus nodded.

“We all were.”

Sirius was leaning up against the post of Peter’s bed, still holding his gut. “I cannot believe this stick in the mud—uppity prude—sorry excuse for a tosser—*Remus Lupin*—got with four girls at once in their own dorm room!”

“Four?" Peter gaped, as though he’d just realised his sister was one of the girls in question.

“He said it wasn’t like that,” James said.

“No, he didn’t,”

James snapped to Remus. “Well? Was it?”

“No!”

“There you have it then. You can shut up now, Black.”

Sirius dropped a hand from his cheek, where he’d been feigning at wiping away tears, and he and James shared a long look. Finally he took a breath and shrugged. “Still funny.”

Turning away like a scorned woman, James stormed across the room. They all watched him go, and Sirius leaned in close to Remus by the bed.

“Hey,” he said, cheekily raising his fist for Remus to bump.

“Oh sod off, you idiot,” Remus scoffed, watching as James reached down to Sirius’ pile of cassette tapes and grabbed the first one he could, slamming it into the hi-fi and turning the volume up much louder than he’d heard it in a while.

They all winced at the noise—even Sirius—as James turned around and gave a rather bitter shrug. “ANYONE FOR CARDS?”

* * *

No one brought up Remus’ end of the month escapade in front of James again, and the term trudged on. The girls were exceedingly friendly after the birthday though, and Lily even found Remus on the following Monday to apologise for the hangover he’d been nursing all of Saturday.

By mid-February James was back to his cheery self, but any mention of girls, kissing, or drinking (and these were some of Sirius’ favourite topics of conversation apart from himself) had him instantly soured and quiet. Though, if James was secretly harbouring a small grudge towards him—and he undoubtedly was—Sirius’ interest in Remus had only been invigorated. The cheeky Black family heir seemed to have created some wild image of his newest roommate as someone who snuck out all the time to smoke or hang out with girls. Remus had

tried on more than one occasion to squash this impression, but it seemed as though Sirius was determined to keep Remus on his lipstick-covered pedestal. He pestered him for stories of his winter break and the times before he'd come to Hawkings.

"Is that what London is really like?" Sirius would ask him. "Girls just want to hang out all the time? How do you do that—just get them to invite you places?"

"Try not making their lives miserable every time you see them," Remus had eventually snapped. They were in music period during a practice day, and he was struggling with the pre-chorus to "Sweet Emotion" on the Fender. Mrs. Buchanan had stepped out to deal with an issue after some kick named Darby got his hand slammed in the piano fall-board.

"I don't make them miserable," Sirius said indignantly, "I leave them wanting more. Besides, all girls love a bit of teasing—even Evans. But I'm sure you'd know more about that than me."

Shooting him a nasty look, Remus slid his chair a little further away and turned back to his music stand. Buchanan had been happy enough to procure the sheet music for him and she'd been working with him on the song outside of regular assignments since early last term, but he couldn't quite grasp the ability to play the chords with the rest of the song's messy bravado. Every time he tried his notes came out sounding sloppy, not gritty. It was endlessly frustrating.

"I don't know why you started with that one," Sirius said. He'd dragged his chair closer when Remus wasn't paying attention and had his guitar in his lap. " 'Sweet Emotion' isn't exactly a beginner's best friend. It's supposed to sound sort of dirty, not like you're playing for your grandma in church."

"And I suppose you've already got it down pat?" Remus said with full-snark.

With a cheeky smile, Sirius pulled his guitar strap over his head, setting the Rickenbacker across an empty chair on his other side. "Here," he said, taking out his own binder and shuffling through several sets of sheet music. "I got Sheila to compile me a whole set of songs last year when I was first getting a handle of the guitar."

"You should really stop calling her Sheila."

Waving him off, Sirius produced a guitar score of "She Loves You" by

The Beatles, setting it on Remus' stand. Remus frowned, giving him a resentful look.

"Are you joking? 'She Loves You'? Really?"

"What? It's their number one single. Thought you had a thing for The Beatles?"

Slightly flushed, Remus turned to the music and reached out to flip the sheet over to get a look at the tablature. Sirius watched him, before pointing at the first stave at the top of the page.

"There, it's got a good bass line for a beginner. Nice and slow and repetitive. How do you think you're going to learn anyway? Not by jumping into the deep end and letting yourself drown."

"It's not even written for a bass," Remus said, keeping his eyes on the sheet.

"The guitar and bass tabs are similar for this one," Sirius said, picking up his guitar. "It'll sound a little different on the guitar, but I'll show you."

"So you play the bass now too?"

"I've been known to dabble."

Remus sighed, but finally turned his chair in toward the music stand and watched where Sirius put his fingers, copying him until he got the first few chords down pat. He wasn't going to admit it, but he could already tell the song was a better fit.

"James is mad at me isn't he?" Remus asked as Sirius flipped the sheet music to get a look at the bridge.

"Nah, 's just James being James."

"Does being a liar come with being a musical genius, or are you just an arse all on your own?"

"You think I'm a musical genius?"

"Tosser."

"He isn't mad though. He just…"

"—Likes Lily."

Sirius pushed his bottom lip out a bit. “Yeah. Has for a while, but Evans won’t give him the time of day anyway.”

“Why?” It was the first time Remus had felt brave enough to ask after Lily’s vendetta against the boys—James in particular.

“Why does he like her? Beats me—girl is wound up tighter than Ms. Pince.”

Remus rolled his eyes again. “No, I mean why doesn’t she give him the time of day?”

“Oh, I dunno. Started at the end of last year though. They were amicable up until then, I suppose. I thought Mary or Marlene would’ve caved by now and fessed up, but they won’t budge. Not even Lottie’s big mouth has been flapping about it, and Peter spent all summer trying to get it out of her.”

“So James doesn’t have any idea what he did? Do you?”

Sirius shook his head, playing a riff of “She Loves You” while bobbing his head as though he could hear the words playing in his mind. He probably could. “Evans is just frigid.”

“No, she’s not.”

“Oh? Got some experience there then?”

“*No.*”

Sirius remained unconvinced. “Well, I can’t pretend to know what Evans is thinking. James is great, any girl would be lucky to have him.”

“He’s like, fifteen. A kid.”

“And a romantic,” Sirius said. “Really Lupin, anyone else would think you’re twelve and not about to be sixteen.”

Remus slouched back in his seat with a sigh. He tried hard not to think about his birthday, or how Sirius had found out about it in the first place. As a result, both his roommates and the girls were insistent on planning something, and so far he hadn’t bothered to tell either group about the other. It was now looking like he was expected to be at two parties at once.

“Do *you* know why Evans is so pissed?” Sirius asked.

“No,” Remus said, too quickly. “They won’t tell me either.”

“You’ve asked then?”

“No, they just say stuff sometimes.”

“So Evans talks about James then?” He looked smug now.

“Not as much as you or James would like.”

Sirius strummed his guitar. “Maybe we should fix that.”

“What, like change her mind? Dunno if you’d picked up on it already, but you’re not exactly Lily’s favourite person either.”

“But *you* are. ‘Least as long as those pucker marks are anything to go by.”

Remus kicked his shin lightly. “I don’t like Lily. She’s just a friend.”

“Good, then there’s nothing stopping James from sweeping her off her feet.”

“Are you even listening? Lily. Hates. Him.”

“That’s just womanly fickleness.”

He very much doubted that Lily’s almost year-long hatred for them could just be put down to a ‘fickle’ nature, but Sirius was approaching the subject the same way he approached a prank, and since those had been severely lacking since Christmas, Remus knew there was no talking him down.

“I’m not going to convince Lily to go out with James.”

“You don’t have to,” Sirius said amicably. “That’s his problem. All you have to do is help us find out what it is that she’s so lashed over.”

“But they won’t tell me.”

“They won’t tell *us*, but a little more girl time and I’m sure they’ll let you in the club, then you’ll have rights to all their dirty little secrets.”

Remus would’ve rather done a million other things than join a 'girls’ club’. He liked the girls well enough, sure; they were kind, usually more so than the boys, and were helpful when it came to studying, plus Lily and Marlene always had a decent book recommendation, but

Remus was no girl. He didn't want their 'dirty little secrets' or even the gossip, really, and he definitely didn't want to play go-between for an already doomed relationship.

"You're insane," Remus said, slumping back in his chair. Across the room Alexander Flutwarts' had started playing a screeching version of "God Save the Queen" on his accordion, much to the distaste of his other classmates. Sirius grimaced at the sound but kept his attention on Remus.

"I'll take that as a compliment, Lupin. No good artist was ever sane anyway."

"You said the same thing before Christmas."

"Knew you listened."

Another scoff. "I still won't do it."

"Oh c'mon Lupin, you've been playing both teams since the beginning of the year, you can't do it anymore!"

"Watch me!"

"Okay, tell you what," Sirius said, "I'll teach you 'Sweet Emotion' until Aerosmith themselves couldn't tell the bloody difference. You should really be playing it without a pick too, you know. It changes the sound completely."

"Where were you in fucking October?"

Sirius gave a little snort. "Ignoring you. Or trying to—but I'll teach you the song until you're perfect if *you* do your mate James a solid and find out why Evans is so high up on her horse."

"You'll teach me one song in exchange for lying to Lily and sneaking around like some nark?"

"You wouldn't be lying, you'd be doing just the opposite. You'd be sleuthing. We'll call it, 'Operation: Out with It Evans'."

"I was actually expecting something more clever. Thought you were supposed to be a writer."

"It's a working title—now will you do it?"

Remus leaned back with a huff and considered. Apparently he took his

sweet time about it, because Sirius was already willing to renegotiate. “Any song!” He said. “Multiple songs—America’s entire rock discography if you want. *And*—I’ll teach you everything I know for the bass. You’ll sound like John Paul Jones himself when I’m done with you.”

“Do you even sound like John Paul Jones?”

“Semantics. Say you’ll do it, Lupin.”

Remus sighed. “Fine. I’ll do my best to find out just what pig-headed thing you lot did to make Lily Evans hate your guts.”

“Champion!”

Alexander’s accordion gave a gruesome howl from across the room and Sirius stood up very suddenly, guitar in hand.

“Flutwarts, if you don’t put that bloody groan-box down right now I’ll knock you one myself.”

As Sirius stalked away, presumably to tear the accordion in two, Remus sat up in his chair and returned to his playing, though he found it considerably harder to focus while thinking of how he was subtly going to get the girls to give up their most coveted secret. It was obviously not going to be as easy as learning the first few chords of “She Loves You”, and unlike the song, he had no one around to teach him.

Chapter End Notes

> Oh Lily, oh James, oooh Remus.... :)
>
> John Paul Jones is/was the bassist and keyboardist of Led Zeppelin.

Chapter 20: Pictures of Lily

Chapter Summary

> Remus spends the month of February trying to sort out the mystery of Lily's distaste for James. Lottie has some insight.

Chapter Notes

> C/W: 'F' slur used in a smoking context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Girl, you really got me goin',
You got me so I don't know what I'm doin';
Yeah, you really got me now,
You got me so I can't sleep at night…

- "You Really Got Me" The Kinks, 1964

To Remus' surprise, James had been all for *Operation: Out With It Evans*.

"No, it's brilliant!" He said over dinner, his voice hushed so no one could overhear, but excited none-the-less. "You're already in with the girls, Lupin, why wouldn't they tell you?"

"Because I'm not a *girl?"*

"Semantics," James said, infuriatingly akin to Sirius, "it's a magnificent plan."

And so there was no going back it seemed. Remus had officially been recruited as the Lily Evans Sleuthing Expert and after confessing that the girls were also planning a party for him, the boys decided that his birthday would be the perfect deadline. It seemed like the best excuse to get everyone in the same room, and as long as they knew why Lily was so angry before then, James could make a big show of apologising.

"I could try and get Moira to talk to her," Peter said, but James only shook his head.

“Doubt it would work—I asked Tara Webb to do the same thing last October and Lindsey Taylor in November, and both times Evans just pretended as though she didn’t know what they were talking about."

“You mean she pretended as though she had no idea who you were,” Sirius amended. “Apparently it was pretty believable too. She should try acting rather than focusing all her efforts on school and hating you.”

“Well, your pranks certainly haven’t helped,” James said, looking pointedly at Sirius.

“My pranks? Who was it willing to climb up to the gym’s rafters to hang a bucket of bacon grease? So don’t blame me, I’m not the one trying to woo an Orthodox. And you just *know* you’d just hate to be left out, Potter.”

Sirius, as always, was right. Despite the fact that it was Remus’ mission, James demanded a status report on the battlefront almost every other day and was often disappointed by Remus’ lack of intel. Most days Lily was busy with school or other perfectly duties and whenever Remus did manage to bring up the subject of James, she would simply change the subject. Marlene on the other hand, played on the girls football team and like James was often swamped with pre-season practices. It left Mary and Lottie, both of whom seemed to have friends all over. Mary’s own popularity nearly rivalled James and Sirius’ and whenever Remus was alone with her plenty of other students would come up to say hello or strike-up a conversation. This made things hard in the secrets department, but Remus had a feeling that even if he’d had enough chances, Mary would never snitch. She was a gossip and a massive flirt, but she was also startlingly loyal; a sentiment he had spent several ‘reports’ repeating to James, who was insistent that there must be some way to root out the truth from one of them. Neither he nor Sirius seemed to understand just how difficult the task they’d assigned him was, mostly because they were never around to witness him squirm. Having any of his roommates nearby certainly guaranteed that he would get nothing out of the girls, who seemed locked up tighter than the Tower of London anyway, and so his roommates kept pushing for Remus to spend all his free time away from the dorm where his chances of sniffing out secrets were greatest. This led to Remus quickly realising just how much he’d come to rely on the 4A boys.

It wasn’t just the fact that he was growing tired of complimenting Mary’s choice of nail colour or having his homework scrutinised by

Lily and Marlene, it was the fact that he'd spent most of February shuffling between the girls or else alone. Whenever the boys met the topic was always Lily, and Remus' patience was growing thin. He was either going to have to throw in the towel or just start demanding answers from the girls—neither of which he imagined would make him very popular with either group.

"Well, have you tried Lottie?" James asked, kicking his football around the damp grass outside their dorm. Remus stood across from him, wrapped up in two jumpers and a jacket to ward off the late-February chill, while James remained perfectly fine in just a long-sleeve and track pants, the lunatic.

"Talking to Lottie is like talking to a radio jockey," Remus said, "they can't hear you and even if they could they talk so fast you'd never get a word in edgewise."

Shrugging, James kicked the ball toward him, and Remus received it clumsily with the side of his foot before passing it back. The kick went wide, and James had to chase the football down while he winced. He knew agreeing to bat the ball around to pass the afternoon would just lead to his own embarrassment, but he'd figured that maybe if James saw how bad he was he'd finally stop asking him to try-out for the team. So far though, no such luck. James seemed just as content to chase down the stray football as he was to talk about Lily.

"I'm starting to agree with Sirius, you know," Remus said. "Lily's great, but why bother so much?" Especially considering that James was popular enough to swing anyone he wanted; he imagined there were very few girls who would be as adverse to hanging off the arm of the school's football captain.

James smirked. " 'Agree with Sirius'? How'd that one feel coming up?"

"Like vomit."

"Yeah, well, Sirius doesn't always know what he's talking about."

"And how'd that taste?"

"Like a relief," James laughed. "I love him, but the tosser wears on the nerves sometimes. He just doesn't get it."

"Well, forgive my ignorance," Remus started, wincing as James kicked the ball back and he had to use his shin to block it, earning him a stinging smack, "but neither do I! Lily only ever talks badly about

you."

"But she does talk. You gotta read between the lines, Lupin."

Remus returned the ball. "Okay, now you sound like Sirius."

"I am serious," James grinned, and Remus flipped him off. "Lily's mad and she won't say why, but she always responds when I speak to her, right?"

"Yes, but that's normally just to insult you."

"Girls don't pay attention to people they really hate, Lupin."

"Then you certainly don't know anything about girls at all," Remus huffed. "I mean really, how is it I, the kid who showed up halfway through upper-secondary, gets stuck playing middle-man for a group that's known each other since they were in nappies?"

"Lily only came to Hawkings in year seven," James pointed out.

"And here we are in year *eleven."*

James dribbled the ball between his feet, looking a bit sore. "We were friends before this, or at least I thought we were. It's just the last year that things have turned rough."

Remus crossed his arms over his chest. "That much I know. What is it you *did* though?"

"I don't know!" James exclaimed, kicking the ball with such ferocity that Remus missed on purpose and let it bounce off the brick wall of the dorm behind him. "All I know is she threw a fit right before the end of term last year and when we came back in September, she'd decided that she hated my guts!"

"So you admit she hates your guts?"

James kicked the football up into the air with his toe and caught it. "Who's side are you bloody on?"

"I'm just a man for hire, actually. Once I get my dues I'm ditching the lot of you."

"You're cruel and mean, and that's why girls like you so much."

"And yet you've learned nothing."

James shook his head and checked his watch. “I gotta go, I’m gonna be late for practice.”

Remus bristled. “You told me you didn’t have practice tonight. It’s why I’m out here in the fucking cold in the first place.”

“Actually you’re just out here for a breather and a status report,” James said. “You gotta get out more, Lupin, the library’s starting to turn you into a taller but equally uptight version of Ms. Pince.”

“You dirty liar, I take it back, you are cruel.”

James tucked the football up under his arm. “Talk to Lottie!” He called, turning and jogging down the grass toward the road.

* * *

Tuesday 9th March 1976

It took a few days to polish up just what he was going to say to get Lottie to fess up, but after another failed attempt to get Mary to talk on their way to Modern Foreign Languages, Remus decided that it was time to fully change tactics.

Talking with Charlotte Pettigrew was a lot like getting a lecture from Professor Binns, except instead of history, he was learning about the differences between hair and skin products and what celebrities had cheated on their spouses with their on-screen costars. (Lottie was distinctly under the impression that Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford were getting it on during the filming of *The Way We Were*. Remus hadn’t seen the film, and just ended up nodding along.) Most of the time Remus tried to tune her out by reading or smoking. Lily had found his cigarettes in his school bag one morning in Geography and was appalled of course, but at least it meant he didn’t have to hide his ‘disgusting habit’ around the girls anymore. Lottie never seemed to mind the books or fags, content enough to sit around and swap gossip, however the problem remained that it was always the wrong gossip, and by the time March 9th rolled around, leaving only a single day before his sixteenth birthday, Remus had all but given up hope of discovering just what James had done to so tremendously ruin his chances with the love of his relatively teenaged life.

It really was just by chance that he and Lottie had gotten out of private study early while Lily and Marlene had both had other things

to attend to. They made their way to a picnic bench next to the dining hall and set up their books and things across from one another. It was finally warm enough to lounge around outside again, but you still had to be careful where you sat or you'd be walking around with a damp arse for the rest of the day.

"Have you ever thought about getting a tattoo, Remus?" Lottie asked after a while.

He looked up from his history text. Lottie had the same book open, but she had put a magazine over top and was reading that instead.

"A tattoo?"

"Yeah," she said, absent-mindedly. "I've always sort of wondered about getting one myself one day. I mean—not for a while, but I think they're so cool." Lottie traced her finger along the edge of her magazine. "Mickey doesn't like them though, and Mummy says proper ladies have virgin skin. If only she knew."

Remus smiled a bit, and watched her. He'd never given much thought to tattoos himself, but a few of the boys he knew had them, including Doss who walked around sporting the image of a pair of dice on his forearm. He'd gotten the tattoo after a decent round of poker thinking it would bring him the same good luck later on, but the guy giving him the tattoo had happened to be one of the game's losers and had left Doss with a set of dice that looked more like a bad bruise.

"They're coming back into fashion, you know," Lottie continued, flipping a page in her magazine. "And not just for blokes. Janis Joplin had one on her wrist."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "You know Janis Joplin?"

"Oh sure. She was a queen. It was just a small thing anyway, but she called it 'a representation of the liberation of women' on the Dick Cavett Show and I sort of always liked the idea. Like, it's my body—autonomy and all that right?"

Remus nodded his head slowly. "Joplin's cool. I reckon you should get one… If that's what you want."

"You think?" Lottie looked off in consideration. "She also had one on her chest, just on the side of her bap. I sort of love that. Imagine being with a fella and he looks down to find this tiny little tattooed heart right over your actual heart."

“Then why not?” Remus said. “I mean… you should do stuff for you, not for anyone else.”

It almost felt like cheap advice, coming from a lout on a mission to root out the issue of someone else’s sour love-life, but he hadn’t thought that Lottie was interested in anything beyond her hair and boyfriend, and she’d surprised him. The conversation actually reminded him a lot of Tonya, who wouldn’t have let anyone else tell her what she could and couldn’t do with her body. Remus wouldn’t have been the least bit surprised if she had a secret bap tattoo of her own.

Lottie tilted her head to the side a bit and flipped a page in her magazine. “I think you’re right actually. We should do stuff for ourselves, shouldn’t we?”

Remus nodded, and Lottie returned to her magazine, seeming a little happier. It made him wonder how many people she’d mentioned the idea to, and how many of them had rebuffed her like her well-to-do mother and respectable boyfriend. Maybe that was why Lottie had brought it up to him then, since there was no way Remus was of the respectable sort. Whether she’d done it on purpose or not, Lottie had looked him up and down and decided that he was the best person to broach the subject with, and she’d gotten the information she wanted.

Well, two could play at that game.

“Lottie,” Remus started, twirling his pencil between his fingers, “have Mary or the others said anything about my birthday tomorrow?”

Looking up eagerly, Lottie nodded. “Oh yeah. Mary wants it to be a ball. She got more booze from Andrea Schwartz for us. Says it’ll be lots of fun—and it’ll be warmer so we might not have to be stuck inside! Marlene was iffy about going out and breaking curfew, but we’ll already be breaking the rules by having you in our room anyway, so we might as well do what we want.”

Remus nodded amicably. “That’s great and all, but I’m actually a little bit worried to be honest.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah…” He rubbed the back of his neck for effect, “you see the lads also wanted to do something tomorrow. It know it’s the same day Mary planned for but—”

“Can’t they just do whatever it is on the weekend?” She asked. “I mean, what boys want to party on a Wednesday?”

“They’re pretty set on doing it on my actual birthday tomorrow…”

Lottie scoffed. “Course they are. Don’t worry, I’ll talk to Peter. We’ll get you out of it.”

Trying not to act offended that Lottie considered the girls’ plans more important than the boys’, Remus took another breath. “Actually I was thinking that we could all do something together. You know, as a group.”

Lottie seemed to consider this, tapping her unused pencil against her magazine. “Don’t really know how that would work—Lily would never go for it.”

“I know,” Remus said quickly. “I know none of them get along, but that’s why I brought it up to you first, because you’re friends with everybody.”

Lottie grinned at that, and he knew he’d said the right thing.

“Well, I could say something to Mary," she ruminated. "Might be fun, a big group—but Lily’s going to be the worst about it.”

“Yeah, I remember you saying something about a party not going well last year. Was it really so bad?”

Lottie gave an exaggerated sigh, like it was a conversation she was tired of having. “God, it’s *so* boring to talk about, really. Lily didn’t even want to go, she said as much to me right after! But I think she was just upset that they asked Mary and I to go and not her.”

Remus could practically feel himself humming. Nearly a month, and this was as close as he’d gotten to finding out anything. “Who asked?”

“Sirius—and James. But I'd already heard about it from my older brother Simeon who told them about it in the first place. Petey didn’t want me to come but I’m older than him by fourteen minutes so it’s really what I say that goes.”

“And they didn’t ask Lily?”

“No, but she would’ve said no anyway. All she cared about was exams and making prefect and it was a party for the year thirteen’s who were

leaving school so there was tons of booze and stuff. We all went out to this field just outside the village and they had this big barn all lit up. I met a local guy there—this was before Mickey, you see. It was *fun,* and Lily was firmly against fun at the time."

Remus was almost stunned. "So… Lily's so angry, because she didn't get invited to a party?"

Lottie snorted. "No! Lily's angry because James snogged someone else *at* the party."

Bloody hell. Remus could've groaned. *All this, over a little kissing?*

There was a gasp, and Lottie covered her mouth, her normally-large eyes now considerably larger. "Oh my god, I shouldn't have told you that."

Remus coughed out a laugh, both genuine and incredulous. *Lord.*

"You can't tell anyone!" Lottie insisted.

"I won't," he promised, knowing it was a lie. "Just can't really believe that's what they're fighting over."

Lottie groaned and pressed her perfectly-manicured hands to her forehead, and Remus could see the guilt in her features. She may have been a loud-mouth, but she didn't do it to hurt people, at least.

"Mary's going to kill me," she sighed. "We all swore we wouldn't talk about it with anyone else. Lily decided it didn't matter."

"If it doesn't matter then why is she still so angry?"

She made a pained face, but Remus could already tell she was too far gone to stop now.

"James and Lily went on a date just before the end of last year. I think she thought he liked her, but then this party happened and she probably felt slighted that James never asked her to go. The kissing was like the cherry on top. She forgave me and Mary, but the boys bragged for forever. Reckon it got under her skin."

"That doesn't sound like James at all," Remus said in defence of his friend. "They were dating?"

Lottie shrugged. "It was one date, but it must've meant more to Lily than it did to James."

Remus sat back, conflicted. "No, no way," he said. If Lottie was telling the truth, then James did have some apologising to do, but he wanted to give the other boy the benefit of the doubt at least.

“You seriously can’t tell anyone I told you,” Lottie begged.

He nodded; “Cross my heart.” Though he’d kept his fingers crossed beneath the table just in case.

Lottie let out a little breath and her smile returned to her face. “Feels almost good to tell someone else, actually. It’s such old news but I was getting tired of just listening to Lily whinge about the boys. Not you of course, Remus, you’re different from them.”

Fucking hell. If Tomny could see him now.

Remus forced a tight smile. Apparently he was better at lying than he’d thought—or maybe Lottie was just frustratingly gullible. He wasn’t sure which was more likely.

“Thanks for telling me, Lot. Feels good to be thought of so highly.”

Lottie flipped the page in her magazine. “Anytime, love.”

* * *

Telling James why Lily was so angry with him was certainly less satisfying than it had been to find out from Lottie in the first place. As Remus had suspected, the issues arose not because James had meant to slight Lily, but because of poor communication, which could hardly be condemned for a couple kids new to everything 'love and dating'.

“You can’t be serious,” James moaned from his bed.

“I am.”

“But that was nothing!”

“Not according to Lottie.”

“Oh my god.”

James fell back on his bed dramatically as Sirius and Peter were busy killing themselves on the other side of the room, nearly in tears after Remus had explained just what they’d done to make such an enemy.

“Somebody should be writing this down,” Sirius said as he recovered. “Pete, call your dad, we might make tomorrow morning’s paper. Wager Evans’ crush would be worth the front page?”

“Lily doesn’t have a crush on James anymore,” Remus pointed out. He was sorting Sirius’ vinyl albums, having finally had enough of the general lack of organisation in his collection.

James lifted his head pitifully. “She doesn’t?”

“Not according to Lottie. And not after you supposedly bollixed-up that date.”

“It was not a date!” James insisted, dropping his head back against his pillow in defeat. “I was totally gonna fail history so I asked her to help me with some studying before exams!”

“Alone?” Peter asked.

“Well, we *were* alone.”

“And how did Lily seem?” Remus asked. “Happy?”

James balked. “Yes? I mean she didn’t seem any different from any other time we’d studied. She… she said the other girls weren’t coming because they had things to do!”

“Lily told you this?”

“Yeah!”

“Well did she say, ‘the girls are busy’ or did she say ‘the girls aren’t coming’?”

James threw his arms up; “What’s the bloody difference?”

“Mate,” Sirius laughed, “I almost feel bad for the girl at this point.”

“Even I would’ve been able to tell you it was a date,” Peter said, crawling onto the bed next to James as he pouted. “Doesn’t mean there isn’t still hope though.”

“Feels a tad optimistic to me,” Remus said, trying to decide if the records should be ordered alphabetically according to artist or album title.

“Lupin, you gotta help me,” James said, sitting up very suddenly.

Remus shook his head adamantly (sorted by artist, it was); “No way, I did my part—now you know why she’s been so pissed. S'not my business anymore.”

“That’s ice cold, Lupin,” Peter said over a snicker.

“But it really isn’t even my fault,” James said, “like *actually*. I only didn’t invite her to that party because I assumed she’d say no. And there were exams, and we were drinking, and she wanted to be a prefect because it looks good on uni applications. It was one bloody night—and it wasn’t a date!”

“If you haven’t learned to read through the lines where women are concerned, there’s no helping you,” Sirius said cheekily, standing up from Peter’s bed and strolling over to the rest of them, snapping his fingers in that way of his that meant he’d been sitting still for too long.

“You’re just as much at fault, Black. You never asked Lily to go either—and you snogged a girl at that party too!”

Remus glanced up at Sirius, who only shrugged and dropped down next to him, picking up a record and flipping it over, ruining the beginnings of his finely organised pile. “Evans wasn’t dating me.”

“We weren’t dating!”

Despite the fact that it belonged to Sirius in the first place, Remus snatched the album back. “Well you still aren’t dating her,” he said, putting the album back into order. Sirius was staring, but for once he didn’t feel shy. It had been a while since they were all together, and it had been easy to convince Lottie to talk to Mary and keep the boys’ presences at his birthday a secret. Still riding the high of his success, Remus found that he was actually looking forward to tomorrow evening.

James swung his legs around the side of his bed. “How am I supposed to apologise for a problem she’s so clearly made up in her head?”

Remus shrugged, but Sirius was in his element.

“You should serenade her,” he said smugly. “Find a song that’d really make your feelings clear.”

“I can’t sing,” James scoffed.

“Sure you can. You’ve been belting out ‘Whole Lotta Love’ in the shower for three weeks now. And what was it before that?”

“ ‘Proud Mary’,” said Peter. "Sounded pretty good to me too." Sirius pointed at him approvingly.

“Pete’s right. It’s not exactly lead singer material, but you don’t sound all that bad. Have some faith.”

Still appearing unsure, James began to nibble on his thumbnail. “Maybe just playing her a song would be enough? But I don’t really know what sort of music she likes.”

“ABBA,” Remus said, automatically. “They played a lot of it on her birthday.”

James and Sirius pulled the same repulsed face.

“Yeah, no,” Sirius said, going for another album before Remus swatted his hand away. He held his fingers like a scolded dog but continued; “It can’t be ABBA. Even if you aren’t singing, it still has to be a good song.”

“She likes The Mamas and the Papas too,” Remus supplied.

Sirius grimaced again; “It just keeps getting worse.”

“I don’t mind them as much,” James shrugged. “Just a little folky s’all.”

“How about a song with her name in it?” Peter offered. “There has to be one. It’s not as though her name is ‘Prudence’ or ‘Agatha’.”

“Well, do you know any ‘Lily’ songs?”

“No,” Sirius and Peter said at the same time as Remus said; “Yes.”

“What song?”

“It’s a single by The Who.”

James looked at Sirius, who shook his head sorely. “Don’t got that one.”

Remus wet his lips. “I do.”

A little hesitantly, he got to his feet and crossed the room to his own

bed, opening his side table drawer and drawing out the tiny luggage key he kept hidden at the bottom under a copy of the Hawkings Student Handbook. He'd figuring that was the last thing that might interest anyone should they decided to go snooping.

Back still turned, Remus knelt down next to his bed and shuffled aside his school trunks to withdraw his mother's old trunk. So far none of them had asked about it and he was silently thankful. There was no need to hide his stash of fags anymore at least, but it was the rest of the contents that he really didn't want to show off. If Sirius got wind of the records he'd surely expect him to play them, and Remus wasn't sure he wanted to.

As quickly and as naturally as he could, he unlocked the trunk and lifted the lid only enough to get a glimpse of its interior. The album he was looking for was a 45 LP, smaller than a full-sized record, and there were only a few of them in the collection which made it easier to sort through and find. Once he had the album in hand, he shut the trunk with a short click and slid it back under the bed, getting back to his feet. He turned around while thumbing the edges of the paper cover, and looked up to find all three of his roommates staring.

"Here," Remus said, crossing back to James' bed and handing him the LP. James turned the small vinyl over in his hands and looked up, beaming.

"You're amazing you are, Lupin!"

Remus gave an awkward chuckle before noticing the questioning look Sirius was giving him. "What?" he demanded, but Sirius just shook his head and stood up, taking the record from James and setting it up on the turntable. A few moments later the song was playing. They all listened quietly, and Remus restrained himself from singing along. The single had always been one of Hope's favourites by The Who, and it never failed to make her laugh. The words came back to him easily.

I used to wake up in the morning,
I used to feel so bad;
I got so sick of having sleepless nights,
I went and told my dad;

He said, "Son, now here's some little something",
And stuck them on my wall;
And now my nights ain't quite so lonely,

In fact I—I don't feel bad at all…

Pictures of Lily, made my life so wonderful,
Pictures of Lily, helped me sleep at night;
Pictures of Lily, solved my childhood problems,
Pictures of Lily, helped me feel alright;

Pictures of Lily,
Lily, oh Lily;
Lily, oh Lily,
Pictures of Lily!

When the song ended, the boys stood around looking to one another expectantly. It was Sirius who finally broke the silence, fighting a snicker. "You're gonna play her a song about some bloke tugging on his nob to her picture?"

"Er—" Remus felt like his entire childhood had smacked him in the face. "That's not what the song's about! It's a love song, innit?"

Sirius handed him the album sleeve and pointed to the lyrics on the back. "Might want to try again, mate."

Remus, feeling instantly defensive, tossed the cover away. “Well it’s the only song I know with ‘Lily’ in it, so take it or leave it.”

"Maybe you can just talk over the diddling parts," Peter suggested. James, who at this point was desperate, scratched the back of his head.

“It could still work, right? We just play the song for her, and I’ll apologise and explain everything. She won't even notice the words."

“Well, don’t expect her to immediately take you back,” Remus warned, suddenly very aware that he’d betrayed the confidence of not just one, but all four of the girls—one of which seemed very good at holding a grudge.

“ ‘Course not. But it’ll be good just to be able to say the right thing this time.”

“I still don’t know why you’ve been chasing her for this long,” Sirius said. “It’s never made any sense. One girl couldn’t possibly be worth all this.”

James reached up to where Sirius was standing next to the turntable, one hip leaning against the hutch, and squeezed his shoulder. “When you meet the one for you, you’ll understand, Black.”

“Yeah, sure,” Sirius snorted.

“Considering his only true love is himself, we might be waiting for a while,” Remus said, sarcastically.

“Right you are, Lupin! I knew you laid awake every night just thinking about me, you moony bastard. It’s a tough life, being so desirable and yet so unattainable.”

“I think you mean, ‘emotionally-unavailable and also a ginormous nob’.”

“That too.”

“Enough about this tosser, Lupin,” James said, “play the song again. I need to practice my apology.”

Chapter End Notes

A "radio jockey" is just another term for radio host.
"Nappies" mean diapers.
A "Bap" or "baps" are slang for breasts.

The song Remus played for the boys was "Pictures of Lily" by The Who, released in 1967.

Stay rocking, my guys xx

Chapter 21: Happy Birthday, Remus

Chapter Summary

It's Remus' sixteenth birthday. The start of many things.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking, drinking, and general foul teenage language, lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You say it's your birthday,
It's my birthday too, yeah;
They say it's your birthday,
We're gonna have a good time;
I'm glad it's your birthday,
Happy birthday to you!

- "Birthday" The Beatles, 1968

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY REMUS!" The girls shouted in unison, just as he'd managed to haul himself through their dorm window. Remus dropped down on the rug with a grunt, grateful that they had shifted their wardrobe hutches slightly out of the way for easier entry this time around.

"Cheers guys," he said, dusting off his shirt. Both Lily and Mary came toward the window, each taking one of Remus' arms and leading him forward. A deep blue armchair that they must've nicked from the Rowena common room sat squarely between Lottie and Marlene's beds and they pushed him down into it none-too-eagerly.

"Sit, sit," Lily said. "The chair was Marlene's idea, since she was the one who found you on the floor after my birthday."

Marlene smiled shyly from her bed, drink already in hand. "Just in case."

Mary passed Remus a drink—cranberry juice and vodka—and Remus raised it to them before drinking deeply. It was tart and gave quite the kick, but he didn't mind much. It was better that they were all at least a little gassed for the evening's events anyway. Lottie had played her

part well, it seemed, and both she and Mary made more than a few sneaky glances in his direction while Lily and Marlene remained blissfully unaware.

“It really is a nice night out tonight,” Mary remarked after a while. Once she'd served them all a second round of drinks, she’d set herself up a nice spot on top of her hutch and remained camped out by the open window as though she were waiting for someone.

“We could go for a walk,” Lily said, distinctly unprefect-like. There was a stark difference between a sober Evans and the person she became when she had a drink in hand. “Figure we could make it down to the lake?”

Marlene shook her head. “Lake Dubh is freezing even in the summer. I’d rather not pretend like a visit in March is a good idea.”

“It’s not your birthday,” Lottie said, “it’s Remus’. Don’t you want to go out, Remus?”

Remus finished off his second vodka-cranberry and took a breath. Trust Lottie to forget the very thing they were waiting for. “I’m happy here,” he said simply. Lily had put on an album, Simon and Garfunkel, and he’d been bobbing his head along to it for some time.

“We should play another game,” Marlene said, before giggling. “But not truth or dare.”

“Two truths and a lie, then!” Mary called.

“You just want to know all our secrets,” Remus said, trying his best not to slur his words. Mary did know how to mix a stiff drink.

“Of course! What sort of friends would we be if we didn’t share all our darkest secrets?”

At Mary’s words, Remus looked to Lily, who scrunched her eyebrows but smiled. “What are you thinking, Remus?”

“Nothin’.”

“Liar. You gave me a look.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“I know what the look was for!” Lottie exclaimed, sitting up on her bed. She had Remus’ new Godric-red tie around her neck like it was an ascot. He might’ve been afraid she’d spill the beans right there, if Mary hadn’t let out an ear-piercing scream at the same moment and launched herself off the wardrobe hutch.

“You buggar!” She wailed, holding her side as Sirius leaned over the edge of the girls’ window, pushing his dark hair out of his eyes.

“It was just a little pinch, Macdonald. You didn’t see me waving.”

“You could’ve said something!”

Lily launched herself up from Marlene’s bed, eyes wide. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Party crashing,” Sirius said casually, still clinging to the window sill. Another piece of hair fell into his eyes and he had to blow it away with his mouth.

“You’re not coming in, no way!”

Sirius shrugged. “Alright, if you’re sure. Though I wonder if Filch fancies a visit? I doubt he gets up to much on a Friday evening, but I’m sure he’d be very interested in the amount of booze bottles in your bin. Not to mention my mate, Lupin there, paying Rowena a little visit after hours.”

Lily drew back like Sirius had threatened to skin a live cat in front of her. “It’s Remus’ birthday!”

“So doesn’t Remus get to decide?” Remus called. Whirling around, Lily gave him an incredulous look, her green eyes twice as big as normal.

“Remus did you—”

“If you don’t mind,” Sirius interrupted, “poor Pete’s getting tired of being my stepping stool, and I'm sure this damn metal box is just murder on the knees. If we could just come in for a few minutes it’d really help soothe his back.”

“Please, Lily!” Remus heard Peter moan from somewhere below.

Rushing forward, Lily shoved Sirius’ head aside to look out the window. “You’re *all* here?”

“ ‘Course,” Sirius grunted, making Mary laugh.

“Oh c’mon Lily, they came all this way—”

“What do you mean ‘all this way’, they’re only two buildings down!”

“Let them iiiiiinnnnnn,” Lottie sang.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Marlene said. She’d picked her feet up from the floor and was tucked up on her bed, nursing her drink.

“It’s Remus’ birthday,” Mary said.

“It’s Remus’ birthday,” Sirius repeated.

“IT’S REMUS’ BIRTHDAY!” James joined in, from somewhere outside.

“Bloody hell,” Lily groaned, “just get them in here before someone hears them.”

“Tu es très charmante, Evans,” Sirius said.

"N’est-elle pas? J'suis tellement folle d’elle," Mary added.

Lily gave them both the finger as Mary helped the boys climb in, before turning back to Remus, who had stood up to get a better look at the whole affair and was currently trying not to look too guilty.

“You told them.”

Remus shook his head. “Nooo…”

“You’re lucky it’s your birthday.”

Smiling, he handed her a bottle of Mary’s wine. “Thanks, Lils.”

Eyes still narrow, Lily sighed and took the bottle, swigging from it deeply, before stepping past him to join Marlene on her bed. Trying not to look too pleased, Remus stepped forward just as James was crawling through the window and Sirius clapped him on the back, pulling him in for a quick shoulder-hug the same way the London boys did when they greeted each other back home. “Took you long enough," Remus said, amused.

“Ah, you know how it goes,” Sirius said. “Pete was in the shower and Potter got cold feet.”

Remus glanced at James over Sirius’ shoulder. “And now?”

“A little whisky does wonders, mate,” he said, just as James looked up and said; “Hello, ladies!”

The girls responded with varying levels of enthusiasm and the room was quickly made into a space that could accommodate the growing group. It was considerably more crowded in the dorm room with all eight of them, but Mary and Lottie made room eagerly, helping the boys push Lottie’s bed aside while Marlene went down to the kitchenette to fetch more glasses. Lily remained camped out on her friend’s bed, trying not to look too sour for Remus’ sake. All the pillows, blankets, and sheets came down onto the floor to make one big plush circle to sit on and James took a seat next to Lily on the floor while the rest of them were busy sorting out drinks. It took a few minutes, but eventually he plucked up the courage to lean over and tap Lily on the knee.

“Oi, Evans—”

“Buzz off, Potter,” Lily said, drawing her legs up onto the bed. To his credit, James did not appear disheartened after the automatic rebuff.

“Alright, alright, was just gonna to ask what you got Lupin for his birthday.”

Lily returned the question with an unimpressed look. “Books.”

“Brilliant, which ones?”

“Nothing you’ve read.”

“I’ve read books before,” James said, grinning.

“Like?”

Maybe James was right—at least Lily was talking to him. Too bad he had no idea what to say in return.

He glanced desperately to Remus, who’d been observing the entire interaction from his blue throne, and was currently smiling into his drink. Even though watching his friend flounder might’ve been the more entertaining option, fixing the divide between James and Lily had been the very thing he’d spent the entire last month working toward, and so slowly, Remus reached behind himself, where he’d set aside the books the girls had given him for his birthday. Without looking, he tipped the first cover he could reach in his friend’s direction. James squinted a bit to get a look, but perked up

immediately.

“Like 'The Second Sex',” he announced, before his eyes went comically wide and it dawned what he’d just said aloud.

Straightening, Remus fumbled for the book and brought it into his lap. The feminist philosophy novel was definitely not one of his birthday presents—it was one of Lily’s own books that he’d pulled off the hutch.

‘Oops,' he mouthed to James, but Lily was already gaping at him.

“You’ve read Simone de Beauvoir?”

James tried to swallow the smile, but his laughter escaped anyway. “Dear god, no.”

Rolling her eyes, Lily leaned backward on the bed and glanced to Remus, who was still clutching the book. Shooting forward, she snatched it back and used the book to swat at Remus’ thigh.

“Little shits, both of you.”

Remus exchanged a guilty look with James before snorting, and both of them began to laugh just as Marlene returned with extra mugs for the booze. After that James kept a healthy distance from Lily, sitting almost diagonal from her and only glancing over when he knew she wasn’t looking. Despite her apparent distaste for him, it didn’t take Remus long to discover that Lily was doing the same.

“Care to try some of this, McKinnon?” Sirius asked, waving around a very fat flask. “Got it from Pete’s brother. I warn you though, it’ll put some hair on your chest.”

Marlene scoffed. “If it hasn’t done as much for you, I doubt it’ll do anything for me.”

Everyone laughed while Sirius slapped a hand to his heart. “You wound me, you really do.”

"Uh-oh," Peter said. "Watch out Marlene or he might fall in love with you."

“In that case I’ll have to be much drunker.” Reaching down from her bed, Marlene snatched the flask from Sirius and took a deep swig before gasping in disgust.

“I can’t believe I just saw McKinnon do that,” James said, in awe.

“Why?” Lily started. “Because girls can’t drink?”

James straightened up a bit. “No, I only meant—”

“It’s fine, Potter,” Marlene said, passing the flask back to Sirius. “It’s a special occasion, s’all. What mum doesn’t know won’t kill her.”

“Promises, promises,” Sirius mumbled.

James nodded and Lily looked away, leaning back into Marlene like she was embarrassed. Marlene smiled and put an arm around her, swinging her head to the music that still played as the background soundtrack to their noise. David Essex had finally made an appearance.

“Right, that’s it,” Sirius said, standing up and almost tripping over one of Lottie’s pink throw pillows, “I can’t take it anymore.”

Eyebrows raised, Mary sat up a little; she’d been leaning back against Remus’ knee, sipping elegantly from her mug of wine. “What are you on about, Black?”

“This music—how you lot stand his bloody whinging I’ll never understand.”

“It’s a love song,” Lottie said, lying on her stomach on her bare mattress.

“You think everything’s a love song,” Peter said, his head resting against the side of his sister's bed. Lottie silenced him by pushing her drink against his mouth.

Sirius stepped over James and stumbled back toward the window. “It’s bloody grating on the ears, that’s what it is.” He bent down over his schoolbag and flipped open the leather top, reaching inside.

“You brought your own music?” Mary asked, sitting up more to see over her friends.

“I brought *good* music,” Sirius corrected. After withdrawing several records he made his way to the corner of the room, where the girls had set up the stereo and turntable on the floor next to the bathroom. Essex’s bleating came to a scratching halt and the room was quiet until Sirius had set up the next album.

“Sirius has good taste, don’t worry,” James told the room.

Lily perked up from Marlene’s shoulder. “As opposed to our taste?”

“Shush!” Sirius called. “It’s spinning.”

Both Lily and James fell quiet, but Remus didn’t miss the quick look that passed between the two of them.

'If I hear you knocking hard up on my door,
Ain’t no way that I’m gonna answer it;
‘Cause cheating is one thing and lying is another,
And when I say it’s over that’s it I’m gonna quit, yeah!'

Sirius stood up and turned around, dancing back to his place in the circle and dropping down beside James, who clapped him on the shoulder. Mary was snickering, mostly at Lily and Marlene’s expressions. Sirius caught on and grinned.

“C’mon ladies, you can’t be playing that nancy-shit on a lad’s sixteenth birthday!”

“You didn’t even ask Remus what he wanted to hear,” Marlene pointed out.

“I know what he wants to hear,” Sirius said smugly. “What kind of bandmate would I be if I didn’t?”

“Oh here we go,” Remus mumbled, and Mary shot upright again, looking up at him in his chair.

“You’re in a band?”

“No! He’s just drunk.”

“I am drunk,” Sirius agreed, “but I’m not a liar! Lupin’s just being his painfully modest-self, as per usual. Don’t have much to show for ourselves yet, but a few more lessons and he’ll be ready for the stage, I swear it.”

“Oh shut up, Black.”

James knocked Sirius’ shoulder. “When were you going to share all this?”

“Cool off, Potter. S’all still very new. Pick up a guitar and maybe we’ll let you audition. What do you think of drums, Pete?”

Peter gave a hesitant thumbs up. “Well… s’long as you teach me that stick twirling thing.”

Sirius tipped his glass toward him. “It’s a deal, my good man.”

“And I suppose you’re going to sing, Sirius?” Lottie asked.

“Only s’long as no one else here can produce anything of quality. Lupin, you sing much? Or just howl?”

Rather than answering him, Remus tipped his drink back and downed it while shooting Sirius the bird at the same time.

Band talk aside, the group kept drinking and eventually Marlene and Lily presented them all with a chocolate cake that read *‘Happy Birthday Remus!'* across the top in red icing. While the rest of them stuffed their faces, Sirius and Mary took turns regaling the group with stories (Sirius mostly involved numerous detentions while Mary’s involved numerous admirers) and by midnight they were all red in the face from either laughter or the drink.

At one point, during a play-through of The Rolling Stones’ *Sticky Fingers,* a sharp knock came on the door.

“I’ll get it!” James said automatically, but before he could stand up completely Lily was on her feet, shoving him back into the pillows.

“You’re not even supposed to be here, you lunatic!”

Mary waved at the rest of them with frantic glee. “Hide!”

James and Sirius scrambled into the bathroom as Remus and Peter dove beneath Lottie and Marlene’s respective beds. It was Lily who answered the door, and they all heard her sweetly explain to the Rowena dorm monitor that they were simply trying to celebrate a birthday (prefect’s honour), and the loud music was just a result of some good, girlish fun. They got off easy after Lily had promised to turn the music down, and Remus thought she’d done remarkably well maintaining her calm facade for the amount of booze she’d ingested so far. Before she left the dorm monitor stuck her head inside and wished Marlene happy birthday, and the moment Lily fell against the closed door everyone erupted into laughter.

“The bathroom light is out,” Sirius said, stumbling back into the room with James just behind him. They both appeared a bit flushed but that was probably just the booze.

“We should play a game!” Mary announced. “Truth or dare!”

“Not this again,” Remus whined, pressing his hands to his eyes. Sirius caught his words as he staggered back to his place on the floor.

“If the birthday boy’s reluctant, then you know it’s bound to be fun.”

Mary got her way in the end of course, and they played several rounds of truth or dare, in which Peter was made to put on lipstick and rouge without using his hands, James had to eat a dry tea bag, and Marlene was forced to only speak in a horrible American accent for the rest of the game. She kept going back and forth between a New Yorker and a Texan, which was admittedly much more fun than listening to Sirius and Mary speak to each other in French, which they only did because they knew no one else understood them.

Avoiding truths at all cost this time meant that Remus was forced to let Peter sit on his lap for several rounds like he was a mall Santa, and received a new hairdo courtesy of Lottie and some very stiff hair mousse; but nothing was as embarrassing as seeing Sirius try on a girl’s uniform, skirt, stockings, and all.

He came out of the bathroom in the scandalously short skirt (it was Mary’s from year 8, and she only wore it when she really wanted to kick up a fuss) doing up the blue Rowena tie and shaking his head. Remus had never seen Sirius in such little clothing—he didn’t even sleep shirtless on the nights when their dorm was blazing hot—and had to watch through his hands, shrinking down in his chair until Peter fell off his lap.

“You live to embarrass me, ladies, I know you do,” Sirius said, still shaking his head but smiling despite himself.

“You have to do your hair!” Lottie said, taking a hair tie and gathering as much of Sirius’ black waves as she could into a small ponytail at the back of his head. When she was done Sirius took another swig out of his flask and walked across the room, swishing the skirt back and forth as he went.

“Surely your boy Bowie has worn something just like that,” Mary slurred through her laughter. Sirius snorted and picked up one of the Bowie albums he had brought, flipping it over.

“Oh, I'm sure he has, the fruit.”

“If I saw you from behind I might just have to say hello, Black,” James laughed. Almost blushing, Sirius blew him a kiss and walked forward to smack him upside the head with the album.

“Alright, whose turn is it, anyway?” Sirius asked after, clearing his throat.

“It’s Lily’s,” Lottie cheered.

“Oh no,” Lily said, actually laughing and as drunk as the rest of them. “I can’t even look you in the eye when you’re dressed like that.”

“Don’t be such a prude, Evans.”

“I’m not a prude!”

“Prove it.”

Lily stood up off Marlene’s bed indignantly, though swaying a bit. “Fine. I choose dare.”

Sirius ran his tongue across his teeth and glanced at James, who remained tight-lipped. “Alright,” he said, “I won’t torture you on your dear Loopy’s birthday—”

Remus puckered. “Don’t call me ‘Loopy’!”

Sirius ignored him. “I’ll give you a simple dare, Evans. Just one smooch, and I’ll never call you a prude again.”

“You’re actually daring me to kiss you?” Lily sneered.

“Nuh-uh,” Sirius said, shaking his head, “not me. James.”

The entire group gave a loud gasp, and Mary shot up so fast from the arm of Remus’ chair that he nearly spilt his drink. If James had a single murderous bone in his body he looked about ready to beat Sirius over the head with it, but it was really Lily, of course, that looked the most comical. Her mouth had dropped open into a wide ‘o’, and she looked between James and Sirius like she couldn’t decide which of them was worse.

“I’m not kissing anybody!” She declared hotly, and Sirius tilted his head at her.

“Because you’re a prude. A puritan, a schoolmarm, a Victorian so hot under the collar you’re sweating in your petticoats.”

Standing up from the floor, James held the back of his hand to Sirius’ chest. “Sirius, that’s enough.”

“You’re such a prick, Black!” Lily shouted, her face as red as a tomato.

“Oh, come now, Evans, surely you have a more colourful insult in one of those feminist manifestos of yours? Just admit what we all know to be true: you’re a prissy little Mrs. Grundy who can’t even let loose when you know no one else is watching.”

“You’re wrong!”

“Then prove it! One kiss!”

“Fine!”

Egging Lily into a frenzy had not been a part of their initial plan, but if Remus had had a camera with him he might’ve snapped a picture. Lily plucked James’ face out of the air and pulled him down to her so roughly he was half-sure their front teeth had banged together on impact, but none of that mattered. The room erupted into screams from the girls (even Marlene shrieked through the hands over her mouth) and Sirius stumbled away from the smooching pair so fast he got caught up in the blankets on the floor and went down with a heavy thud.

Releasing James with a slight shove, Lily stepped back and let out a victorious breath. “There!”

“Jesus Christ, Evans,” Sirius laughed, turning over and fixing his skirt, “didn’t think you’d go the full lock, stock, and barrel on us.”

Lily deflated a bit. “What?”

“I only meant a little peck on the cheek.”

Mary stepped forward and scooped Sirius’ flask up from the floor, tapping him on the head with it. “You’re so full of shit, Black.”

Sirius grinned like an idiot and took the flask back.

“Oh I knew I should’ve just punched you!” Lily wailed.

James, who until that point was still quietly stunned by the kiss, seemed to shake himself free of the shock as he held his jaw. “I think you might’ve dislocated something, Evans.”

“Both of you!” She corrected. “I should’ve punched both of you!”

Fuming, Lily reached down and snatched Sirius’ flask from his hand. He let her have it, holding up his hands in surrender as she unscrewed the cap and tossed it back, gulping down the biggest mouthful Remus had seen anyone take that night. It was almost impressive; he’d already had a couple swigs himself and was pretty sure Simeon had gifted them battery acid rather than alcohol.

When Lily failed to stop drinking, James, less dazzled by her sudden show, stepped toward her and reached for the flask. “Okay Evans, I think you’ve had enough now.”

Lily pulled back sharply and snapped at him over the rim of the flask. “Don’t tell me what to do, Potter.”

“You’ve already had more than—”

“Then what? Then I should?”

“Well, no… uh…”

“Than a *girl* should have?”

“No! I just—”

Holding one finger up in James’ face to silence him, Lily tipped back the rest of the flask and drained it. When she finally lowered the bottle she staggered a bit before blinking herself out of the daze and tossing the flask back to Sirius.

“Evans…” James started, but Lily ignored him, turning around to face Remus, who until that point had done an extremely good job on keeping out of the nasty affair.

Lily held out one hand expectantly, and Remus looked between her and James before slowly reaching out and taking it. That was enough for Lily to slump down into his lap, picking up her feet and tucking her cold toes under Remus’ thigh as she turned her face away from the rest of them to better ignore James.

Everyone stared of course, and Remus felt his own ears heat up as

James gawked at him. It was all he could do to shrug. This couldn't possibly be all his fault.

"Good on you, Evans," Sirius said, biting his lip, "distinctly un-prude-like."

Lily shot Sirius the bird for perhaps the tenth time that evening and James gave him a nasty glare as he sat back down on his spot on the floor, quietly fuming.

"It's James' turn," Lottie sang, breaking the stilted silence. She had her head hanging off her bed upside down and just looking at her made Remus feel queasy.

"Truth," James said. "No more dares."

"Lily has to ask the question."

"Can't think of any," Lily said automatically.

"Then ask him about something embarrassing," Lottie instructed.

James made a face. "Like what?"

"What's the most embarrassing thing anyone's ever told you?"

"That's not even his own secret though," Mary complained, sitting down next to Sirius. "No fun."

"Too late," James cut in, "the question's been asked." He paused to think, a hand on his chin.

"Oh, Remus," Lily started, patting him on the collarbone. As she cupped her hand over his ear, Remus leaned in, but James wasn't having it.

"What's that?" He called.

"Nothing," Lily quipped. "I'm talking to *Remus."*

"Fine then," James said, clearly put out, as he turned back to Lottie and began in his most casual voice; "I'm not sure about the *most* embarrassing, Lot, but I think it would be pretty humiliating to know that I gave my first kiss to someone as rough as Davey Gudgeon."

There was a collective gasp from the girls, and Lily pulled her hand back from Remus' ear sharply. In his inebriated state Remus had to

blink a few times before he realised what had been said. Lily's jaw was on the floor, and both Mary and Lottie had their hands covering their mouths while Marlene's eyes looked like they might pop out of her head.

He'd expected Lily to shout, to throw something at James even, but instead she just leaned back from Remus and the chair very suddenly, thrusting a finger in his face. *"You!"*

Fuck.

"Uh-uh!" Remus tried, sitting up straighter underneath Lily's legs and shaking his head aggressively. "I didn't do it! I did not tell him!"

"You *knew,* Lupin?" James demanded.

Remus returned the favour. *"You* knew?"

"How come *I* didn't know?" Sirius cried.

Lily gave a wail; "Potter, who told you?"

"Davey did! Little git was trying to brag!"

"Oh my god!" Sirius slumped back against Mary as he cackled, drumming his fists against her thigh. "You guys are really too much. Gudgeon, Evans? Really?"

Lily squeezed both hands into fists, looking like a bomb ready to go off. Remus, sensing that the room was distinctly heading in that direction, reached his long legs across the space and kicked Sirius hard in the shin. He didn't seem to notice.

"That had nothing to do with you!" Lily shouted.

"Not according to Davey!" James shot back.

"Stop saying his name!"

"Then stop being so angry!"

"I'm not angry!"

There were more than a few shared looks around the dorm at that and Sirius apparently took that as his cue. He turned over and cupped a hand to James' ear, whispering something before he jumped up and made a beeline for the stereo's corner. If Lily hadn't been pining him

to the chair, Remus might've leapt after Sirius himself.

How could the git have such good rhythm yet such *terrible timing?!*

"Sirius, don't!" James shouted, but a moment later there was another record-scratching stop.

"C'mon, Potter, it's just like ripping off a plaster!"

Sirius took out Remus' little 45 LP and set it onto the turntable, and as the girls all craned their ears to listen the song started, much louder than any of the music they'd played before;

'I used to wake up in the morning,
I used to feel so bad;
I got so sick of having sleepless nights,
I went and told my dad;
He said, 'Son now here's some little something',
And stuck them on my wall;
And now my nights ain't quite so lonely,
In fact I—I don't feel bad at all…'

Remus could practically feel James' embarrassment permeate the air. The girls all shared a questioning look, but as the song came to its chorus, realisation began to dawn.

"Oh my god…" Mary echoed, trying to stifle her laughter. "You guys are insane."

Lily looked from Remus, to Sirius, and finally to James, who looked about ready to fold in on himself and disappear. He made it through the chorus before Sirius shouted at him again; "Go on, James! That's not your lap, is it?"

I'm gonna kill him, Remus thought, but apparently the sentiment was enough for James to find his nerve. He stood up very quickly, with the expression of a man about to dive head-first off a cliff.

"Lily," he started, "I know why you've been so angry at me."

Lily shook her head vigorously and leaned back into Remus as though she could disappear into his chest cavity. "No way. No. Remus make Sirius stop the music—"

“I’m sorry!” James gasped. “I’m sorry I didn’t invite you to that party last year! I’m sorry I let myself believe that you wouldn’t want to go!”

'Pictures of Lily,' the song sang;
'Lily oh Lily—'

Finally standing up and freeing Remus, Lily threw her arms out. “Stop talking!”

“I’m sorry I kissed that girl and bragged about it afterwards! I didn’t realise that we’d gone on a date!”

“Oh my god!”

Remus suddenly wished he was a lot closer to an exit. Peter, thinking the same, rolled back under Lottie’s bed, taking a bottle of whisky with him.

“It didn’t mean anything," James insisted frantically, "I just thought you wouldn’t be interested in going—you were so focused on exams and making prefect and—!”

“Potter, *shut. Up.”*

“It just didn’t seem like you’d be interested,” he whined. “I was just trying to be polite.”

Lily had had enough of being embarrassed apparently. “Well, *don’t!”*

“I have to!”

“Why? Because I’m a GIRL?”

James threw his hands out. “Yes!”

“Ugh! You’re so sexist!”

“What?”

“You are! You’re always talking down to us girls, trying to step around our feelings like we might cry at any old thing. You think of us as separate. It’s sexist!”

James whirled on Remus, still trapped between them and his chair. “Lupin, am I sexist?”

“Er—”

Lily reached across the gap between them and smacked James' shoulder. "Don't bring Remus into your mess! You've been doing this dance all night, and we're tired of it! Right, Marlene?"

Marlene, who'd been very quiet on her bed, suddenly found herself very interested in the bottom of her cup, popping a thumbs-up while she tipped back her glass.

"Don't force Marlene to take your side just because you're both girls!" James shouted.

"So you admit that we're both girls."

"Of course you're both girls! You've got all the same bloody equipment!"

"Don't talk about our 'equipment'!"

"That is rather piggish, James," Mary observed from the window, a decent distance from the active bomb-site.

"Not helping, Mary!"

The song ended and Sirius reached down to play it again. "Nothing wrong with a little equipment-talk."

"Shut up, Black. And stop playing that horrible song!"

"Oi, don't talk to my mate like that!"

"It's not my fault that all your mates are pigs."

"All of them huh? Where was that attitude when Remus came home with your lips all over him?"

Lily gasped. "That has nothing to do with this."

"Oh yeah? I just kissed some random girl, but you kissed one of my mates."

"On the *cheek!"*

"That's bollocks! You were just sitting in his bloody lap!"

"I didn't kiss Remus!"

Unwilling to sit in the crossfire for any longer, Remus stood up and

climbed over Lottie and her bed to escape to the other side of the dorm. If the music hadn't drawn any complaints yet, James and Lily's shouting match certainly would.

"Time to go," he told Sirius, who grinned like a Cheshire cat and followed him to the window. "Sorry Mary," Remus said, as she stepped aside for them.

"Cowards!" She wailed. *"Fils de putes!"*

"Handsome *fils de putes,"* Sirius added, kissing her on the cheek as Remus crawled out the window. "I'll return the skirt tomorrow. *Au revoir,* love."

By the time Sirius had dropped down onto the grass beside him Remus could tell that the argument had shifted from kissing people to other, less savoury activities. A crash sounded from inside, and then a desperate shout from Lottie;

"Lily, that's my shoe!"

"Go!" Sirius wheezed, shoving Remus ahead of him by the shoulders as they scrambled away from the square of light let out by the dorm window. They stumbled across the lawn, following the grass down to the road where they finally skidded to a halt, their shoes slapping the pavement. Remus' head was swimming thanks to the alcohol, but the night air was a cool and welcome change from the very heated situation that had just unfolded in the girls' bedroom.

"James is gonna kill us for ditching them," Sirius cackled.

"Not if Lily kills him first," Remus added. "Did you see Pete?"

"Yeah! He rolled under Lottie's bed to avoid the fallout. Five quid says he falls asleep there."

Remus snorted, and together they started down the lane, which was as empty as it normally was on a Wednesday night—or a Thursday *morning,* Remus supposed.

"Bloody chilly out, innit," Sirius hummed, bouncing up and down slightly as he walked.

Remus smirked. "Well, you are wearing a dress." He looked down at Sirius' bare legs, which were illuminated only by the occasional passing street lamp.

“You’re just jealous I can pull it off. Your hair looks ridiculous by the way.”

Remus reached up to feel his hair, which was still crunchy from Lottie’s hair mousse, and shaped a lot like a stiff pencil. “Yeah, well, at least I don’t wake up everyday looking like I stole Snape’s grandmother’s church wig.”

Sirius shoved him, and as he stumbled across the walkway Remus reached into his pocket for his cigarettes, withdrawing the carton.

“You want one?” He asked, and Sirius nodded, taking the cig he offered and popping it between his lips. Just as Remus was doing the same, Sirius slammed to a sudden halt. Remus spun around to find him slapping the front of his chest and then his legs, as though he’d lost something.

“Fuck,” Sirius groaned. “Goddammit Mary…”

Smiling around his cigarette, Remus pocketed the carton. “What’d Mary do?”

“She tricked me out of my own trousers.”

“You’re saying that’s never happened before?”

Sirius wagged a finger at him. *“Ha-ha*—not what I meant. I had your birthday gift in my back pocket. Buggar fuck.”

Remus pulled the cigarette from his mouth and bit down on a smile. “Oh. Well, that’s okay. You can get it later when you give the skirt back.”

“You’re supposed to give presents *on* someone’s birthday,” Sirius pouted, “and it would’ve been useful right now too.”

Glancing around—there was nothing but empty darkness. If it had been warmer, they’d have heard crickets. “Well what was it? You fit a new winter coat down your pants?”

“No,” Sirius said, stomping up to Remus and snatching the cig from between his lips, waving it in his face, “for these!”

“Alright, alright, calm down you alkie—cigarettes?”

“A lighter,” Sirius sighed, pushing the cig back into Remus’ mouth himself, “to replace the one you lost before Christmas.”

“I think you lost that one actually,” Remus said. Truth be told, he hadn’t thought about the lost zippo since he’d forgotten to be mad at Sirius in the first place. Going back to London for Christmas had left him more than enough of a connection to Tomny, it had told him that even if he was far from home, his friends were still thinking of him.

Sirius tsked and bit down on the end of his cigarette, before locking his hands behind his head. “Yeah, well, you can thank James for the new one. He picked it up over the holidays. Was just my idea. Happy birthday, I guess.”

He started down the road again, and after a moment, Remus followed, fumbling for the matches in his pocket. As he walked, he lit his own cigarette and snuffed out the match.

“Hey,” he called, and Sirius stopped immediately, spinning around to face him. Before he could let himself think too much, he bent down and touched the tip of his cigarette to Sirius’. It took a moment, but after a quick inhale the cigarette lit and both boys broke away, puffing into the night air.

Sirius reached up to pluck the cigarette from his mouth with two fingers, exhaling through his nose. “That was kind of erotic, Lupin.”

“Oh god,” Remus groaned, stepping back dramatically, “don’t make it weird!”

“You’re the one who did it!”

“Well you tried to do it before Christmas!”

“When?”

“B-by the window! We were talking about music.”

Sirius shook his head innocently. “Hm, no, don’t remember. I think I’m gonna have to use that one though. Next time keep eye contact a little longer though.”

“You—*fucking*—I hate you.”

Sirius burst out laughing and Remus ignored him, along with his thumping heart, while he puffed on his cigarette aggressively.

“Think I could beat you back to the dorm in a dress?”

Remus looked back to find Sirius smirking like he always did when he

got his way. “We’re smoking.”

“And we can keep smoking, once I’m not freezing my bloody knackers off.” Grinding his cig out on the bottom of his shoe, Sirius began walking backward down the street. “Loser owes the winner a pack of fags?”

“Do you even have any fags to bet?” Remus called.

“Guess you’ll have to beat me to find out.”

Turning very quickly, Sirius took off into the dark, and for a split second Remus thought about letting him go on by himself, but he was too drunk and too happy, and he didn’t want to stop and let himself wonder why.

Tossing the cigarette into the nearest gutter, Remus sprinted after him.

Chapter End Notes

The song Sirius plays is "Good Lovin' Gone Bad" by Bad Company (1975).

A ‘Mrs. Grundy’ is a figurative term used for an extremely conventional or prudish person.

Chapter 22: Aftermath

Chapter Summary

> The group is feeling the effects of Remus' birthday. An understanding seemingly appears between James and Lily.

Chapter Notes

> CW: References to alcohol consumption and some real rough hang-overs, lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My head hurts, my feet stink, and I don't love Jesus,
It's that kind of mornin';
Really was that kind of night,
Tryin' to tell myself that my condition is improvin',
And if I don't die by Thursday I'll be roarin' Friday night…

- "My Head Hurts, My Feet Stink, And I Don't Love Jesus" Jimmy Buffet, 1976

Mary had been right, sixteen felt completely different from fifteen. Before that morning he'd been simpler, less world-weary, and perhaps might've even been able to see the humour in his current circumstances, but now, at a fresh sixteen, Remus would've done just about anything to free himself from the penance that came with a night of heavy drinking.

After spending his birthday mixing liquors and drinking their weight in vodka, whisky, and tequila—though where that had come from, Remus still wasn't sure—the four boys woke up to the sound of Benjy Fenwick mercilessly banging two pots together outside their door.

"UP AND AT 'EM BOYS!" He shouted through the wood. "THE EARLY BIRD GETS THE WORM, RIGHT? OR IS IT THE HANGOVER, POTTER?"

Remus sat up on his bed and felt instantly sick. His mouth felt like sandpaper and tasted like a cross between a muddy puddle and the dregs at the bottom of a three day-old beer. Across from him Sirius stared back, dark hair falling over his face like a limp curtain.

“Who fuckin’ ratted to the dorm monitor?” Sirius grumbled.

There was a groan, and next James was upright, his dark skin looking distinctly ashen. “Got caught on the way in last night,” he grimaced. He appeared as though he might elaborate, but cut himself off when he clapped his hand over his mouth and nearly hung himself with his bed curtains, busy making a beeline for the toilet.

Remus sighed and looked to his alarm clock—7AM. “Who’s going to tell Potter he actually got caught coming in this *morning?”* He sighed, tugging his sheets back and swinging his legs around the side of the bed, only to step directly onto Peter, who must've passed out on the floor between their beds.

“Ah! Fucking hell, Pete!”

“Stick a sock in it, Lupin,” Peter moaned from the floor, head propped up on a small pile of Remus’ books.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“LET'S GO LADS, THE DAY IS YOUNG AND SO ARE WE!"

At Benjy’s insistence, all four of them hauled themselves out of bed by 7.30 and made the trek down to the dining hall, moving like the living dead. The trolley was to be avoided, out of sheer fear for losing whatever hellish sludge was left in their stomachs on the ride. Instead they took the regular path to the Hawkings Dining Hall, squinting and wincing in the bright morning light only to be assaulted by the fluorescents once inside. Plenty of kids turned to stares as they crossed the hall to their regular table—and why wouldn’t they? For them it was just a regular Thursday, not a morning to deal with the repentance of drinking way past the normal human limit.

“Hey Cindy,” Sirius said, stopping by another table to tap a girl on the shoulder, “got a hair bobble? Lost mine.”

“Uh, yeah, here you go,” Cindy mumbled, taking the elastic from around her wrist and holding it out to Sirius, eyes as wide as a goldfish. She’d probably never seen the great Sirius Black looking so ragged, but at least he wore the look with some sense of achievement. Remus didn’t even want to *think* about how his hair looked.

Slumping down at the table, Peter gave a horrible groan, cradling his head in his arms.

“Whose idea was it to wake up today?” James breathed, sagging down next to him.

“Not mine,” Remus grumbled, rubbing his eyes. The other students around them were chattering noisily over their morning meals, making his headache even worse.

“Remind me to put laxatives in Benjy’s lunch,” Sirius grumbled, also face-down on the table. They all sat there for a little while, staring into the tea they’d collected on the way in, contemplating whether or not it was worth it to even attempt to move again.

“Well, might as well try and eat something,” James said, reaching across the table next to Remus and nudging Sirius. “C’mon Black.”

“Five more minutes, mum.”

Both James and Remus cracked bitter smiles, but stood up together. Remus reached for Sirius, helping him to his feet while James grabbed Peter, who astutely refused to move from the table.

“Fine I’ll bring you a plate,” James grumbled, dropping his arm on the table.

“You’re the best, mum,” Peter whimpered, face-down.

They crossed the hall to line up for breakfast, taking their trays and plates and moving down the line after one another. Remus ended up in front, and as he made it to the assorted fruits one of the girls from his history class cut in front to reach for a banana while he stood and yawned.

“God,” she said after doing a double-take, and Remus squinted down at her.

“Oh, hi Hannah.”

“You look awful Remus,” Hannah said, reaching up to adjust her glasses. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, breathing out as a wave of nausea hit him in the gut. He had to swallow to get the feeling to pass. “Jus’ getting over a bit of a bug.”

Hannah stepped back like she was afraid he might be contagious. “Maybe you should go see Ms. Pomfrey.”

“S’fine,” Remus said amicably, before feeling a sharp nudge from his other side.

“Budge up, Lupin,” Sirius grumbled, “I’m trying to reach the eggs.”

With their plates full, the boys slunk back to their table, where Peter hadn’t so much as moved. James dropped a tray in front of him and slowly he turned his head, tipping the fruit bowl toward him, only to groan again. “I hate honeydew.”

“Shut up and eat your breakfast,” James muttered, stabbing his spoon into a cup of yogurt. Just watching made Remus ill again, but James powered on, probably determined to get something of nutritional value into his stomach.

“I think I’m still sort of drunk,” Sirius said. Then, more horrified; “Am I going to get more hungover as the day goes on? We have gym today!”

“Oh god, please just shut up,” Remus whined, pinching his forehead. A sudden thwack to his left had him nearly jumping out of his skin, and he spun to find Mary sitting down next to him with her school bag on the table. Her hair was distinctly frizzier than normal, barely contained under a hair scarf, and she had smudged eyeliner from the night before under her lower lashes.

“I blame *you,”* she hissed lowly, while squinting at each of them.

“Us?” Remus echoed.

“Yes, all of you. I blame all of you for this fucking hangover.”

There was chuckle, and Sirius looked up from his Weetabix. “Feeling a bit off your trolley, Macdonald?”

“Here’s your bloody trousers,” Mary snarled lightly, reaching around Remus to toss Sirius his pair of grey school slacks.

“Cheers,” Sirius mumbled, before rummaging through the pockets. “Lupin, here.” Casually (or maybe it was just the hangover) Sirius passed him a silver-plated lighter, much more fine than the one he’d lost to Filch’s grubby fingers the term before. Remus thumbed the cool metal, before turning it over and finding a small engraving in its front; *RJL*.

“Thanks,” he said shyly, as Mary stood up from the table, pinching her

nose.

“How can you fucking stand to be eating eggs?” She whimpered from behind her hand, before streaking across the room toward the girls’ bathroom.

“Weak,” Sirius said, reaching over and skewering some of Remus’ breakfast with his fork.

“Eat your own,” Remus grumbled, pulling his plate away, despite the fact that he almost felt like following Mary to the toilet. Rolling his eyes, Sirius just reached across the table, stealing a strawberry out of James’ fruit bowl instead. James let him, staring off into space as he lifted his tea to his mouth, drinking slowly.

“Alright, Potter?” Remus asked.

“Hm?” James looked up, blinking, and nodded. “Oh yeah, champion.”

“Thanks for this by the way,” he said, showing off the lighter.

“Oh, s’no problem. Glad you like it.”

Nodding, Remus returned to his breakfast, making it about two bites before he had to set his fork down and take a breather. He glanced back up at James again, who had dark rings under the eyes that could’ve rivalled his own.

“What time did you and Pete get in last night?”

James contemplated his tea. “Three, maybe?”

“Blimey. And… the girls?”

Looking up sharply, James gave an unimpressed smile. “Things are fine, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh really,” Sirius cut in, “because when Lupin and I left—”

“You mean when you ditched?”

Sirius glanced sideways at Remus. “Knew he’d be mad. You owe me some fags.”

“That wasn’t part of the bet.”

“You two took bets?” James demanded, lowering his tea.

“Only on if Evans would send you home in a body bag,” Sirius snickered.

“Well she didn’t, clearly!”

“So…” Remus prodded, “don’t tell me all my hard work was for nothing?”

James lifted his mug to his lips again. “I’ll have you know that Evans and I—” Stopping very suddenly, James lowered his mug and stared off behind Remus, who turned just in time to find Lily approaching with Marlene.

Both girls were looking distinctly rougher than normal, with pale faces and messy ponytails. They approached the table with their breakfast trays, setting them down next to Remus before sliding onto the bench. Lily lifted Mary’s abandoned book bag out of her way and dropped it down on the ground before catching Remus’ eye and straightening up.

“Good morning,” she said, though her usual chipper attitude was replaced with a stilted phrasing that said she’d had too little sleep and too much to drink the night before.

“Morning,” Remus returned, before tilting forward to get a look at Marlene, who was actually wearing sunglasses indoors. “Okay, McKinnon?”

“If you talk to me, I’ll have to kill you,” Marlene said lowly, slowly spoon-feeding herself tiny bits of porridge.

“Wish I’d thought of sunglasses,” Peter mumbled from across the table, head still propped up on one arm.

“Just close your eyes and pretend, Pete,” Remus told him, and Peter did just that, before resting his forehead against the table top once more. Shaking his head in light amusement, Remus turned back to Lily and nudged her arm. “Where’s Lottie?”

“Nurse’s. Said she had these spots in her vision.”

“It’s bollocks,” Marlene chimed. “She’s just lying to get out of class.”

Lily nodded amicably, but didn’t seem to have much in her to argue.

“You feeling okay?” James asked her finally, hunching his shoulders a

bit like he was nervous.

“Yeah. Fine.” She breathed out. “You…?”

“Fine,” James nodded back, quickly. “Your dorm monitor give you a hard time?”

“A bit. Yours?”

“Oh yeah.”

Lily cracked a small smile, and Remus felt his jaw hit the floor. He glanced between his two friends, both of whom had been screaming at each other at full volume mere hours before. Catching his look, James cleared his throat a bit and gestured with his chin at Lily’s breakfast.

“Want some tea?”

“Sure,” Lily said, after licking her lips. “Two sugars, please.”

Standing, James scooped up his own mug. “Tea, Lupin?”

Remus indicated to his untouched cup; “I’m good.”

"Cool," James said, before tapping his hand to the bottom of his mug a few times and awkwardly striding away.

“Bring me back one!” Sirius called, before collapsing back against the table, eyes closed.

“Okay…” Remus started, turning on Lily, “what was that?”

“What was what?” She asked innocently, wiping the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

“That. You and James—you were talking civilly.”

“We’re always civil.”

Remus coughed out a laugh dramatically. “Don’t tell me all the booze made you forget what happened last night?”

Lily sighed and slapped her napkin down. “No. But not much else happened after you left. And I did notice by the way.”

He gave her a guilty smile. “Well it worked right? Having it out all in one go?”

“We got detention.”

“Detention? Thought you were a prefect.”

“I am,” Lily scoffed, and the smug satisfaction of hearing that her perfectly status didn’t protect from all things was enough to make Remus wiggle a bit in his seat.

“Stacy caught Potter in our room,” she sighed finally.

“That your dorm monitor?”

“Mhm. We have detention together for two weeks. Would’ve been more if she’d found the empty bottles, but Mary tossed them out onto the lawn before she saw.”

“Guess she couldn’t toss James out fast enough then,” Remus smirked. “So what do they have all of you doing?”

“It’s not all of us,” Marlene interrupted, leaning past Lily and lifting her sunglasses up to reveal her red-shot blue eyes. “James took the fall. Told Stacy he was crashing *my* birthday.”

Incredibly proud, Remus looked across the dining hall to see James filling up several mugs of tea; a true hero in the flesh.

“So you and Mary got away with it?” He asked Marlene in awe. "What about Pete?"

Lily clicked her tongue. *“Peter* hid under Lottie’s bed."

"But what about you then?"

"Well I... As prefect *I* should’ve been the one to shut everything down.”

Remus had never felt more scandalised. “So it’s—”

“Her and Potter,” Marlene giggled, as though she’d forgotten she was hungover. “They’re looking at several weeks of detention together." She held a hand to the side of her mouth; *"Alone."*

"Oh, please!" Quite dramatically, Lily covered her face with both hands and moaned. Both Remus and Marlene couldn’t resist laughing, and eventually he reached out, fist-bumping her over Lily’s breakfast. James returned a few minutes later, sliding a mug of tea across the table to Lily and Sirius, who had fallen asleep with his head on the

table.

Lily took her mug and mumbled a thanks before sipping it shyly, avoiding James' gaze in her obvious embarrassment. Remus however, had no such qualms.

"You didn't tell us you got caught in the *girls* dorm," he mused, using the side of his spoon to cut up his scrambled eggs into tinier pieces. James looked to Lily and Marlene before pushing his glasses up on top of his head.

"Okay, Lupin, since you so clearly want to gloat—"

"Noooo. Only meant I was surprised to hear it, mate. Knight's honour."

"You're a terrible fucking liar," James said, both Remus and Marlene began snorting with laughter again, whilst Lily tipped her head back, just short of an another groan.

"You're right," Remus confessed, drumming his hands on the table top, "I am gloating." And he was happy. Happy that his friends were at least talking again, and that all the time he'd spent going between the two groups had not been entirely wasted. He still felt like shit, but as he watched Lily and James shoot each other glances from across the table, a sense of pride bubbled in his chest.

Toward the end of the breakfast hour, Mary finally returned, stopping behind Marlene and looking more ashen than she had over the eggs. "I'm never drinking again," she sighed, reaching for the napkin on Marlene's tray.

"I've heard that one before," Marlene quipped, and Mary paused her reaching to give her blonde ponytail a sharp yank. *"Ow!"*

"Oops." Snatching the napkin, Mary made her way down the table, scooping up her bag before she glanced at Sirius, still passed out at the table. "He got my skirt?" She asked Remus, who winced automatically.

"Oh yeah… about your skirt, Mary. You see, there was a little mishap when we got back to our room." Remus scratched at the back of his head; "Sirius was smoking and he dropped the ash and, well…"

"He *burnt* my skirt?"

“S’just a small hole really.”

“Ugh.” Scowling, Mary reached across the table and scooped up the spoon James had been using for his yogurt before strolling down to Sirius’ end of the table.

“Wake up,” she snapped, but Sirius only gave a little grumble, turning his head away from her. Without missing a beat, Mary slammed the spoon down on the tabletop, directly next to his ear, and along with Peter, Sirius burst upright, fully awake and panicked.

“One sugar!” He shouted, before blinking and smacking a hand to his forehead. “Fuck, Macdonald.”

Several kids from the tables around them began to laugh, and Remus sighed at the poor idiot, nudging Sirius’ cup of tea toward his hand.

“You’re buying me a new skirt you dunce,” Mary hissed. Before Sirius could grasp the cup, she snatched this tea and downed it in one go without so much as a grimace, leaving the mug turned upside down on the table top like a shot glass before spinning on her heel and strutting out of the dining hall.

“I can’t believe Macdonald just did that,” James said, then catching Lily’s eye, he added; “Not because she’s a girl. Tea’s just hot, s’all…”

* * *

Monday 12th April 1976

“Fuck.”

Remus slammed the phone down on its receiver hard enough to make the year 9 boy talking to his mum on the other line jump and let out a little squeak. Mumbling an apology, he turned away from the hall phone lines and took the stairs two at a time until he’d made it to the fourth floor, winding himself with the effort.

As he stalked back through the door of their room Sirius looked up from his spot on his bed, a pen sticking out of the corner of his mouth, the Rickenbacker across his lap, and various pages of sheet music strewn out in front of him.

“Quoi d’neuf?" He mumbled around the pen.

Remus paused with his hand still on the door handle. “You did not just use French to show off while also holding a bloody guitar in your lap.”

“Heh, yeah, maybe.” Plucking the pen out from between his teeth, Sirius leaned over one of the music sheets and continued making little notes in its margins while Remus shut the door behind himself.

“So who was on the phone? Your dad?”

Remus snorted and walked back to his bed, picking up the stack of books he’d been organising before the phone call. “As if. No, it was Giles, his driver. Says I’m not going home for our break, apparently.”

Sirius sat up a little straighter. “They’re making you stay at school for Easter holiday?”

“Yup.”

“Wicked.”

Remus rounded on him, books in hand. “You want to stay here?”

Sirius nodded eagerly. “I’d lick McGonagall’s bare foot if I could stay for a whole holiday.”

Remus scowled, forcing the image of their Headmistress’s feet from his mind. “Well, why don’t you then?”

“You already know why. Mum would kill me.”

“You say that, but how much can she do from the other end of the bloody country?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Yeah well, at least it’ll mean I get some peace and quiet from you lot.”

Sirius gave a harsh strum on his guitar, making Remus flinch. “We are very peaceful.”

“Tosser.”

Sirius smiled and held his chin thoughtfully. “Well at least the holiday isn’t for another week. You’ve got time to practice missing us.”

“Or ignoring you. That’d really do me some good.”

Wiggling his eyebrows, Sirius returned to his fretting while Remus packed away the rest of his books. They were only out of order because Sirius kept going through them, the buggar.

“Have you seen Pete?” Remus asked, eventually, after glancing at Peter’s rumpled bed sheets.

“He’s out with Moira.”

“Again?”

“Right? I think she’s the reason he’s going to fail maths this year.”

“S’long as he doesn’t bring her back here.”

“Oh don’t be such a moralist. Honestly I’m surprised he swung anyone. Though it is just Moira, after all.”

Remus frowned. Moira was… attractive? Reasonably pretty at least and she seemed to like Peter so that was a plus. His judgemental attitude toward Peter’s girlfriend almost made him wonder what Sirius secretly thought of him, especially on the really rough mornings. It had been several weeks since his birthday when they’d all woken up looking like they’d been run over by Stan’s trolley, and yet Remus had had little luck when it came to getting his sleeping schedule back on track. It was like his mind just wouldn’t shut off. If it wasn’t a song stuck on repeat, then he was reliving the day’s events, running through every situation that could’ve gone differently and reimagining them. Worse still was the memories, the ones that came back with problems he couldn’t possibly solve inside his head.

To distract himself he’d read, pulling his lamp inside his bed curtains so as to not disturb the other boys, and if that didn’t work he’d sneak across the room and sit himself down against Sirius’ wardrobe hutch, borrowing the stereo and headphones to listen in the wee hours of the morning. It was on one of these nights that Sirius had woken up and found Remus there, back lit up by the moonlight coming through their window. He hadn’t said anything of course, electing rather to lie there and watch until Remus had finally noticed his eyes were open. That quiet kind of Sirius that only existed at night was more unnerving than any noise that came out of the East End, and he’d thought about stopping after that, but the stereo remained too tempting on those nastier nights, and the music helped drown out everything else.

“Oi, Lupin, what do you think of this?”

Remus looked up from his books as Sirius set his fingers to the Rickenbacker’s strings, playing a dirty little melody that rose to a quick peak in the middle and filtered out in the end. The riff was good, almost like listening to a jazz piano; but Sirius wouldn’t have thought that was a compliment, so he kept it to himself.

When the other boy looked up from his guitar Remus nodded. “That’s really good. Are there any words to go with it?”

Sirius shook his head. “Nah, but if you think of any, let me know, okay?”

Remus snorted. “Okay.”

“I did write something the other day though.”

“Oh? You’re writing songs now?”

“Just a few drabbles really. We’ll need them if we’re to make it as a band later.”

“Well go on then you smug idiot, let’s hear it.”

Sirius winked and then strummed a chord. *“ ‘Hey diddle, diddle, Black and his fiddle, come listen to this merry tune. Pete’s a silly prat, Pot’s a right twat, and Lupin jumped over the moon’.”*

“You idiot,” Remus laughed, snatching up one of his pillows and tossing it across the room. The pillow caught Sirius upside the head and he fell backwards with a dramatic *‘omph’* just as the front door opened and James walked in, book bag tucked under one arm, humming to himself.

“Alright lads?”

Peeling the pillow back from his face, Sirius grinned at Remus, who was trying to swallow his laughter. “Alright,” he answered. “How was detention? We missed you at dinner.”

“I ate with Lily,” James said, opening the hutch at the base of his bed and setting away the school books that had accompanied him to detention after class that day.

Both Remus and Sirius shared a knowing look until Sirius’ curiosity got the better of him.

“So how is Evans?” He asked, tossing Remus’ pillow back across the room.

James shrugged casually. “She's good.”

"Ah, 'good'. I see." Glancing at Remus again, Sirius shook his head and stuck his guitar pick between his teeth. It was nice to see him showing a bit of restraint, especially considering they were only just barely out of the woods where Lily was concerned.

“Are you going to practice?” Remus asked as James shucked off his school jacket and peeled his shirt up over his head. Unlike the rest of them, James had never hesitated to strip down in the middle of the room. Remus suspected that if he had his way, the dorm would’ve become little more than a glorified changing room.

“Yeah,” James said, “boys are getting ready for the tournament at the end of May. We want to beat the Scots, you know, to make up for our bruised English pride from last year’s loss.”

“S'just ‘cause we’re not used to losing to them,” Sirius snickered as James pulled his jersey down over his head.

“Want to come, Lupin? We could always use someone else to run drills.”

Remus shook his head. “Oh no, you go ahead.”

“You’d think with those legs he’d be more coordinated,” Sirius said.

James tossed one of his football boots at Sirius. “What about you then? Might as well run something besides your mouth.”

“Oh yes,” Remus said, “take him. I want to get a paper done and it would be nice to not have to do it in the common room just to avoid his flapping gums.”

Sirius gave him an offended look but set the guitar aside. “Oh fine then, Potter. But I’m not running laps.”

“It’s good exercise!”

“ *‘It’s good exercise*—bah,” Sirius mocked, getting up and rifling through a draw in his hutch. He came back with a pair of jersey shorts and a t-shirt and crossed the room to the bathroom.

“Not going to change out here with your mate?” Remus called,

teasingly.

“You first, ya lanky git!”

Biting his lip, Remus watched as Sirius disappeared into the bathroom to change, before tossing a pencil across the room at James, who was tying his shoes. “What do they have you and Lily doing in detention?”

James straightened up on his bed, considering. “Well first it was lines. ‘I will not sneak into the girls dorms’, ‘I will not lie to my dorm monitor’, ‘I will not break curfew’.”

“Did any of them manage to sink in?”

“Nah, they’d have to tattoo me for the message to stick.” Smiling, James tossed his pencil back, and Remus scrambled to catch it out of the air.

“And here I thought you were supposed to be the good one. Does this mean you and Lily are talking then?”

“Yeah. S’good.”

“Just ‘good’?”

James gave a shy smile. “Well, maybe a little better than good.”

Smugly, Remus tucked the pencil behind his ear and stood up, crossing the room to fiddle with the stereo. It felt too quiet without Sirius’ strumming.

“Hey Lupin?”

“Hm?”

“Thanks.”

Glancing back from the stereo’s dials, Remus gave his friend a cheeky smirk. “For?”

James sighed. “You know what for. For everything.”

“Yeah, well, do me a favour and don’t ever ask me to play match-maker again. I am officially out of the love business.”

“But you were so good at it.”

Remus batted him on the top of the head, and James returned the gesture with a swat of his own. They kept going, snickers turning to light-hearted grunts until finally the door to the bathroom opened and Sirius walked out to find them half-grappled, grinning like idiots.

“Hey, don’t leave me out!”

Before Sirius could reach them, Remus broke away and skirted back to his bed, tossing himself down amongst his books.

“Quick, take him,” he said to James, who’d stood up and grabbed the football from beneath his bed.

“He must hate me,” Sirius complained, but James only gave him a small shush, pushing his ball into his arms and leading him to the door.

“We’ll meet you for dinner later,” he called, then; “Oh, and Remus, Southampton got into the Cup finals!”

Now absent-mindedly chewing on the end of the pencil, Remus glanced up from his notes. He had been pretty sure James only favoured Arsenal, but maybe he’d switched over and he’d just tuned out that conversation.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, dunno who they’ll be playing yet, it’s between Manchester United and Oxford, but we’ll have to watch the game together!”

No way. “Sure, mate.” *Sounds terrible*. “Sounds great.”

James beamed at him and flashed a quick thumbs up before disappearing out the door as Sirius, tossing a football up and down in the air, fell into step behind him.

Chapter End Notes

A 'hair bobble' is just another word for hair tie/ponytail.
'Weetabix' is a brand of UK breakfast cereal.

I really liked writing this chapter. It was simple but also felt nice to let the kids whine like kids and communicate back and forth in true pining-style. See you next chapter, cheers xx

Chapter 23: Easter, 1976

Chapter Summary

Remus begins his Easter vacation at Hawkings alone and finally comes face to face with (possibly) a new friend.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking and (briefly) implied child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I go out to work on Monday morning,
Tuesday, I go off to honeymoon;
I'll be back again before it's time for sunny-down,
I'll be lazing on a Sunday afternoon…

- "Lazing on a Sunday Afternoon" Queen, 1975

There hadn't been much rain so far that April, which only meant they were shaping up for a hot summer just like the last. Remus was beginning to feel that familiar uncomfortableness that came with the late-afternoon heat, but at least he wouldn't be stuck inside all week while his friends were at home visiting their families. All of them except for Lily had boarded the buses at the crack of dawn to make it to the station on time, but since she was the only one of them not bound for London her train wasn't scheduled to leave until noon, giving them more time to slum around after breakfast.

"I'm really sorry you're spending the holiday at school alone, Remus," Lily said, as they walked to the buses together.

"Don't be," he said, switching her trunk from one hand to the other. She hadn't asked him to carry it but he'd taken it off her hands anyway, only stopping to wonder at the last second about what his chances were of being called a misogynist.

"But the only ones around will be the year thirteens, and they're all going to be busy studying for their A-Levels."

Remus shrugged for what felt like the millionth time. "Better than staying for Christmas, at least I can go outside." Truthfully he was

trying not to think about Tomny, who he'd promised to visit once he got back to London for Easter holiday. If only he had a bloody phone, the caveman.

"James offered to stay actually," Remus continued, "but I think he wants to go home and see his parents."

Lily smiled a bit. "At least Easter Communion will be nice and small. I hate how big and busy it gets back home."

"Fuck. I'd forgotten about that, you know?"

"Language, Remus. We're talking about church."

"I'm pretty sure I've heard you say worse things since my birthday."

"Shush, you. What about Black though, did he not try to stay?"

"No, he offered too, but he couldn't really have stayed. His mum's a hard-ass."

Lily nodded. "Yeah… James has mentioned before how horrible she is. Seems kind of counterintuitive. You have all that money and influence and you're still so awful? And to your own son? I mean I know Sirius is a prat and all—"

"Yeah, well, 'money doesn't buy happiness' and all that," Remus said, kicking a stone out of his path.

"It's not just her either—James said Sirius and his brother used to be closer, but he and Regulus really fell off in the last couple of years. Sirius has never said anything to me, but James did, you know… before." She blushed a bit. "Regulus hangs out with some real nasties though. I've seen them outside Sev's dorm—they're in the same House—and one time Regulus actually *hit* Sirius. In front of the whole lawn—just lashed him right across the face! I thought Sirius was going to kill him for it—I might've—but he only laughed. It was kind of scary actually."

Lily stopped to give a little shudder, and it occurred to him that the fight must've been scary, to affect someone as fearless as her. She continued though, lifting a hand to nibble on her thumbnail. "James told me the argument was over something Sirius said about their mum. But oh, I don't think I was supposed to tell you that… It's not really my business either."

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell,” Remus said, meaning it.

They had made it to the front of Castle Hall now, and the wide, U-shaped driveway was full with buses and cars all waiting to take the rest of Hawkings’ students home for the week.

Remus passed Lily her trunk, which she took with a smile. “You know, I never said sorry for ruining your birthday party,” she said, bashfully.

“You didn’t ruin it. It was still fun. And besides, I figure those weeks of detention punished you and James much better than I ever could. You never did say how those went, by the way.”

Lily pursed her lips over a smile. “They were fine. We got through them, and Potter was amicable enough.”

“Oh, he’s amicable now?”

“Yeah, a good bit more than you’re being right now!”

Remus smiled, and she knocked her trainer into his ankle. “Stop looking so smug!”

“I’m not smug, I’m happy! You don’t know what it was like going between you girls and the rest of them. I spent weeks trying to get information out of you lot, I’ll have you know.”

“We *noticed,"* Lily drawled. “Mary was half-convinced you had a crush on one of us, what with how many questions you were asking.”

“Uh…” Remus suddenly felt very warm in the face.

“I’m only kidding,” Lily said finally, “besides I guess you lot got what you wanted then? You knew on your birthday—why I was angry.”

Remus rubbed the side of his neck. “Er… yeah. Lottie told me.”

“Marlene always says she needs a muzzle.” Lily sighed. “I feel like an idiot, you know. I think in the beginning I was just sort of embarrassed. They all thought I was some boring swot—”

Not all of them, Remus thought, for James’ sake.

“And that all I cared about was school. It was embarrassing that—lord—I don’t know—that I wasn’t cool enough?” Lily pinched her forehead. “And then James bragged about kissing that girl from the village in front of me and I just… I spent all summer trying to forget

about it. I told myself it didn't matter but as soon as I saw him at the beginning of the year I got angry all over again."

"But you're not angry anymore?"

"No, I'm actually pretty tired of ignoring him and Black. They don't make it easy, exactly."

"No they do not," Remus said, smiling a bit. "Does this mean you and James are dating now?"

Lily swatted him in the shoulder. "God—no! You're as bad as Mary."

"S'just a question, Evans, no need to get violent."

"I'd like to settle for amicable acquaintances for now."

"And is that what we are?"

Lily shook her head with a pretty smile. "No, we're friends, Remus."

"Oh. Cheers then. Now will you tell me why Davey Gudgeon was first on your kiss-list?"

"Don't make me take my friendship back."

They shared a cheeky smile, just as another body appeared at Lily's shoulder.

"Lily, the bus is getting ready to leave," Snape said, ignoring Remus' presence entirely.

"Oh, Sev, yes! I'm coming," Lily said, snapping to attention. Snape spared Remus a single glare before picking up Lily's bag and walking off with it, though Remus noticed smugly that he struggled a little bit with the extra weight.

"I'm not studying with him anymore," Remus told the red-head. He'd only had to spend a handful of afternoons at a library table with Severus Snape, but each one had been filled with more glowering and sneering (not just from Snape) than learning. More often than not Snape had elected to speak or make a jab at Remus through Lily, as though she were the telephone line between them. Lily had been ecstatic the day Remus finally agreed to join her in exam studying, but not even a passing biology mark was worth spending more time with the greasy boy.

“Don’t worry,” Lily said, “I’ll plan accordingly for when school starts up again. I don’t really get much use out of studying with Sev anyway, he’s always just correcting my answers without teaching me how he got them.”

“So he makes a horrible teacher as well as a horrible person, then.”

“Don’t be mean.”

“LILY!” Snape barked, standing by the bus door and shaking his hands frantically to get her to hurry up.

Lily nodded to him before turning back to Remus. “I’ll see you in a week, okay?”

“Okay.”

There was a honk and Lily flounced off to follow Snape onto the bus, scuttling eagerly to a seat on Remus’ side. She waved at him and he waved back until the bus had pulled away from the curb and driven completely out of sight.

* * *

Sunday sermons were distinctly more painful to sit through without Sirius or James there to mimic the priests or thumb war when they were supposed to be reciting verses with the rest of the school. Not including the teachers who’d elected to stay for the holiday, Remus counted less than two dozen kids, most of which were year 13’s who appeared as though they didn’t want to be in church any more than he did; though he suspected their irritation had more to do with an interruption in their studying than anything else.

Without so much as a single familiar face to keep him company, Remus sat in his empty pew and twiddled his thumbs for the entire service, feeling like an idiot for not even attempting to skip. They hadn’t taken attendance, and not even Mrs. Buchanan was there to lead the sparse choir, making his mind wander toward fantastical reasons for her absence. There didn’t seem to be any other teacher who left campus as often as she did, but she did supervise one of the most chaotic forms classes in the entire school. A week before Sirius had almost laid Crouch out for making a year 8 girl cry over her dental head-brace and she’d had to separate them with one hand while balancing a tuba in the other. Perhaps she just left school for

peace of mind; anyone who dealt with as many shits as could be found in Music Room #2 deserved frequent breaks.

Once the actual holidays had finished (he'd at least been fed well—beef Wellington on Sunday and a bacon-wrapped turkey on Monday) Remus found himself with plenty of time to catch up on homework and practice with his bass. It took about two days before he'd started to venture out on his own again after coming to the realisation that not only was his dorm room empty, but so was the rest of the campus. He hadn't been doing so as much in the last few months, and it was a strange feeling to be suddenly confronted with so much alone time after he'd finally gotten used to all the noise.

The preferred spot quickly became a little shaded patch under a large oak tree, just across the berm from the dining hall. Once he'd run out of homework he began taking books and the Fender along with him and used the practice to keep busy, setting up his sheet music out on the grass and using small rocks to weigh them down so that they wouldn't blow away in the spring breeze. It felt better to practice acoustically. He still hadn't gotten the hang of the power plugging into an amp gave him; it only seemed to magnify every mistake—but with no one around he found himself enjoying himself more than usual. It was easy to become self-conscious during lessons or in their bedroom since Sirius was always around to listen, but once he finally let go of the fear that someone would be around to hear his mistakes, Remus' confidence began to grow. His fretting was getting better, and he didn't trip over his fingers as much anymore. Halfway through the week he'd even managed to get through a full rendition of "Sweet Emotion" without any major blunders, and it was getting easier to play the bass's heavy strings without a pick.

Remus ate most of his meals under the tree and even enjoyed a few cheeky cigarettes since he knew no one would be around to catch him. He was sixteen now, old enough to legally buy his own smokes, but Hawkings was still pretty strict when it came to smoking outside of designated areas, and those were usually crowded with upper sixths or irritable teachers just looking for a break.

Being alone was pretty good once he'd gotten over the disappointment of not going back to London. Tomny might've been wondering where he was (maybe even placing bets with the others) but also, who's to say he was even thinking about him in the first place? Things often got messy following a take-over, and blokes like Tomny who didn't belong to any one group, preferring to pay their dues to whoever barked the loudest, were always getting shoved around until the dust

settled.

Was Tonya still there, dancing around the flat to her music and creating three-course meals for boys who were used to having half a beer for breakfast? Maybe she'd found a new place in a safer neighbourhood, or maybe she'd gone back to Paris. Would Tomny be missing her then? He'd always had a quick turn-over with girlfriends, but Tonya wasn't like any of the girls he'd brought around before. Or at least, Remus had liked her the best.

The song Sirius had started composing before the holiday kept him busy after he'd run out of things to practice. It wasn't really a song, more of a melody than anything, but the parts of it he could remember sounded good on the bass too. He expanded on it, added a wonky bridge and just let his fingers play until he had something that he thought was halfway decent. Coming up with the words was harder. In his boredom Remus had started to scribble lyrics in the margins of his music sheets the way Sirius was always doing, but none of them seemed to match with the tempo and most were just plain bad;

'You want me, you want me home//You want me, pick up the phone';

'She's so sweet//Raises the heat//Leaves me wanting more//She's so hot// I can't just not//Fall across the bedroom floor';

'I watch you go through that front window//Don't you have any regrets?// I've lost the bet now//Bring back my cigarettes'.

There was no way he could ever show Sirius or the others; he'd die of embarrassment. The lyrics went back and forth between gross and nonsensical to sappy and wimpish. It felt like he was just imagining himself as Bob Dylan or James Taylor and doing a crappy job of it. How did you even write a song anyway? Were the words just supposed to appear while you stared at nothing, imagining situations that might be interesting enough to put to music? Was that why all musicians were such lunatics; because they spent all their time slamming their heads into concrete in hopes that something half-way decent might just fall out?

Remus felt particularly disgruntled over his attempts at writing when evening came and he spent all his time staring at the lyrics printed on the back of Sirius' albums. He was developing a particular vendetta against Queen for the band's ability to spin such outrageous stories into beautiful prose, and must've listened to "Killer Queen" about a

hundred times;

She keeps her Moet et Chandon,
In her pretty cabinet;
“Let them eat cake”, she says,
Just like Marie Antoinette;
A built-in remedy,
For Kruschev and Kennedy;
At anytime an invitation,
You can’t decline…

He had no idea what the hell Mercury was on about, but it sounded bloody cool, and because he had nothing better to do, Remus kept playing. It had always been easy for him to pick out the instruments from one another on a recorded track, but he was getting better at reading the chords by ear now too.

By the fifth day of his paternally-imposed isolation, Remus had nearly run out of things to do all together. He smoked to pass the time, but since the truth about his dirty habit had come out to the rest of his friends, smoking had become more of a communal event and he was just left disappointed. Always eager to play the rebel, Sirius had lit up alongside him whenever he could—most of the time bumming off Remus but occasionally showing up with his own carton, which he was always willing to share. Peter had partaken enough times too, usually coughing his guts out, but really it was James that had surprised him. He didn’t like smoking in the dorm room and wouldn’t join in very often, citing football as an excuse to keep somewhat healthy, but some afternoons when he seemed to be feeling particular ballsy, James would start smoking like a chimney.

“You sure you’re not a secret chain-smoker?” Remus had asked, after watching James light up a third cigarette behind the dining hall dumpsters.

“I figure,” James started, “that if you only do it every now and then, something else’ll come along and kill you before the cigarettes realise that it’s their job.”

“I think that’s the most fatalistic thing you’ve ever said,” Sirius said, impressed.

“My dad’s always saying how the gap between British humour and death is very small.”

The memory had stuck with Remus mostly because he thought it would almost have made a decent song, and so in his boredom, he found himself trying to rhyme ‘fatal’ with something—*cradle? Hateful? Dining room table?*—when a hand tapped him on the shoulder, scaring the life out of him.

“Bloody hell!” Remus shouted, dropping the cigarette he’d been smoking into his lap as he scrambled to hide what he was writing. When he finally looked up it was Simeon Pettigrew standing behind him, leaning against the trunk of Remus’ oak tree with his hands in his pockets.

“Sorry,” Simeon said, over a cocky smile, “just wanted to make sure it was you and not someone else. Didn’t think I’d make you piss your pants.”

“You didn’t,” Remus huffed, setting his papers aside and picking up his cigarette, which had nearly burnt a hole in the front of his trousers. Simeon watched him, his eyes unnervingly blue. He was wearing a t-shirt tucked into a pair of brown bell-bottoms, and had a gold earring in his right ear the same as Sirius. His attire might’ve been average in a big city like London, but after months of seeing only grey slacks and House colours Remus almost balked.

“You’re Regis," Simeon said.

“Remus.”

He grinned guiltily. “Sorry. I’m Simeon. Nice glasses.”

Remus reached up to remove the teashades Tonya had given him for Christmas. “I know who you are, you’re Peter’s brother.”

He nodded. “Shouldn’t you be at home for the holidays, Remus?”

“Shouldn’t *you?"*

“I stayed to study.”

“So did I.”

Simeon glanced around the messy pile of papers and music sheets, then at the Fender, which was sitting in its case with the top open.

“Clearly.”

“It’s nothing,” Remus said, as he snapped the case closed and got to his feet. Simeon’s sudden entrance was the first interruption he’d had in days, and it somehow left him on edge. The sun was still shining, it not even being mid-afternoon yet, but he could always continue his ‘nothing’ in the common room.

“Looks like the fun kind of nothing. More fun than exams, anyway. You like music?”

“Yeah," he mumbled.

“Me too.” Simeon pushed off the tree and crouched down, scooping up Remus’ carton of Embassys. He hadn’t realised they’d come out of his pocket.

“You bring these from home?” He asked, looking up. “Nobody’s selling this brand on campus.”

“Yeah,” Remus said, then; “Kids sell cigarettes at school?”

“ ‘Course. You can get anything if you know the right person to ask. Hawkings is too old of a place to not have some sort of black market.”

Simeon handed the carton over as he stood up again. He was barely taller than Remus, but he had certainly taken the bulk of the ‘handsome’ gene within the Pettigrew family. Poor Peter was probably going to be 5’4” and mousey forever.

“How’s your stash? Probably getting pretty low, hey?”

“Mhm.” He had been trying not to think about it. Between nearly four months of school and supplying Sirius he was running dangerously low. The plan had been to stock up again through Tomny over Easter break, but obviously that wasn’t going to happen.

Feeling irritated over yet another interrogation (the kids at Hawkings were so nosey, like really) Remus brought his cigarette back to his lips. He had to relight it, but once he’d done so he took a deep drag and let the smoke waft over Simeon. “Is this the part where you tell me you’re the one who’s been giving Sirius the cigarettes?”

“He told you that was me?”

“No, but you get us booze.”

“Indeed,” Simeon said.

“How does he pay you? His parents cut him off.”

Simeon rubbed a hand over his mouth. “Commissary stuff mostly. Little things. He’s still got a tab there. Would’ve thought you’d have known that. Private school’s not that much different from prison, mate.”

“Yeah, I figured that much out for myself at least. You don’t got your own tab?”

“It’s mostly just a favour. I know he’s got it rough at home.”

Having it ‘rough at home’ meant very different things in the East End, but Remus tried not to think about how Simeon seemed to know more about Sirius’ home-life than he did. It irked him, for some reason.

Simeon took the silence as a chance to look Remus up and down. “So you wanna come to a party tonight?”

“A party?” Remus looked around at the empty berm. There couldn’t have been more than fifty people on the entire two-hundred acre campus. “With who?”

“Not all of us stayed just for the books,” Simeon said with an easy laugh. He turned and began scooping up the sheet music from the ground, which Remus snatched back quickly.

“So it’s your party, then?”

“Not mine, per se. Just some friends looking to have a good time. I’ll even show you had to roll your own cigs, if you want.”

Remus, who was not used to people doing things for nothing, squinted at him. “Why?”

The older boy shrugged. “Because I’m so bored I’m ready to put my head through one of the library windows, and you seem about as interesting as anything else right about now. *Annnd,* I’ve seen you out here by your lonesome a lot.”

“I’m not lonely.”

“Never said you were—a musician needs his downtime. Just asked so

you could come and hang out with some cool people."

Remus laughed a bit. "You're cool then? Do people who are actually cool have to say that they're cool?"

"They don't, but nothing wrong with a little self-advertising."

Remus considered, wondering if he really wanted to be dragged along to another event for someone else's enjoyment. Simeon seemed less whiny than Lily or Sirius, and at least if he went he might get something out of it, but still, he was hesitant.

"You can get me some fags then?"

"Loose tobacco, maybe. We roll our own. You got anything to trade for it?"

Remus shrugged. "Some spliffs."

"Then of course."

"Fine, then."

Simeon grinned and for a moment Peter's boyish face shone through. "You'll come?"

"Yeah, but you have to show me how to roll a decent cig, too."

Simeon wiggled his eyebrows. "Deal, and in return, you have to play me a song on that guitar of yours."

"It's a bass—" Remus started, before his haughty expression vanished from his face all together. "What? No, I can't."

"It's just one song!" Simeon insisted, already backing away from the tree. "The others'll love it, and if they don't, you won't really care. Trust me."

"But I don't play—" Remus tried, but the other boy was already across most of the berm.

Simeon gave one last wave, his golden locks blowing in the breeze. "Byron House, tonight. See you there, Regis."

Chapter End Notes

I definitely cringed writing those song lyrics, but so did Remus

and that was the point, LOL.

Chapter 24: Come Together

Chapter Summary

Remus attends a party hosted by Simeon Pettigrew and gets to show off a little.

Chapter Notes

CW: Drinking, smoking, and recreational drug usage.

A/N: *Update* There is a character featured in this chapter named Alice. She is NOT Alice Longbottom, just to be clear. xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh Peace Train sounding louder,
Glide on the Peace Train;
Come on now Peace Train,
Peace Train;

Now I've been crying lately,
Thinkin' about the world as it is;
Why must we go on hating,
Why can't we live in bliss?

- "Peace Train" Cat Stevens, 1971

Thinking that there was no way Simeon could've been serious, Remus had almost left the Fender behind. It felt stupid to bring an instrument to a party he'd only been invited to at the last minute. Sirius would've loved it of course, being an aspiring musician and naturally the most luminous person in any room he walked into, but Remus only knew a few songs and most of them sounded half-baked at best. You'd never catch him admitting it, but after Simeon had left him on the berm Remus had gone back to his dorm and practiced straight through dinner out of nervousness.

By the time he'd worked up the nerve to leave Godric the sun was long gone and the roads and paths of House Lane were lit up only by the yellow street lamps. Named after the poet, Byron boys dorm had earned itself a reputation for housing Hawkings' artsy, alternative types, though that was a loose description at best. Simeon didn't really

strike Remus as ‘alternative’, but he figured the guy owned at least one or two puka shell necklaces, which had to count for something.

Passing the dorm’s exterior plaque depicting a golden ox, Remus walked right through the front door and down the hall. He heard music before anything else, but as he approached the common room, he could hear a mixture of laughter and shouting. Slowing just outside the sloped doorway, Remus leaned his head in to listen.

“I’m telling you, Cass, it’s just a division of extremist politics and industrial labour, how can you not understand that? It’s not just about being nihilistic, they’re really trying to fight against a future that isn’t working.”

Another voice joined the conversation, deep and sarcastic in tone; “I thought you were talking about the ethnic division versus the aging population?”

“It's not a 'versus' thing. Don’t you see how it all links back to one another—that those bleeding codgers in parliament are only putting a bandage over a bullet wound? They’re going to drive our generation into the ground!”

“*Sunt lacrimae rerum,* Audrey.”

“You don’t actually sound any smarter when you speak in Latin, dickhead.”

Another voice called out, “Audrey, come sit down, love.”

“He’s impossible! I swear there’s just sawdust where a brain should be.”

There was more laughter, and Remus had just steeled himself to walk in when a hand came down on his shoulder, making him jump.

“Two for two, today,” Simeon smirked. “You’re too jumpy, Remus.”

“Maybe you should stop sneaking up on me.”

Simeon just grinned and indicated toward the noise and laughter with a jerk of his head. “Come meet the club.”

With no choice but to go where Simeon led him, Remus went with him into the common room. Like Godric’s, the room was decorated with sofas and armchairs as well as tables and benches for studying.

Bookshelves and paintings were decorated every wall and surface, though it became obvious right away that where Godric House favoured a baroque-style and impressionism, Byron coveted surrealism. Melted faces and various depictions of juxtaposed realities stared back at him from every wall; and they weren't the only ones.

A group of five kids, two boys and three girls, watched him from the centre of the room where they had pushed the sofas together into one big circle. Each of the kids were in weekend dress, which at Hawkings usually consisted of a variation of their uniform paired with clothes they might wear at home; though they had slightly more jewelry and makeup than Remus was used to seeing, even after hanging around Mary for two terms. The windows were open to the night behind them, but Remus could still smell the hash and the coffee table was decorated with rows of bottles, cans, and ashtrays. He didn't recognise any of them from the Easter service either.

Still with an arm around Remus' shoulders, Simeon pulled him right up to the back of the sofas and held him there while everyone turned around to get a look as though he were a monkey in a zoo.

"Remus, that's Cass, Audrey, Alice, Deacon and Renata. Lads, ladies, communists, this is Remus."

"Remus who?" Audrey asked snappily. She had short, spiky blonde hair and wore so much eyeliner that she reminded him of an angry raccoon or one of the punks you could find around hanging around Denmark Street and music venues like the 100 Club.

Simeon leaned into Remus' ear. "Hey, what's your full name again?"

"It's Lupin."

"Remus Lupin!" He exclaimed. "Now everyone be good and say hello."

All of them spoke in unison;

"Hello, Remus Lupin."

Simeon nodded his head, clearly pleased, and turned him toward one of the empty sofas, which they had to climb over to enter the circle. Remus dropped his bass behind the couch, but couldn't help but notice the acoustic guitar in the lap of the boy to his left. He was big, with shoulders even James would kill for and enough freckles to rival Lily.

The guitar boy gave Remus a friendly smile and leaned over to offer his hand. “Welcome to the club, mate. I’m Cass.”

Remus shook his hand firmly, the way Giles had taught him. “Remus.”

“Anyone got his registration papers?” Cass called, sitting back.

Remus looked around. “You’re an actual club?”

“Oh yeah, they call us, *'Les Provacateurs'.”*

“We’re not a club,” Simeon said from beside Remus, reaching to the hi-fi on the table beside his end of the couch and messing with the dials, “Cass’s just being a nob. We’re actually just a few numpties who always seem to find themselves in the same place at the same time. It’s completely casual.”

A pretty hispanic girl Simeon had called Renata sat up straighter across from them, grinding a cigarette stub out in the ashtray in front of her. “It’s not hard with a ringleader like Sim,” she said. Deacon, who must’ve been her boyfriend, looped an arm around her shoulders and passed her another cigarette as she slumped back into him.

Simeon grinned in a way that said he liked being known as the leader but had to deny it to save face. “That’s tosh, I’m no club boss. Although if we were a club I knew who I’d be nominating for president.”

“Who?”

“Alice, of course.”

There were a few chuckles, but they were quickly followed by nods as everyone agreed. Remus followed Simeon’s gaze to the girl sitting next to the blonde punk. She had a black bob haircut that looked much too dark on her pale skin and the oversized leather jacket she was wearing looked just as juxtaposed with her modest corduroy skirt and school shoes as the paintings on the wall.

“About time we had a woman in office anyway,” she said, leaning into Audrey, who began to stroke her hair.

“Careful what you wish for,” Cass said, fiddling with the tuning keys on his guitar, “or the next womanly world leader might really put us through the ringer.”

“And what could she possibly do in comparison,” Audrey said, “take away your cookies and milk at nap time?”

“Who needs milk when you have cheap beer?” Cass leaned forward and snatched a can up off the table, tossing it across the circle for her to catch. She did so, and flipped him off for good measure before cracking the tab.

“Want one?” Cass asked Remus, offering another can.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said.

“There,” Simeon mumbled, as he got the hi-fi to start playing a Cat Stevens album. “That’s enough Dr. Hook, I think.”

“Piss off, I liked that album,” Audrey said.

Simeon leaned in to Remus. “Don't mind Audrey. She's is our resident eristic instigator.”

"I've gathered that," Remus answered, and Simeon gave him a wink that made his stomach flip.

“What year are you, Remus?” Renata asked, blowing smoke.

“Eleven.”

“You didn’t want to go home for the holidays?”

“Uh, no.”

“That's too bad, I bet your family misses you.”

“Leave the kid alone, Renata, we’re not here to sob over a home-life,” Simeon said, then to Remus again; “ignore her, she gets sappy around the holidays.”

“What are you here for then?” He asked. “Just to study?”

Simeon glanced upwards in consideration. “That, and to forget our troubles. They won’t tell you until it’s too late, but eventually those high-up toffs are going to start asking you what it is you actually want to *do* with your life. Where you want to go to school next, what sort of mind-numbing career you’re going to have—what sort of ‘difference’ you’re gonna make. It’s exhausting, really.”

“Ignore *him,* Remus,” Renata said, “he gets bitter around the

holidays.”

Simeon smirked and picked up a beer of his own, cracking it and lifting it to Renata. She returned the toast with a glass of her own.

“You sure he’s old enough to drink that, Sim?” Audrey asked, gesturing to the beer in Remus’ hand. Remus met her eyes.

“You sure you’re old enough to have a haircut like that?”

There were a few snorts of laughter and Deacon tipped his head toward Remus; “He’s right, Auds. You look like a punkified version of my grandmother.”

“Oh shut up, Deaky.”

“Deaky—like John Deacon of Queen?” Remus asked.

“Nah,” Cass said, “Deaky’s been Deaky since year—what, four?”

“Three,” Alice corrected.

“So you’ve all known each other for that long then?”

“Almost,” Simeon said, “you get more new kids in primary than secondary.” Simeon looked back to his friends. “This is Remus’ first year at Hawkings.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Renata sighed, "you must miss your friends back home then. I know I did.”

“Oh—yeah, I do…” Remus licked his lips, staring down at his beer.

"Where are you from?" Asked Deacon.

"London."

"Us too—'cept for Cass and Alice."

"I'm from Dover," Cass said. "Alice's from Sheffield."

"Do you like Hawkings, Remus?" Alice asked.

Unnerved by the amount of questions, Remus looked to Simeon, but he just shrugged and sipped his beer.

"Yeah, it's cool," he said eventually. "Better than other schools I've

been to anyway."

"With your other friends? Must've sucked to leave them," said Renata.

"Er—yeah, sure, but I never actually went to school with them."

Deacon jutted out his chin. "Where'd you meet 'em then? A party?"

"Something like that."

"Sorry," Renata amended, smacking her boyfriend's thigh and smiling guiltily, "we don't mean to pry."

"No, it's fine," Remus answered. He was suddenly caught by the realisation that not only did he miss his friends, but up until that moment, no one had ever so much as asked him. It made sense that the Tomny or Lee or the others didn't ask much about school, they knew he didn't want to go and understood that if he wanted to share he would; but Sirius, James, Lily, and the rest… what did they know about him, really? They'd never bothered to ask about things beyond family and status. They knew about the cigarettes but had never asked where he'd picked up the habit. Were they just assuming things in their heads, the same way Lily had when she'd seen his clothes that very first day?

Flexing his jaw, Remus forced himself to sip his beer. When he looked up again they were all staring at him, as though they were waiting for some big speech.

"You guys like music?" He asked, and the tension deflated out of them.

"That's right," Simeon said easily, turning off the hi-fi, "Remus promised to sing for us."

"I did not!"

Simeon ignored him. "I said I'd teach him how to roll his own baccy if he played us a song."

"You just like watching people squirm, Sim," Cass said, tapping his fingers along the edge of his guitar. Remus looked at it nervously—he hadn't expected any of Simeon's friends to know how to play too.

Catching his gaze, Simeon knocked Remus' elbow. "Cass only carries the guitar around to look cool. He's actually shit."

“I’m still just learning, you nob. Never too late to pick up a new hobby.”

“You’ve been ‘just learning’ for two years now.”

“And you’ve *just* been an arse. Which of us do you think’s accomplished more in that time?”

“Remus, what do you like to play?” Alice asked with a smile, showing off a single dimple on her right cheek.

“I actually only know a few songs,” Remus said sheepishly, “The Beatles, mostly.”

“That’s great!” Renata said. “I love The Beatles. And I'm sure we’d love to hear you play.”

“But if it’s terrible then you get dunked in the lake.”

“Audrey’s just kidding.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Go on, Remus,” Deacon said, “save us from Simeon’s questionable taste in music.”

“Up yours, Deaky.”

“You can do it, Remus,” Alice said kindly.

Already regretting coming (he should’ve just stayed in his dorm and finished the last essay he’d been putting off) Remus sighed and stood up, reaching behind the sofa for his case. Drawing back with it, Simeon helped him clear some of the beer cans and ashtrays off the coffee table to set it down. When he’d opened the case and picked up the Fender, all eyes were on him, small smiles on everyone's faces.

“Holy shit, that’s nice,” Cass said, staring at the instrument with an intense interest.

“It’s not mine,” Remus confessed, “I take music with Buchanan.”

“And this is what the old bird’s been hiding? Damn. Thought it was all oboes and brass.”

Simeon had a cheeky look on his face. “Regretting taking Latin over music now, Cass?”

Cass gave a cheeky gesture and sat back on the couch. “Go on then kid. Let’s hear it.”

“It’s not going to sound like a guitar,” Remus said, “it’s just a bass.”

“Oh no,” Cass said quickly, “can’t ever be ‘just a bass’. A good bass line holds the entire band together. Without it the drums and guitar are going to sound disjointed. It smooths everything over to make that perfect harmony that’ll resonate down to your very core. Can’t have a band without a bass. You just have to think of it as—”

“Stop flapping your gob and let the kid play, won’t you?” Simeon snapped.

As Cass flashed another fowl gesture at his friend, Remus turned the Fender over in his lap and tested the keys to make sure everything was in tune. “Come Together” was easiest to play without looking at the sheet music, so he started with that. Nervous, it only took a few chords for him to trip over his fingers and mess up the timing of the intro, and he had to stop and take a breath.

“Don’t worry,” Alice said, comfortingly, “you’re doing great.”

So, Remus tried again. And this time he got through it—or at least the bits he remembered. There were a few stumbles but for the most part it sounded okay, and once he’d finished Remus finally looked up from the strings to find everyone smiling at him.

“That was so good!” Renata gushed loudly, and everyone else agreed with a nod.

“Hey, Remus,” Cass said, “can you play that again?”

“You wanna hear it again?”

“Yeah, just wanna try something.” Cass picked up his acoustic guitar and set it on his lap before looking back to him. “You go ahead, I’ll join in with the parts I know.”

Remus swallowed and found the right finger positions before starting again. This time he had an accompaniment, and despite Simeon’s earlier teasing, Cass picked it up quite quickly. By the time they made it to the second verse they were at least in time with one another.

Glancing around with a suspicious smile, Simeon began tapping his hand on the arm of the couch to keep time, and a few moments later,

opened his mouth to sing along.

"He wear no shoe shine—
He got toe jam football—
He got monkey finger—
He shoot Coca-Cola—
He say I know you, you know me,
One thing I can tell you is you got to be free—
Come together, right now, over me…"

There was snorting from Aubrey, and Alice swatted her in the arm hard enough that she hissed, but Simeon didn't seem to mind, he just kept singing. Remus glanced at him shyly, before looking back to his fingers so he wouldn't mess up. By the time they had made it to the bridge Renata had joined in, a much better singer than Simeon, and after her Alice and Deacon added their voices to the song. Simeon kept going, egged on by his friends now, and Remus felt the same sort of thrill he got when he was hanging around Tomny or sneaking out after hours with his roommates.

"He roller coaster—
He got early warning—
He got muddy water—
He one mojo filter—
He say, 'one and one and one is three',
Got to be good looking 'cause he's so hard to see—
COME TOGETHER! RIGHT NOW! OVER ME!"

Remus couldn't help it. He laughed and sang too. They kept singing the same verses over again, just going until they ran out of words and finally their last *'come together'* filtered out with Remus' bass and Cass' guitar. Shaking out his fingers, still stiff from nerves, Remus rubbed his wrists and took a deep swig from his beer.

"You're pretty good," Cass offered.

"You too."

"Told you, Sim, you bastard. Know any other songs, Remus?"

"A couple, but I need the sheet music for them."

"Did you bring it?"

"Mhm."

“Then break it out, kid.”

Remus stood up quicker than he meant to and nearly jabbed Simeon in the ribs with the Fender’s neck. They ended up making a make-shift music stand out of the beer boxes and he played each song in his very short repertoire at least twice through. His final song went over the roughest, obviously, but by then he’d already finished off his third beer and cared a lot less.

Cass was the one supplying the weed that evening, evidently, and after finishing his second play-through of “She Loves You” (Renata loved that one, of course) Remus broke out the spliffs that he’d brought.

“You rolled these yourself?” Deacon asked, inspecting one before lighting it.

“No, I’ve got a friend back home who’s an expert at rolling.”

“Useful friend.”

“Yeah,” Remus said, before smiling to himself. “His name’s Seesaw.”

“Seesaw?” Aubrey and Alice echoed together.

“Yeah, he got the nickname after getting punched in a fight and losing the sight in his left eye.”

“That’s funny,” Cass said, “the nickname, I mean—not him losing the ability to see.”

It was funny, Remus thought to himself. And he’d never even told his roommates.

Simeon looked up from the table behind their circle of couches. They’d set up a small bar table there and he was currently mixing several drinks at once. “Hey Alice," he called in a sly voice, "you didn’t happen to invite Lucy, did you?”

Alice smirked and stuck her hand in the inner pocket of her beat-up jacket.

“Lucy another friend?” Remus asked, earning him a chuckle or a snort from every one of the older kids.

“No, he means dots,” Cass said.

Remus just stared, still as just as confused.

“It’s acid,” Simeon said, standing behind Remus’ spot on the couch and passing him a drink. He didn’t know what was in it, but it smelled like Palmolive and disinfectant.

“You ever done it?” Alice asked, pulling out a small tin case out of her pocket.

Remus sipped his drink and resisted a grimace—vodka, but also tequila and what tasted like pineapple juice. A true sinner's mix. “I think so,” he answered. “Last summer, maybe. But my friends called it something else.”

“LSD?” Cass tried. “Mellow yellow? Window pane? Trips?”

“Maybe?”

“Oh, well, you wanna try it?”

Remus considered. He still had the whole weekend left before anyone else would be back at school, and he had nothing better to do; his dorm was empty except for a few more sixth formers, and none of them seemed interested in anything but studying. If he couldn’t go home, he could at least pretend like he was.

“Yeah, sure, why not.”

Jumping up from her spot on the couch, Alice came around the coffee table toward him, popping open the tin and pulling out a small square of paper half the size of Remus’ pinky nail. He stared at it, leaning away at first. “What’s that?”

“It’s the acid.”

“But it’s paper.”

“Paper dissolves faster than a pill. Here, stick out your tongue.”

Remus did as he was told, though still sceptical, and Alice dropped the colourful square into his mouth. It had a very slight metallic taste but dissolved in seconds just as she’d said. “How long ‘til I’m supposed to feel something?”

“Twenty minutes? Ten if you’re lucky.”

“That fast?” Remus licked his lips nervously. “Where’d you even get

it?”

“From Xeno,” Alice said, moving on to Deacon. “He’s got the best hook-ups if you can convince him you're cool.”

“If you need anything,” Simeon said, swinging himself over the couch with a overflowing glass of gin, “Xeno in Dalal House can get it.”

“Anything?”

“Mhm. Looks like you got lucky too. He’s only a twelfth year, which means he’ll be around next year if you or the lads ever need a little pick-me-up.”

“Only if he doesn’t get kicked out for selling drugs to children first,” Audrey said.

“He’s made it this far, Auds, you gonna nark on him now?”

“Oh fuck off.”

In the end they all took it. Across the room Renata was straddling her boyfriend and whispering in his ear and Alice had laid her head down in Audrey’s lap with her legs draped over the sofa arm, letting the other girl stroke her fingers through her hair as though she were petting a cat. Cass had plucked a book off of one of the shelves—a dusty, leather-bound thing barely holding together—and appeared to be trying to read while balancing on the back of one of the sofas. No one bothered to tell him that the book was upside down though.

While he was waiting around for the drug to kick in, Remus turned back to his bass, fiddling with the strings. First it was just mindless strumming, but then Sirius’ melody floated into his head. He kept it going with the mismatched bridge he’d added, as Simeon leaned in next to him, eyes downcast, a quiet smile playing on his lips.

“That’s quite good. What’s the song?”

“Oh, no song—Sirius wrote it,” Remus said. “Or at least, he wrote the first bit.”

“Clever one, that Sirius.”

“Yeah… Kind of a git though.”

“Eh, he might grow out of it yet. You never know.”

“You really believe that?”

“Not a chance.”

Simeon winked. It’d taken some time, but Remus now knew why Sirius always went from being his usual chatterbox-self to a full surround-sound system whenever Simeon came around. He was impressive—in that sort of devil-may-care way Sirius desperately tried to portray. Simeon had never seemed to mind the attention before, but then again, Remus hadn’t been paying as much attention before.

“He admires you,” Remus said, conveniently forgetting that the admiration was probably meant to be a casual secret.

“I know,” Simeon replied smugly. “He’s hard not to notice.”

Real hard. “He wants to play music one day—rock and roll.”

“Bet he could, too. He’s good.”

“You’ve heard him play?”

“Whole school’s heard him. He used to play piano during Communion. Stopped, maybe, last year, though?”

Remus nodded. “Says he prefers the guitar now.”

“He good with that too?”

“Oh yeah, the great arse.”

Simeon chuckled and closed his eyes. Remus could already feel himself slowing. His fingers tingled and he had to put the Fender back into its case when he realised that he’d lost feeling in them all together. He picked up his empty beer can, just to hold to make sure he didn’t lose his hands or something.

“He writes songs too,” Remus said, bragging openly now.

“I hope they’re awful,” Simeon said playfully. “Otherwise he’d have everything. Good looks weren’t enough for the little bleeder—'course he’s got to be Shakespeare too.”

“I dunno if he’s Shakespeare,” Remus snorted. His legs felt like he were floating in a pool. "Oi, is this supposed to feel like—" Remus turned to his left to find Simeon only a few centimeters away, only this time he didn't jump.

"Remus," Simeon started, blinking at him in slow-motion, "are you, *you know?"*

"Huh?"

" 'Cause I was wondering..."

"About Shakespeare...?"

"About *you.* And Sirius."

You and Sirius. The phrase made Remus giddy for some odd reason. His pleasure must've shown on his face because Simeon just smiled, shaking his head like he'd just lost a round of cards. "So you like him."

"Like who?" Remus asked dumbly.

"Sirius."

"Ha, 'course I like Sirius. Everyone likes Sirius."

"So we're off the table then?"

"What do you mean?" He was practically slurring now. Simeon just smirked and lifted a hand to Remus' face, stroking his cheek with his thumb. For some reason his touch felt like velcro scraping across his skin and he shivered, making Simeon chuckle and pull away.

"Nah, s'fine, didn't figure you were anyway. AC/DC maybe, but nah."

"There's this new Australian band called AC/DC. I don't care for 'em much."

Simeon waved him off. "His songs—are they any good? What does your Sirius write about?"

My Sirius? Oh bloody hell. “Well, I haven’t heard any of them actually. Just these bits on the guitar.”

“Wish I had something like that.”

“A guitar?” Remus had to stare hard at the common room rug to keep it from moving on its own. A moment later and the pattern had become hundreds of little butterflies; the kinds with eyes on their wings. They all blinked at him. Remus blinked back.

“A dream,” Simeon whined. “Listen to this—I’m going to finish school

and take over dad's press… probably marry some pretty girl, make an honest wife of her. Then she'll pop out a few kids and stay home while I work the nine to five grind, and at the end of the day I'll come home to a reasonable dinner made by that pretty wife. We'll talk about our day, ignoring our growing waistlines and the fact that we've both been cheating with the postman. Sounds like the life, to be honest… but what else? I'll be bald by the time I'm thirty—Dad was. There should be something else to look forward to, don't you think, Remus?"

"My dad's not bald," Remus said. Then he laughed, because it was so *stupid,* and only he knew why. "Or maybe he is?"

Simeon reached across the couch and pat him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, lad, you're just in it now. Enjoy the ride. You'll still have a full head of hair in the morning s'long as you stay away from Audrey, okay?"

"I heard that," someone called, but their voice was distorted and Remus was too busy trying to figure out what the colour of the couch tasted like. *Apricot and mushroom? Sirius would know.*

"God I love drugs," someone sighed dreamily, and one by one they all began to laugh as the common room's paintings, which had already appeared melted before, began dripping down the walls and liquifying on the floor. The music had stopped playing, which Remus thought was a terrible shame, so he began to hum a tune instead. He didn't have a pen or paper on hand to write down the words, but he figured he could just remember them.

Hey diddle diddle,
You've left me a riddle,
And I can't get it out of my head;
Sirius Black's a little shit,
With a horribly quick wit,
So why do I feel such dread?

It shouldn't feel scary,
Just feelings we'll bury,
It's not like we're sharing a bed;
Can't be this smitten,
Plenty of birds left in Britain,
We probably just been mislead;

Pretend that we're blind,

There’s no way he’s inclined,
And his lips aren't even that red;
So stop with the questions,
And act with discretion,
Or surely we’ll all just drop dead.

"Simeon..." Remus whispered, two minutes or two hours later, "I wrote a song."

"That's great," Simeon murmured back, "sing it for me tomorrow."

"Okay, promise."

Chapter End Notes

"Sunt lacrimae rerum" is a Latin phrase meaning "tears of things". In this context it means more along the lines of, “life is tragic”.
Denmark Street is a street in London's West End known for being associated with music. In the 60's and 70's recording studios began popping up along the street and bands/artists such as The Kinks, The Sex Pistols, David Bowie and Elton John recorded music there.
The 100 Club is a music venue/club which has been hosting live music since 1942. It was very popular amongst the early punk scene and played host to dozens of bands.
I threw in a reference to “Margaret Thatcher the Milk Snatcher" just for fun.
Also, the term "AC/DC" is a reference to bisexuality.

Chapter 25: The Corners and Cracks

Chapter Summary

> May 1976: The FA Cup finals. Exams are looming. Remus and Sirius have a chat.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Drug mentions. The 'f' slur in a smoking context. References to implied child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Got a feeling inside (can't explain),
It's a certain kind (can't explain);
I feel hot and cold (can't explain),
Yeah, down in my soul, yeah (can't explain)...

- "I Can't Explain" The Who, 1965

It had taken all of a week for the other boys to root out how Remus had spent his Easter holidays, and that was after he had been stopped twice by his new acquaintances; once in the dining hall by Renata and again when Audrey and Alice called him over while they were making their way to the gym.

"What did Renata want?" Peter asked the first time.

Remus shrugged as he shovelled eggs into his mouth. "Nothin'."

Sirius glanced up over Remus' shoulder to get a look. "Who's Renata?"

"She's one of Sim's friends," Peter said.

They all glanced at Remus expectantly, but he ignored them, keeping his head down over his breakfast and the book in his lap. It got harder later to convince them that nothing had happened once they'd seen Alice give him a baggy of loose tobacco, and so after much pestering from Sirius, Remus finally fessed up.

"I can't believe it," Sirius exclaimed in a hushed voice, "you did acid *without* us?"

“You guys weren’t exactly right around the corner.”

“James, he’s not even repentant!”

“Let Remus take his psychedelics in peace, Sirius.”

“Yes,” Remus said, “let him.”

“Shut-up Lupin, you traitor. It’s like the cigarettes all over again—you just keep holding out on us. Got any other big secrets you’d like to share? Perhaps you’re growing hash in the year thirteen gardens too?”

“God, you’re such a drama queen.”

“And you’re a seditious Judas.”

“Do you *always* have to put on a show?”

“ ‘All the world’s a stage’, so might as well make it your bitch.”

“We’re in church,” James pointed out in a whisper.

Lily leaned across Remus’ lap. “Oh, you only just now noticed?”

Sirius leaned across too, nearly touching his nose to hers. “It’s rude to interrupt a conversation, Evans.”

“Personal space, please!” Remus hissed, pinching Sirius’ nose and making him sit up and fall back into James. A moment later Marlene looked over to give them a piercing glare and everyone was silent after that.

Rolling tobacco had at least been a hit for Sirius. According to him it was a much more useful life-skill than anything they were studying for exams, but Remus couldn’t help but pick up on the other boy’s slight jealousy when he learned that Simeon had been the one to teach him. Still, most of the memories of his time spent with the Byron House gang were spotty at best, but that was largely thanks to their friend 'Lucy', who'd turned up at more than one party, though Remus never admitted to anything other than the first time.

“You have to tuck the edge in and then lick it,” Remus instructed, showing Sirius his half-rolled spliff. “It should look like a little canoe, but don’t make it too thin at the end.”

They’d set up shop outside the Galilei Block, tucked in between the exterior wall of Sirius’ chemistry lab and an outbuilding that was used

for storage and had since moved on from tobacco to hash. Despite Remus' attempts at instruction, Sirius had come away more than once with what looked like pulverized oregano on the tip of his tongue.

"Buggar," Sirius said, spitting. "Can't get the hang of it. Why can't I get the hang of it?"

"Can't be perfect at everything, Black."

"Hmph. Whatever, you finish them then."

Sirius leaned back against the brick wall and kicked one foot up over a knee, looking up at the blue sky above them. The hiding spot had been one of his favourites since Remus had found it back in January and marked it down on his campus map, which had steadily grown into more of a scribbled mess than anything else but still managed to hold every secret he had discovered about the school so far. The map itself was still a secret for the most part. Eventually Sirius would root it out (he had a bloodhound's nose for other people's business) but for now Remus was content to share only little bits of himself at a time. That way it stung less when things eventually came back to bite him on the arse.

While Remus worked, Sirius reached for his guitar. They'd both brought their instruments along without so much as discussing it, as though they were in silent agreement that they'd both missed their joint practices. Before Easter Remus had been too nervous to touch the bass much outside of music class, and even then he'd only tip-toed around the songs Sirius had been helping him with. Playing only what Buchanan had assigned—mostly exercises and symphonies written by long-dead Jerrys—was easy, and it didn't matter if he sounded uncool while doing it, the songs themselves were already uncool.

It had been fun—eventually—to play for Simeon's friends, and Remus had willingly hung out with the group for the remainder of his exile until everyone had returned from holiday; but playing in front of Sirius felt, well, more serious. With the others it was just about passing the time, filling the silence so they could ignore responsibilities like exams and a looming year's end. Remus had the best of both worlds as an eleventh year, with fewer exams to worry about and only the end of term to look forward to. Every time he'd imagined himself playing for Sirius rather than Simeon he'd get an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach and he couldn't tell if it was excitement or dread, so he'd stopped imagining all together and let Alice feed him drugs until the week was over. Afterwards he was

content with pretending that the intimate parties existed in a realm separate from the reality he actually lived in, and he didn't seek the older kids out again. He would've been lying though if he'd said it didn't feel nice to be recognised by those who didn't just know him from lessons or because they lived together. He nodded to Simeon and Deacon from across the berms the same way he might if he were passing one of Tomny's acquaintances in the street and let Renata pinch his cheek when she said hi to him in the hall. Sirius took notice, of course, and always asked questions, but Remus had spent half the time with them high out of his gourd anyway and could only give little details.

"I bet if you took apart the rest of your fags you could cut them into the tobacco," Sirius mused, his fingers dancing across the strings of the Rickenbacker until he hit a bad note and winced. "Need to change the strings."

"They won't burn as well," Remus said, licking the spliff to seal it off. "I'm not that good at rolling yet."

"You will be."

Remus set the finished spliff down and sheepishly reached for his case, drawing the bass closer to himself. "I can play all of 'Sweet Emotion' now."

Perking up, Sirius paused his strumming. "Oh yeah?"

Remus answered by pulling out the Fender. Straightening up, he set it across his lap and fiddled with the keys before plucking the strings a bit to warm up his fingers. When he started to play the beginning of the song came out distinctly disjointed and unintentionally staccato, but by the middle he'd relaxed enough to put some sense of rhythm into it. Still unable to play without keeping his eyes on the strings, Remus had to wait until he'd finished the song before he looked up to gauge Sirius' reaction. When he did, he found that his perfect eyebrows had crawled up onto his forehead in surprise.

"You did that in a week?"

" 'Course not, we've been working on it since October."

"You didn't sound like that in October!" Sirius declared. "What'd you do—eat the sheet music?"

"No, you idiot. I just had a lot of time to practice without you, James,

and Pete buzzing around."

"Well damn. Maybe there's hope for our band after all."

"Not unless you started teaching Peter the drums yesterday."

"Ha!" Sirius exclaimed. "I knew you were invested in the idea. You can just pick up Pete's slack with your incredible bass lines."

Remus dipped his head down, cheeks warm. "I only know a few songs, and none of them are 'Stairway to Heaven', so calm down."

Sirius cracked an easy smile, the one that turned his eyes soft at the corners. "You're allowed to show-off sometimes, you know. Be proud and all that. You sounded great."

"Why would I have to do that when you show-off enough for the both of us?"

"What else is a frontman good for? Besides just looking good, I mean."

"You have more confidence than Jagger, Black."

"Oh, just you wait—in a few years Jagger's going to wish he looked as good as me."

A smile overtook Remus' face and Sirius returned it, nudging him with his shoe. "Go on then, play the others I taught you."

* * *

Saturday 1st May 1976

Hearing that Southampton had won the 1976 FA Cup was apparently less eventful for Remus than James had expected. The championship game was held on a Saturday, and dozens of boys had spent the entire morning and afternoon huddled around the tiny television in the Godric common room like the good Brits they were. Lads like James were starved while away at school, as it was rare for anything less than a championship game to be shown on TV.

In a chance bit of mercy, Remus had been serving detention with Professor Loughty, their biology teacher, after kicking Snape's stool out from under him for making fun of Lottie when she'd cried in class. Lottie—who was overly fond of animals and swore all the time that

she'd have been vegetarian if not for her mother's chicken cacciatore —had been crying over the sheep lungs they were dissecting, which had come from the school's own farm. Unfortunately, Snape had been carrying a tray with his and Lily's lung on it when he'd gone to sit down on empty air. The result was a very gory spill that left the already greasy boy spattered in sheep's blood. The rest of the class had killed themselves laughing of course, but Professor Loughty had been less forgiving and gave Remus two day's detention scrubbing test tubes and beakers. At least Lottie had been thankful.

Afterwards, Remus met his friends on the lawn outside Godric House where they were all taking in the last bit of afternoon sun. James and Sirius were a ways away when he approached, kicking a football back and forth between them. Most people had trouble keeping up with the football captain even on one of his off-days, but Sirius could hold his own so well that James was always going on about how he could've been a star player if he wasn't so perpetually lazy when it came to anything that didn't involve music. Closer, both Lottie and Mary were suntanning on towels they'd laid over the grass, dressed in shorts and bikini tops, while Lily and Marlene helped Peter limp along with his math homework.

"Remus," Lily called out, noticing him first as he crossed the lawn, "you done being Professor Loughty's slave then?"

"No, got another day of it tomorrow, but I think my fingers are going to be shrivelled forever—look." Remus dropped down beside her on Marlene's picnic blanket and shoved his hands in her face, making Lily squirm a little and bat him away.

"You smell like apples," Peter observed. He was lying on his stomach between the two girls, his and Lily's notes splayed out around him.

"It's the dish soap," Remus sighed. The sun was beating down on their heads and there was little breeze to be found, leaving him hot under his button-up and slacks. He'd been tempted a few times since the weather had brightened to break out his summer uniform, but the bottoms were just a pair of grey shorts and Remus couldn't help but imagine how silly they'd look on his skinny legs.

"Better than smelling like raw lamb-chop," Lottie said from a few yards away. Beside her, Mary snorted, then smacked Lottie's thigh.

"Don't make me laugh, I'll get lines on my face."

Lily scoffed; "That's definitely not how that works."

“Don’t be so haughty, Lils. You’d join us if you weren’t so afraid of more freckles.”

“Oh shut it, you.”

"Can you even tan, Mary?" Peter asked, eyeing Mary's rich, brown skin.

"I'm only half African," she pointed out. "And it's been ages since it's been this nice out, so let me fry in peace."

Peter put his hands up, returning to his homework.

“Remus,” Marlene started. He turned to her as she snapped her textbook closed, and found her face lit up with a smile; “did you hear the good news?”

He shook his head, and she began to practically vibrate with excitement.

“Southampton won the Cup!”

“O-Oh?”

“Yes! They beat out Manchester zero to one! A total underdog win!”

Remus glanced at Lily, who had an indifferent expression, and gave a tight smile. “That’s great, Marls. Cheers.”

Marlene’s beaming smile faltered a bit and she tilted her head in question. “Is Southampton not your favourite team? James told me yesterday that it was.”

Remus blinked. *Oh fuck*.

Was Southampton the team he’d told James he supported? That was so long ago—*bloody September.* He’d just said the first name that came to mind back then—was it Lee or Doss who supported Southampton? He couldn’t even remember that now.

“Oh well, I’ve been kind of out of touch since school started,” Remus lied, awkwardly. “Haven’t been watching much TV and you know—no live games. But hey, that’s great! They sure deserve it!”

Marlene’s smile returned just as Remus was beaned in the back of the head with James’ football.

“You wankers,” he hissed, snatching up the ball and tossing it as far as he could in the opposite direction. Sirius, the one who’d obviously hit him, grinned and chased after it like a dog playing fetch. James watched him go as he approached the group, stopping just next to where Remus was sitting.

“Marlene tell you the good news, Lupin?” He asked, lifting the hem of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Remus looked away sharply, and found Lily had done the same. They met eyes, and she pressed her lips together to stifle a smile.

“Uh, yeah, mate,” Remus said, still not looking up, “it’s great news. I’m sorry I missed it.”

“It’s okay. They’re going to be doing a recap and team interviews tonight, so you can catch up then.”

“Oh, brilliant.” *Damn it.*

“Stokes was a bloody machine,” James continued, dropping down into a squat beside him, “he scored in the 83rd minute!”

Eighty-three bloody minutes? Someone kill me now.

“It was insane! We all thought Manchester was going to take it. Benjy started taking bets halfway on whether Manchester was gonna balls it up in the second half—”

“ 'Cause they started stronger!” Marlene interjected, and James pointed at her excitedly.

“Yeah! But they kept missing their chance. Couldn’t get anything past Turner!”

“I couldn’t believe it when they went into extra time! Their manager McMenemy said they didn't have a cat in hell’s chance!”

“Blimey—I thought it was over when Daly took that final shot! Turner had every chance to let one through but he didn’t! God, Remus, you should’ve seen the stands—there must’ve been a hundred thousand people there!”

“The announcer said ninety-nine thousand! I don’t know where Wembley put them all,” Marlene agreed.

Remus just kept nodding, feeling less of an idiot because he had no

idea what they were on about and more because he'd bothered lying in the first place. He should've just taken the hit to his reputation at the beginning of the year—at least then he'd have been saved from James' ranting.

The pair of them went on like that for a while and eventually he was able to pass his hesitation off as negligence. When Sirius got tired of waiting he hit James with the football, which ignited a game of chase and tackle between the two of them. Peter got up to join, but was hauled back by Lily for not completing his homework. As he whinged over arithmetic sequences, Remus shuffled over to Marlene on the blanket, who had busied herself with going through her timetable.

"Southampton's your team then?" He asked quietly.

"Oh yeah. The whole family supports it. Dad grew up in Portsmouth but always supported the team so it's become a little bit of an inside joke."

Remus nodded, then confessed; "I don't favour Southampton."

"Oh? You have a different team then?"

"No. I hate football actually."

Marlene looked up at him and chuckled. "I got that, funnily enough."

"You did? Then why's it taken Potter so long to figure it out?"

"Dunno. But you looked like Lily when she's trying not to tell James and Sirius off for something; wide-eyed with a smile like your face was being pulled too tight."

"And I was so looking forward to a career in the theatre," Remus sighed, making her laugh.

"You're funny, Remus. Sirius said you were always so dour and serious, but he's not right at all."

"When did he say that?" Remus asked, indignantly.

Marlene bit her lip like she realised she'd said something wrong. "Oh a while ago—before Christmas, at least. A lot's changed since then though."

"Git thinks he's got everyone figured out…"

“Well, maybe it’s about time someone returned the favour,” Marlene said, lightheartedly. “Are you going to tell James you hate football?”

“Not sure. At this point it might break his heart. Dunno if you noticed but he’s a bit of a sop.”

“He’s going to make you play one day, you know. He’ll drag you out onto the field by your ear, sop or not. He never says it but I know he gets tired of playing the girls team—he always has to go easy. Not on me of course, but you know how it is.”

“He’ll be really disappointed with me then,” Remus said. “I’m lucky if I can kick the damn thing in a straight line.”

“Well, do you at least want me to summarize the match so you can pretend a little longer?”

He didn’t, but she seemed eager and it was nice to hear Marlene talk so passionately about something other than school, so as his friends sat around in the lazy afternoon sun without so much as a care in the world, Remus let himself be regaled with Southampton’s extraordinary win and for once he was not reminiscing about better days.

* * *

Friday 21s t May 1976 — Two Weeks Later...

“Thank you so much for your help, Remus. I know I’ve kept you from dinner.”

“S'okay. James said he’d grab me a plate for later.”

Mrs. Buchanan glanced up from her podium, where she was shuffling and organising papers. Dropping the last chair on the stack, Remus dusted his hands off on his trousers and went to the top of the room’s stage risers where he’d left his bag, pulling it over one shoulder. He really didn’t mind cleaning up after private study in the music room and Sheila often rewarded him with extra music sheets she’d composed herself from songs she heard on the radio. It was a bit irritating, but Remus had regretfully started calling his teacher by her first name in passing (though never to her face), further evidence of Sirius’ bad influence on his subconscious.

Like most lessons at Hawkings, private study periods were unique and

had students constantly revolving rooms to make sure they got the chance to get help from all their professors. Remus always got the most work done when he had study periods with Lily, but Sheila was knowledgeable enough in most things for a music teacher turned choir leader, and Remus found he liked how relaxed he felt in her classes—provided that the noisier instruments were tucked away.

“You’ve really improved in the last few months, Remus,” she said, nodding her head at the bass as Remus crossed the classroom.

“I’ve been practising with Sirius.”

“Ah, so he’s a good teacher?”

Remus shrugged. “When he wants to be.”

Sheila grinned at him. “Have you thought about what elective course you’ll be taking next year?”

Remus reached the bottom of the risers and paused. He hadn’t given any thought to the following school year at all, having spent most of his first year just waiting for the moment that they’d throw him out on his behind; but there he was, nine months later, enjoying private study and aiming to get at least a ‘B’ on his Modern Biology exam. Beating Sirius would be a plus, but he figured he really only had a chance at that in Literacy or History.

Hawkings had worked then, he supposed. The damn school had bored and distracted him into good behaviour, and apart from a few measly detentions his record was clean. Remus hadn’t had such a mellow school year since he was eleven. Giles would be so proud—which for him, was just another synonym for ‘smug’.

Sheila seemed to read his silence as indecision, and began shuffling through her papers again. “I know you weren’t given a choice about taking music this year, but if you have nothing else in mind, I’d love to see you in class again next year, Remus.”

He looked up, a little in awe that a teacher had just said she *wanted* him in her class. “Will you still be my forms teacher?”

“Possibly. You know what they say about my forms. Maybe you’ll have… ‘graduated out’?”

“Never,” Remus said, shaking his head, “Sirius would say that’s becoming boring.”

Sheila clicked her tongue. “Well, I’d hate to become boring, too.” Coming out from behind her podium she handed Remus a few sheets of music. This time it was Johnny Cash’s “I Walk the Line”.

“See if you can get this one down pat by the end of the year,” she said. “It might be a little repetitive but—”

“ ‘Repetition is just practice’s more relaxed cousin’,” he answered shyly.

“I knew you paid attention during lessons. Now off with you, your dinner’s waiting.”

Waving goodbye, Remus left his teacher behind and made his way out of the Bellchant Music Hall. Students were trickling around, walking to or from the dining hall, some with their noses turned down into exam books, others chattering on with their friends. He made it about fifty feet himself before Sirius appeared, holding a container of Caprese chicken from dinner, which made his stomach rumble immediately. He’d skipped lunch to go to the library with Lily and Marlene.

“How come I’m never around when Buchanan gives you these detentions?” Sirius asked, taking the Fender’s case from him so Remus could eat while they walked.

“I didn’t have detention,” he said, around mouthfuls.

“Then why did she keep you so late?”

“I was helping clean up.”

“Sounds like detention to me.”

Remus ignored him. “Where’s James?”

“Dunno. He ran off after dinner saying he had something to do. Chemistry, maybe? I had the headphones on so I didn’t really hear him.”

“Hm.”

“So why *do* you stay to clean up all the time?”

“Because I *can?”* The words came out more forceful than he’d meant for, but Sirius only gave him a measuring side-eye and kept walking. Remus sighed and closed the dinner container.

“Didn’t realise you had the hots for our music teacher,” Sirius said out of the corner of his mouth.

Remus bristled. “You’re gross.”

“No, I get it. I mean, if you’re gonna pick any old mare, Buchanan’s a not bad choice—a solid seven really. Decent body for her age, when she’s not wearing those ridiculous dresses. A little grey at the temples but lots of blokes like that. Oh, you don’t have an Oedipus complex, do you? Because that would be—”

Remus slammed to a stop. “Oh my god, just shut up!”

Sirius turned around to face him, still walking backwards a few paces before stopping. “I’m only kidding.”

“It's not fucking funny.”

“Yeah, it is,” Sirius said, lowly. “It’s fucking hilarious.”

“No. It. *Isn’t.*”

“What’s got your panties in such a twist?”

“You,” Remus snarled. "Now piss off.”

Shoving the container of half-eaten chicken into Sirius' hands, Remus snatched his instrument back and stormed past him down the cobbled path. There was silence for a moment, and he almost let himself believe that Sirius had actually stayed behind, before the other boy inevitably fell into step with him just as they were rounding the corner onto House Lane.

“Lupin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to have a go at you while you were having a rough day.”

“I’m not having a rough day,” Remus said pointedly. "My day was just fine before you showed up.”

“Was it the Oedipus thing? 'Cause I shouldn’t have said that. I know your mum is—”

“It wasn’t about my mum!”

“Then I don’t know what’s got you so worked up!”

“Aren’t you listening?” He demanded. “You! It’s you! You and your

bloody mouth!”

"Come on." Sirius rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell me I’m the first person you’ve met who likes to have a laugh every once in a while.”

“No! In fact, you’re not! I know plenty of people who are capable of being funny without ruining a good mood.”

“Is one of them Mary? Because she got her sense of humour from me, you know.”

“You’re such an ass!” Remus wailed. “I meant *other* people—people outside of this damn school!”

There it was. The thing that Remus had been pushing down deep inside him ever since Easter, when he’d realised just how little he and his supposed friends knew about each other. That was the danger of living a double life he supposed; Tomny knew one half, and Sirius and the rest knew the other. Only, where he understood why Tomny never asked about school or home, it somehow bothered him that none of his roommates had ever been so inclined. They demanded so much of him now, but couldn’t care less about who he’d been before they knew him. Maybe it didn’t matter to them either—but what was their excuse then?

Sirius puckered. “Well, they must be bloody brilliant!”

“They ARE!”

Picking up his pace, Remus trudged on, wanting to make it back to the dorm on his own, but Sirius kept up, always determined to get the last word in.

“I said sorry,” he huffed, “I don’t know what else you want me to do.”

“No, you don’t, because you don’t know anything about me. None of you tossers do.”

Remus could just sense Sirius’ rolling eyes again.

“Fucking hell, what are you on about now?”

“I’m just another yob from London who got dropped into your laps," he snapped. "I don’t know anything about you and you know nothing about me.”

“Hold on.” A hand closed around Remus’ shoulder, making him flinch

back violently. Sirius drew back as he whirled around and put his hands up in a surrender. “What are you so mad about, Lupin?”

“I’m not mad, I’m drawing a line in the sand. Should’ve done it ages ago.”

“Yeah alright, but maybe you could point the line out for me because I don’t follow.”

Remus took a deep breath, trying keep calm. “James always talks about his family and I’ve *met* most of Peter’s, but you—you’re just a bloody mystery. This school’s based on family and heritage and money, and you try and pretend like all of it doesn’t matter. Like your family's shit doesn't matter—like where I come from doesn’t change anything!”

Sirius squinted at him. “I don’t care about your family or where you’re from, Remus.”

“Right. Nice chat then.”

“Lupin,” Sirius groaned, grabbing him as he made to move past. Remus didn’t flinch this time, but Sirius released his grip quickly anyway and looked around. They were alone on the pavement, but it was still daylight, and there were other students mulling about who could’ve easily overheard if they came too close.

“Let’s go over there,” Sirius murmured, putting his free hand into his pocket and heading toward a small garden patch situated between Bronte and Finch House. Reluctantly, Remus followed and watched as Sirius took a seat on an empty bench, swinging his legs under himself. From his sideways view Remus could see the place where Sirius’ childhood face was giving way to a man’s jawline. If his hair got any longer it’d be tickling his shoulders like Jim Morrison’s, and then the girls would really be throwing themselves at him. *Pretty bastard.*

Remus slumped down on the bench with his bass between his legs, staring at the garden as though its flowers might wilt by the sheer fury of his glare.

“I didn’t mean I don’t care about your life… or family…” Sirius murmured, keeping his gaze forward as well; “I just thought I knew everything I needed to know.”

Remus scoffed. “Like what?”

“Like, I know how you take your morning tea with more sugar than the average person has in an entire day, and how you bob your leg when you’re anxious or just need a fag.”

“Observant aren’t you?” Remus snapped sarcastically, and Sirius gave him a sharp sideways glance.

“I know how you are when you’re angry, how you turn off like a light and won’t talk to anyone. I know you can’t make eye contact when you’re embarrassed. I know you love The Who and Queen but have a stupid aversion to Bowie and The Sweet—”

“Sweet’s fine.”

“Mott the Hoople, then.”

“They haven't been good since their lead singer left anyway.”

“So you're getting my point?" Sirius drawled. "I also know you hate Christmas. I know you like books and will read anything that’s given to you if the person giving it says they enjoyed it. I don’t know why you do that, but you *do* and you never complain. You don’t like to be touched—yeah, I noticed—but you never say anything when someone does touch you because I think you’re secretly afraid of hurting their feelings.”

Remus clenched his jaw at this, but Sirius still wasn’t finished.

“You ask questions you already know the answer to, just so others can talk. And I know you have trouble sleeping, but I… I also know it’s your business why.”

Somewhere between Bowie and the books, Remus’ glare had lessened. It had been unexpected, to say the least, but he also felt conflicted. These were all things anyone who’d spent the entire year living with someone else might know. He wasn’t sure it was enough.

“And you never wanted to ask why?” Remus asked finally.

“Would you have wanted to tell me?”

“… No.”

“Well.” Sirius looked down at his hands and the dinner box. “I thought it was enough. The music, the cigarettes… I don’t want anyone judging me by my family. I wanted the me now—the music I like—the

things I like… I want that to be enough. Guess I just thought you were the same."

"I am the same!" Remus took a breath. "It's just… You're so nosey about other things."

The corners of Sirius' mouth turned up. "Only the fun things."

Remus didn't know what to say to that. He clutched the case between his legs, running his fingers up and down the worn vinyl and feeling for the cracks at its edges.

"Answer a question," he said, "then I won't be mad anymore."

"Knew you were mad. Fine. Ask your question."

"Why'd you play the music so loud? I mean when we first got here. And why did James and Peter have all your stuff?"

"That's two questions."

"Don't be a twat."

Sirius grinned like it was impossible. "Mum doesn't like music much—or she does, but not rock and roll. If she knew I had that stuff—that Andy had given it to me—she'd take it away or smash it right in front of me. I'd rather send it home with the boys and not have it all summer than let her ruin it forever."

While Sirius was talking Remus' fingers had found purchase in a worn section of the case's vinyl, and he had to force himself to not pick at it. "And the volume—the bloody noise?"

There was a long pause from Sirius, and then he whispered; "Silence is loud… It's so fucking loud, Lupin. Only way to get rid of it is to drown it out with something else. Two months of silence and I… I come back and all I want is noise. I know it tortures James and Pete, but they let it go because they're good mates. Unlike me."

Remus thought back to the Lupin estate, where the only sound was barking dogs, and empty quiet. The noisy sounds of the East End had always been more comforting in comparison.

"I understand. Home is… too quiet."

Sirius looked directly at him for the first time since they'd sat down. "So you're not missing it then?"

Remus glanced away, cheeks warm. “No, but it’s complicated. Family isn’t fun—but my friends back in London, they’re good.”

“So you’re missing them then, your mates back home?”

“Yeah, reckon I am. It… I was looking forward to seeing them. Sucks that I couldn’t.” He leaned forward to rest his chin on the tip of the instrument case.

“Why don’t you just ring them?”

“Can’t. Just wouldn’t work.”

“I get that,” Sirius started, with a new energy. “I’ve always missed the lads over holidays... And it doesn’t get any bloody easier.”

“You mean like Miles?”

If he hadn’t looked sideways as he asked the question, Remus might’ve missed the way Sirius deflated again, eyes widened in surprise. It almost made him feel sorry for bringing it up, but he supposed it was only natural after they’d spent the better part of the year avoiding the subject all together. None of them had mentioned the former 4A roommate since he and Sirius had had it out on the church’s balcony staircase before Halloween. It felt like a lifetime ago. He’d have needed ten hands to count all the things that had changed since then; all the things he’d learned about his school friends, and his friends back home.

“I was,” Sirius started, looking down, “but I think it’s gotten better. At the beginning of the year I was still so angry, and I think I took it out on you. Saw you as this sort of invader, maybe. It had always been just the four of us, and then Miles up and leaves and we get someone totally new thrown into the mix. I didn’t want you to ruin what we had going, so I was a total git about it... Sorry.”

Remus lifted his chin from the top of his case and leaned back against the bench, feeling a little squeamish inside. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, clearing his throat a bit, “I was git too. Didn’t want to be here—didn’t want you lot for roommates either.”

“And now?”

“Still debating.”

“Ouch,” Sirius said, making them both laugh. Remus relaxed a bit.

“You never tried to call Miles?”

Sirius shook his head. “Wouldn’t work either.”

“Oh. Too bad.”

“Mhm.” Sirius paused for a bit, tapping his heels on the ground in front of him. “So what’s London like?”

Remus raised an eyebrow. “You’ve never been?”

“No—well, I did this one time in year nine. Instead of going home at Christmas I just got off with James and Pete and followed them. Only lasted until Mum came and got me. She doesn’t like cities—thinks they’re dirty.”

“Well, she’s right about that.”

Sirius chuckled. “My dad’s mistress lives in London, too.”

“Mistress?” Remus’ eyes bulged.

“Yeah. She’s some Dame Lady with a dead husband who was twice her age. I’ve met her, you know, at one of our dinner parties.”

“She’s been to your *house?"*

“ ‘Course. The circle of money is so small, Lupin. It’s suffocating. And that woman…” Voice trickling off, Remus got the feeling he didn’t mean his father’s mistress. Sirius sucked in a breath to try again; “If I could, I’d…” He trailed off again and bit his lip.

Remus looked down to his hands shyly. The last time he’d seen Sirius this close to crying was after they’d come back from Christmas, and there’d been actual tears then, but he never offered an explanation and Remus had never asked. Maybe they were both just dancing around each other; Remus hadn’t put any effort into understanding Sirius beyond the present either. He’d been too harsh, probably.

When Sirius looked up again he wasn’t crying, but he did sniff a little before he could get his words out.

“I’m going to do it. I’m going to finish school, and then I’ll never have to see any of them again. Reg can be the heir, I never cared anyway.”

“So you’re okay being a penniless bum?” Remus asked, thinking about Tomny and the rest, all bouncing between different flats, most without

so much as a bed to call their own.

“I’ve got my inheritance from Uncle Al,” Sirius said with a cheeky smile. “There are some upsides to befriending the Black family black sheep you know. I’ll only be a bum in my parents’ eyes.”

“Almost sounds like a song.”

“A good song,” Sirius agreed, “with a good ending.”

“I’ll show you,” Remus said, twisting his fingers in his lap.

“Hm?”

“I’ll show you London. Not the nice parts, but the nasty bits—the gutters and the scum and the real horrible shit. We can see the dive bars and those shitty stage venues. You can smoke with real people, we’ll find ‘em. They’re there somewhere among smokes and the dinge and the corners and the cracks and…” Remus had to stop to take a breath. “I think you’d like it—that London. No one gives a shit about family there. You get to make your own.”

Sirius gave that easy smile, all eyes. “Sounds nice. We can play our songs on the corner for pennies.”

“And what about James and Pete?”

“They can come too. They’re capable enough. We’ll be a four man band, just get Pete a bucket or something to smack.”

“And James? In the East End? He’d lose his mind.”

“Is that where you’re from? The east side of London?”

Remus reached out to bat Sirius upside the head. He regretted it instantly because his hair was so soft. “You know it’s not, you git. I just—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sirius dismissed. “We’ve got time. I’ll see it one day and until then, I suppose I should just start dragging the details out of you one at a time. Then at least I’ll be prepared for the nasty bits.”

“You couldn’t drag anything out of me if you tried.”

“I definitely could—I will!”

“That a bet?”

“Absolutely.”

Remus shook his head, smiling apathetically. “And what are the stakes?”

Sirius tipped his head back up at the sky. It was a rusty orange colour now, like a fire.

“Immortality.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is both light-hearted and heavy, which embodies the general vibe of this fic. I really enjoyed writing it—it's important to me within this story especially to establish that Sirius and Remus ARE friends. I wish I could jump right into the deep end of their romance, but that's not the story I'm trying to tell <3

But we're also nearing the end of year 11 at school! I cannot wait to give you guys the next few chapters. See you soon~

Slang:
Once again, 'Lucy' is a term for acid and a spliff is a marijuana cigarette.
'Jerrys' are a term for Germans, developed during WWII.
'Staccato' is a musical term meaning each note is preformed sharply and detached from the one before.
The Football Association Challenge Cup, more commonly known as the FA Cup, is an annual knockout football competition in men's domestic English football. It used to be the biggest football competition held within Britain before the establishment of the FA Premier League in the early 90's.
A 'Dame' or 'Lady' (Sirius uses both in casual conversational context) is a courtesy title for the wife of a knight or baronet and/or the daughters of various nobles.

Chapter 26: Ow-Levels

Chapter Summary

> Lily has trouble with Snape, which means Snape has trouble with James, and our boys get a very generous gift as they prepare to leave school for the summer.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Just some good ol' fashioned Snape pounding, lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh well now the band is rockin' and everybody's feelin' alright,
It's a Wednesday night, there sure is gonna be a fight;
'Cause somebody's gonna get their head kicked in tonite…

- "Somebody's Gonna Get Their Head Kicked in Tonite" Earl Vince and the Valiants (Fleetwood Mac), 1969

Tuesday 1s t June 1976

"I'm never going to understand it! Someone end my suffering, please!"

"Shh! Do you want to be kicked out of the library?"

"Yes!"

Lottie leaned over and pinched her twin's ear lobe, making Peter cry out despite Marlene's warning. "Stop your whinging. It's not that hard, you're just looking for the variable—really, how could we have shared a womb?"

Clapping a hand over his ear, Peter scowled back at his sister. "Says you! You haven't even cracked your copy of 'Lord of the Flies' and you're writing your final essay on it!"

Lottie slapped her pencil down. "Who could possibly find joy in reading about a bunch of filthy boys stranded on an island trying to kill each other? The essay is supposed to be argumentative, so I'm *arguing* that it was *horrible."*

Peter gave an exaggerated scowl and turned to Remus. "Remus, could

you tell me what you got for question nine?"

"Uh…" Remus began sorting through his notes, but Marlene reached across the table and smacked her hand down on top of them.

"He's never going to learn if you just give him the answers whenever he asks."

Remus cracked a small smile. "But it's so much better than listening to him whine."

Marlene shook her head and drew her hand back, letting him find the right paper and pass it to Peter.

"Cheers, Lupin!"

Marlene snapped her fingers in Peter's direction. *"Shh!* If I fail my O-Levels because you lot couldn't shut up I'll thrash you all."

It didn't really matter how many times she shushed them, it was busy enough that they weren't going to be breaking any silence. Apparently it was common around end of the year exams for the Hawkings' library to turn into a bit of a zoo. Mrs. Pince, who normally crucified any student who dared to speak above a strict whisper, seemed to give up once the students who'd been neglecting their studies all term piled into her palace of tranquility, desperate for essay help and answers to their fervid questions. Having grown used to accompanying Lily or the other girls, Remus found the library as good a place as any to read and study without interruptions. Since his birthday they were occasionally joined by James or Peter, but rarely Sirius, who had no need for review and instead spent his time grumbling over his essays or else causing havoc somewhere else.

"Hey, Lupin," James said from his left, "do you have the study outline for geography?"

Remus shook his head. "Misplaced mine. I borrowed Lily's yesterday."

James pursed his lips and looked around. "Where is Evans anyway?"

"She was with Snape this morning," Lottie offered from across the table. She'd since given up on her essay and was reapplying her lip gloss in a small compact mirror.

"Why?" James asked, instantly irritated and showing it by tapping his pencil against the table top furiously.

“A chemistry project.”

“Hmph.”

Remus gave James a sideways glance. James Potter may have been the friendliest boy he’d ever met, but even he wasn’t without a temper. After Lily’s birthday party, much of Davey Gudgeon’s wardrobe had mysteriously gone missing, only for several of the statues in the Hawkings rose garden to be found dressed in his uniforms like they were on their way to lessons.

“There’s Lily now,” Lottie said.

A few seconds later, Lily was dropping her bag on the table next to Marlene and sitting down without a word. No one said anything at first, but it was obvious to all of them that Lily had been crying; her eyes were red and puffy and she sniffled slightly when she sat, despite the fact that it was nearly summertime.

As Lily began pulling her things out of her bag, James leaned forward.

“Alright, Evans?”

“Fine,” she said simply, barely glancing at him. “Remus, here’s your corrected practice test.”

She handed it over, then zipped the top of her bag with an air of finality. Again, no one said anything. Lily glanced up.

“What? Why’re you all staring at me?”

“ ‘Cause you look terrible,” Peter said, making Lottie smack him in the arm. *“Ow!”*

“I’m fine,” Lily said, defensively. “I just want to study.”

They all nodded like scolded school children and after that the group was quiet. Remus could tell by James’ concerned expression that he was itching to ask her what had happened, but he kept quiet, and exam prep continued in stilted silence.

It took a few days, but eventually they all learned the reason behind Lily’s tears after Mary had mentioned off-hand to Sirius that Snape had gone off on Lily for the amount of time she’d been spending with him and the rest of the 4A boys. It was lunch time, and while they’d all agreed to meet in the dining hall to eat together, Lily was nowhere

in sight, downgrading their group of eight to a group of seven. Upon hearing the news James was immediately livid, mashing his grilled potatoes with his fork as he seethed next to Sirius.

“Who does that little git think he is? They’re barely friends,” he hissed.

“Do you enjoy kidding yourself?” Mary asked sarcastically. “Snape might be the slimiest Scouser to crawl out of Liverpool—and that’s saying something—but he’s still one of Lily’s oldest friends.”

James huffed, but luckily he had his own best friend on his side.

“Just ‘cause something’s old doesn’t mean it’s of any value,” Sirius said, “otherwise my mum would’ve sold dad off at auction already.”

A few of them laughed or cracked a smile, but James remained in a brooding mood for the rest of the day. That day then turned into a week, then two, and by mid-June Remus had seen so little of Lily that he’d almost convinced himself she’d dropped out of school.

The Hawkings football team ended up travelling to Aberdeen at the end of May for their tournament and came second behind the home team. James blamed himself of course, and Sirius, who’d gone as ‘water-boy’ after spending two weeks kissing up to Ms. Hooch rather than studying, told Remus and Peter that James had spent the entire tournament more distracted than he’d ever seen him. Typically James had a single mind when it came to football, but he’d spent his final weeks of the 1976 season in the poorest form the other boys had ever seen. When Sirius tried asking about it he would dismiss his questions or change the subject. He danced around Lily’s name completely, and every time the pair met in passing James would offer only indifferent small-talk, which Lily returned in kind.

Things seemed as though they were backsliding, and despite the rest of the group’s eagerness to spend time together, Remus saw them begin to splinter as the end of the year loomed and their exam period began. The girls remained loyal to Lily and did their best to defend her friendship with Snape even though it was clear that they were as revolted as the rest of them, a circumstance that neither James nor Sirius could fathom.

Sirius spent enough evenings feeding into James’ anger, both of them taking turns coming up with worse and worse names to call Snape. A few merciless prank ideas also materialised on evenings like these, but they were all so busy there was no time to bring them to fruition. So

the boys settled for gossiping, some of which didn't give the girls much benefit of the doubt, despite the fact that Remus was pretty sure they had it worse-off. They had to interact with the greasy git way more often due to Lily's friendship with him; though even a single chance to give Snivellus a piece of his mind might've allowed James to blow off some steam.

As it so happens, he got his opportunity just as their geography exam was ending.

"It's over," Lily sighed happily as she skipped down the front steps of the Great Hall. Remus was fairly sure the exam had gone well for him, and with only History and Maths left his marks were sure to at least be passable considering he was the only one of his friends who didn't attempt an O-Level the year before. Even Mrs. Buchanan's practical exam had gone well, but of course Sirius had been the star of the show, wowing the entire class with a solo rendition of "Misty Mountain Hop" on his Rickenbacker.

It had been almost agonising to give the instruments back at the end of the exam, but Remus had already decided that he'd be taking music again in September, which gave him something to look forward to should he return. Sheila Buchanan was certainly his favourite teacher, and if he had to be stuck at a private school in Northern Scotland he might as well spend a few hours a day in her music room.

"I never want to hear the words 'isthmus' or 'prime meridian' again," Remus said, rubbing his eyes. "How do you think you did, James?"

Walking on his other side, James blinked and pushed his glasses up his nose. Sirius had—naturally—finished before any of them and was probably already back at the dorm.

"Hm?"

"How do you wager you did?"

"Oh…" James forced a smile, "decent I suppose, though for a while there I thought that that expository essay was going to be the death of me."

Remus clapped him on the shoulder. "S'okay, mate. They won't kick you off the team just because you couldn't define continental drift."

"Remus, would you like to play cards after dinner?" Lily asked, turning back to them as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "Lottie

said she needs something to do after her math exam gets out. You can come too, Potter."

Remus glanced at James, who nodded slowly, eyebrows raised. "Yeah, sounds great."

Lily gave a small smile and adjusted the bag strap on her shoulder. "Mary wants you guys to teach us poker actually. She said—"

"Lily."

Together they all turned to find Snape standing down the pavement with arms crossed over his chest, his permanent scowl in place.

"Oh hey, Sev. Geography exam just got out," Lily said. Snape didn't take geography, able to get out of it by taking three separate science courses, which made it the only class Remus had with Lily that didn't include her slimy childhood friend. Of course he'd waited for the exam to get out.

Snape glanced at the other kids as they trickled out of the hall, and nodded. "You said we'd study history tonight."

Lily made a face like she'd forgotten and her shoulders drooped a bit. "Oh yeah, I'm sorry, I forgot. Geography really took it out of me today."

"It's important," Snape said, keeping his eyes on her. Lily's frown deepened.

"Lupin," James started, tapping Remus lightly on the chest and turning to face him as though Snape weren't even there, "you take history with Evans, right?"

"Uhm, yeah?"

"When's the exam?"

Remus stared back at James. "Last day of exam period. Friday."

"And what day is it today?"

Lily leaned past Remus to get a look at James. "What are you on about?"

"Oh it's... why it's Wednesday, James," Remus said, the beginnings of a small smile on his face.

“Wednesday,” James repeated, “means the test is what, two days from now? Surely there’s plenty of time to study before then?”

“Wow, in that case I think you might be right.”

“Well then,” James turned to Snape as he put his hands in his pockets, “there shouldn’t be a problem with taking one evening off to relax.”

Snape’s casual scowl turned more sour. “This has nothing to do with you, Potter. Sod off.”

James straightened up to his full-height. “Make me, Snape.”

Lily stepped between them both, sensing the oncoming fight. “Stop that,” she said firmly. “I just forgot. We can play cards another day—after exams end.”

James set his jaw, but looked away and Lily took that as her victory, silently nodding to Remus before she turned away to join Snape. James might’ve let them go too, if Snape had kept his bloody mouth shut.

“I can’t believe you forgot,” he hissed as she approached.

“I didn’t mean to, Sev,” Lily snapped. “Everyone’s busy.”

“They’re turning you stupid.”

“I am not stupid!”

“Then stop acting like it, why don’t you?”

Lily didn’t get a chance to offer a rebuttal before James had Snape eating the lawn off the side of the pavement. He pinned the other boy on his stomach, straddling his back while holding his shoulders.

“Don’t you talk to her like that!” James shouted.

“Get off of me you lunatic!” Snape howled into the dirt.

Remus watched with bulging eyes. He’d seen enough fights while running with Tomny, but it was astounding to see James—who was normally so friendly and patient—grinding another kid’s head into the dirt.

“Potter, stop it!” Lily wailed, rushing forward and grabbing James by his shirt sleeves. He barely noticed, and worked on pinning Snape’s

flailing arms so he couldn't get a shot in.

"Apologise to her!"

"Get off me!"

By now other students had started to gather, most just stopping to stare. Around the time that someone shouted the first 'fight!' Remus discovered that he didn't have cement for feet, and dashed forward, grabbing James' other arm.

"James, he's not worth it!"

"Let go, Lupin!" James growled. "He's going to apologise!"

"Fuck you!"

"You arrogant little twat! Apologise now!"

"Let him up, James!" Lily pleaded, her face red with embarrassment.

Remus blew out an exasperated breath. "Just say you're sorry, Snape!"

"Piss off, waster!" Snape hissed into the grass, making James seethe even more. Unwilling to continue defending a shit like Snape, Remus let go of James and grabbed Lily's arm until she too, released his school shirt.

James grunted as he continued wrestling with Snape's squirming body; "You're the—foulest—git—I've ever—*EUGH!"* Snape brought back his head and smacked into James' chin, making his jaw snap together with a horrible crack. There was a stunned silence among the small crowd as James cupped one hand over his mouth and used his thighs to finally pin Snape's arms. With his other hand, he smushed his head into the grass.

"AH-POL-I-THIZE!"

"PISS OFF!"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!"

Even Moses would've been impressed by the way the group of students parted around Sheila Buchanan, who stormed forward in a daffodil-yellow sheath dress and matching heels. She reached down and grabbed James by the shoulders, hauling him off Snape with a single fierce tug, allowing the grass-stained boy to scramble away and

whip around, spitting dirt as he glared murderously at the rest of them.

James, who was still holding his mouth, stepped back beside Remus, his chest rising and falling with each heavy breath. Sheila stood between the two, looking back and forth with her lips pressed together in a deadly-thin line. Even McGonagall would've had the sense to be afraid.

"I won't bother to ask who started it," she snapped, "but you all know that fighting amongst friends is certainly not tolerated at Hawkings School!"

"He's not my friend!" Snape shouted, face still marred with dirt.

"That is enough, Mr. Snape, *no more!"*

Sheila let out a huff and looked to James, who dropped his hand to stare back defiantly. "I should give you both detention until the end of the year," she started, "but because that wouldn't solve anything and I'm sure exams have you miserable enough, I will let this single infraction slide. Only this one! Do you understand?"

James glanced at Lily, who just looked away sharply, nostrils flaring like she might cry. Finally he nodded, and Remus felt a bit of the tension in his own shoulders deflate.

"And you, Mr. Snape?" Sheila demanded. "Or would you rather a detention?"

"Whatever," Snape scoffed, wiping his face.

Sheila straightened up and stepped off the grass. "Alright, then. Off you go, all of you. And *no more* fighting!"

As Mrs. Buchanan waved her hands to disperse the other kids, James turned to Lily. He might've apologised immediately if not for his mouth but she never gave him the chance anyway. Without so much as a single word, Lily turned and stormed off in the direction of the library, her red ponytail thrashing behind her with every step. James watched her go, looking sore despite the injury, and from behind them Remus heard Snape let out a sneer. He turned to face the other boy and raised himself up to his full height before stepping toward him very quickly like he might hit him. Snape flinched back with a sudden look of alarm and Remus snorted in bitter satisfaction, before muttering;

“Pathetic wanker.”

Turning away from the miserable git, he took his friend by the shoulder and led him out of the dispersing crowd, back toward their dorm. James did not object.

* * *

“Here.” Remus tossed a freezer-burnt bag of peas across the common room table toward James. He’d found it in the icebox of the Godric kitchenette and suspected it had probably been there since McGonagall was their age. James picked it up and pressed it to his jaw, looking up at the ceiling with a sore expression. It wasn’t his jaw that was injured per-say, but he had bitten his tongue when Snape cracked him in the chin, and now the inside of his mouth was distinctly more red and swollen. Really he was just lucky he didn’t bite it off.

“I can’t believe I missed it,” Sirius moaned, smacking his fist on the table several times. “I can’t believe you actually thrashed Snivellus and I wasn’t even there!”

“He didn’t actually hit him,” Remus answered for James, after he'd shot Sirius a dirty look. “He just… tackled him?”

“Learned that on the field, did you, Potter?” Sirius cackled, elbowing him. “Next year we’re trying full-contact football. We’ll be just like the Americans.”

James dropped one cheek to the top of the table just as Peter returned with four mugs of tea, handing them out with a cheery expression. Having been the subject of more than one verbal slight from Snape, Peter had openly gaped when Remus and James returned to the dorm and Remus had explained what had happened. If James Potter wasn’t already Peter’s number one favourite person in the world (apart from his girlfriend, Moira, of course—that had been an impressive development after Easter), he was now.

“I can’t believe Lily’s angry with you,” Peter said, sitting down next to James and taking a sip of his tea, burning his mouth in the process.

“Livid’s more like it,” Remus said. James kicked him lightly under the table, making him hiss.

“Don’t worry about it, mate,” Sirius said, done laughing for now, “she’ll come around when she realises that you were just defending her honour.”

James sat up with a melancholic nod and stared down at his tea, making Remus crack a smile. What would these boys do without each other all summer? He had Tomny and the rest back home, and Peter and James had each other, he supposed, but what god thought to imagine separating Sirius Black from his bestest and oldest friend? A cruel one, to be sure.

Lifting his cup to his lips, Remus blew on his tea. When he looked up, a familiar face was crossing the common room toward them.

“Hey there lads,” Simeon said, approaching their table and making Sirius sit up in his seat. Simeon’s school shirt was rolled up to his sleeves, showing off the beginnings of the tan Renata had once told Remus that Simeon was famous for in the summer months. Peter, of course, didn’t tan, only burned—yet another loss when compared to his older brother’s genes.

“Hey Sim,” Remus said, earning himself a pointed look from both Sirius and Peter.

“What do you want?” Peter asked.

“Peace, brother,” Simeon teased, “I come bearing gifts.”

“What gifts?”

Simeon raised his eyebrows, and looked at James instead. “Heard you got into a bit of a row outside the Great Hall, kid.”

If his tongue weren’t the size of a golf ball James might’ve rebuffed the fight, but since he could barely talk, he just rolled his eyes and waved him off.

Simeon chuckled and ran his tongue across his teeth. “Well, it sure was funny to hear about. Not all guys get to be impressed by the company their baby brothers keep.”

“Don’t turn my friends into your entertainment,” Peter snapped.

Sirius nudged Remus with his elbow. “Too late.”

Smugly, Remus smirked and nudged him back.

“Well since you’re all so cool, I thought I might bestow upon you something my forebears did for me after my O-Levels.”

All four boys looked up at him with a questioning look and Simeon reached into his back pocket, withdrawing four tiny slips of paper. He smacked them down on the tabletop between them; “Voila.”

Sirius snatched the papers up immediately. “No *way.”*

“I want to see!” Peter shouted, reaching for the papers as Sirius held them just out of reach.

“What are they?” Remus asked, trying to get a look for himself.

“Tickets...” Simeon said simply, “for a concert that just happens to be taking place at the end of the month. Not anyone big of course, but the venue’s great, so I’m sure you’ll still be able to have some fun.”

Sirius finally handed a ticket to each of them, and Remus scanned the front. The band’s name was ‘Dick Very and the Headways’, and the show was taking place in a venue called ‘Dice’s Attic’ on the last Saturday of June. Growing up in London, Remus had stood outside of plenty of live shows, listening to cover bands belt out the same songs he heard on the radio while his friends tucked themselves in between mulling bodies and concert-goers, tricky fingers dipping into the occasional pocket or two. Other than that there were of course shows like *Top of the Pops,* but he’d never had the chance to see a band play live.

“You’re just giving us these?” He asked. Sirius elbowed him in the stomach, perhaps a little harder than he’d meant to.

“Anyone ever told you not to look a gift horse in the mouth, Lupin?”

“They’re totally yours,” Simeon said. “You’ll need a ride, but lucky for you I’ve already organised everything.”

Peter lowered his ticket away from his face and scoffed. “There’s no way you snuck off campus for that long when you were sixteen.”

“Your lack of faith in me is a festering wound, Petey.”

“Just fess up, these were yours weren’t they?”

Simeon sighed over a smile. “Can’t get anything past ya. I got them in return for a favour from a friend, but I’ve already got plans. *So*—

they're all yours."

Jumping up from the table, Sirius hugged Simeon tightly, pinning his arms to his body. Simeon raised his eyebrows but let him.

"You just gotta promise me one thing though," he said, "no drugs."

Sirius immediately let go. "What? But you and Remus—"

"I'm not going with you," Simeon said, very blasé. "Have a few drinks if you want, sure, but no drugs. I can't save your arses from here."

"So how are we even getting there?" Remus asked.

"Stan'll take you and bring you back."

"The trolley driver?"

"Don't worry, he's good for it. Just bring him a couple beers and he probably won't leave you stranded."

Peter gaped; "Probably?"

Simeon nodded. "What's life without a little risk, lads?"

* * *

Thursday 10 th June 1976

Remus could've jumped up and down on the middle of the berm, punching the air out of joy—but of course he didn't, because that would just give Sirius the satisfaction of seeing him so happy. Only Sirius Black could look so smug over a poor final History mark.

"I don't get it. How could you have done so poorly? The exam was mostly multiple choice," James said, comparing his exam marks to Sirius'. His injured tongue was now securely on the mend after a trip to the school infirmary and a few days of grudging silence.

Sirius shrugged. " 'What's past is prologue'. Every dog's allowed an off-day once in a while. Really, I'm starting to think you lads keep me on too-tall of a pedestal."

"Okay, smart-ass." James passed Sirius' mark report back and picked up his football, spinning it on the tip of his finger like a basketball

until one of his teammates called out to him from across the berm.

“Oh, hey, gonna split but I’ll meet you guys in gym,” he promised.

"Kay," Remus waved, as James snatched up his bag from the ground and took off across the grass at a jaunty pace.

Dropping his arm, Remus tilted his head to get another look at Sirius' marks without him noticing. Having gotten their exam results back earlier that morning in their final forms, he'd been initially hesitant to ask the others how they’d done, but apparently his friends held no such qualms. Lily was top of the year again of course, with near-perfect marks across the board. James’ were quite good as well, at least high enough to keep his academically-minded folks off of his back for another year, and Peter had passed Maths, although only just barely.

With no marks in the red this term and at least two A-Level-equivalent results, Remus was more over the moon than he had ever felt when it came to his marks. He was almost looking forward to waving the small slip of yellow paper in Giles’ face when he picked him up from the London train station in a few days, but nothing could compare to the glee of actually beating the ever-perfect Sirius in History. The defeat came only by a small margin really, thanks to Remus’ efforts on his essays throughout the term, but it was enough to put him past Sirius after he’d bombed his final exam. Anyone else might’ve been more prickled, but Sirius just took the poor mark in stride, probably only thinking of the upside of how upset his mother would be when she found out.

“Have you decided what elective you’re taking next year?” Remus asked Sirius, casually changing the subject so as to try and keep some of his modesty intact. With James gone and Peter off on a final date with Moira (her family was from Scarborough and she and Peter would have to make due with only soppy phone calls over the summer) he and Sirius were left on the grass, watching side by side as a few prefects led the tiny year 6 students across their half of campus as preparation for the transition from primary to secondary in the following autumn.

“Music,” Sirius said simply, “I always do music. Sheila’s stuck with me.”

“Poor Sheila.”

“And you?”

Remus glanced at Sirius, who returned the look. They hadn't been this close since their argument on the bench, and the memory made Remus' stomach do little flips. "Music. Guess I'm stuck with you too."

"And our band survives!" Sirius exclaimed with sudden glee.

"You mean the imaginary one?"

Sirius turned his nose up slightly. "Won't be imaginary forever. I'm just glad to know that my efforts in teaching you how to play your own instrument won't go to waste."

"You ruin everything," Remus scoffed. "You gonna do guitar again then?"

"Mhm. Don't wanna do anything else."

"Not even piano?"

Sirius gave him a sharp side-eye. "Thought you hated gossip, Lupin."

"I do," he insisted, "but I'd have to be blind not to see the way you're always fawning over the thing in the music room."

"I do not *fawn* over it."

"Sure you do. People say that you're a prodigy. Are they telling the truth?"

Sirius looked away indifferently. "I was."

"Well, if you know how to play, then why not ever do it?"

"Because then she *wins!"* He snapped. The words had come out so automatically they left both of them stunned, and Sirius had to let out a heavy breath before continuing.

"I started piano because it's what I was supposed to do. Just like how I was *supposed* to listen to all my tutors, and follow orders, and be the perfect heir—I didn't do it because I wanted to. Every time I go home that fucking piano is there to taunt me."

Sirius had begun flicking his fingers in that nervous way of his, and Remus licked his lips.

"Why not just say you want to stop?"

“Mum wouldn’t let me. Still won't. ‘Least not when I’m home.”

“Why?”

“Because... she was my teacher.”

They looked at each other again, and Remus was struck by the urge to reach out and touch him. A hand on the shoulder, a simple pat, something that might offer a modicum of the comfort to the boy he’d spent the last ten months next to from dawn till dusk. In the end, all Remus could bring himself to do was reach into his pocket and withdraw one of his guitar picks that he’d been holding onto even after handing the Fender back for the term. He held the pick out to Sirius, who glanced down at it like he might snatch his hand back the moment he reached out to take it.

“Just take it,” Remus said, before reaching down and grabbing Sirius’ hand, pressing the pick into his palm. Sirius stared at it for a long moment before taking it between his fingers and expertly twirling it back and forth as a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

‘Scouser’ is a term for someone from Liverpool.

I have absolutely made up 'Dick Very and the Headways’ but you look at that name and tell me that couldn't be a British hair-band from the 70's and 80's.

Also, 'Earl Vince and the Valiants' was just the name Fleetwood Mac used to perform that song. They never used the pseudonym again.

Chapter 27: Full Moon

Chapter Summary

Gym class. Remus is a whiny bastard. Hilarity ensues.

Chapter Notes

No triggers this chapter. But it was VERY fun to write.

A/N: I have actually never played a game of rugby in my life. For those who have, please let me know how I did, lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I see the bad moon a-rising,
I see trouble on the way;
I see earthquakes and lightnin',
I see bad times today;
Don't go around tonight,
Well it's bound to take your life,
There's a bad moon on the rise…

- "Bad Moon Rising" Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1969

Thursday 10th June 1976 continued...

Exams concluded, everyone was to return to their regular schedules for those precious few days before the end of term, which meant that the boys were to spend their final afternoon of lessons on the sports field, baking under the hot June sun. Tomorrow was for packing and cleaning, and the day after that the entire student body of Hawkings Independent College would return home for the summer. Knowing that he'd finally be back in London after being denied the chance to visit home over April holiday, Remus should've been excited—and he had been, until he was informed that they'd be spending their final gym class playing rugby.

"It's cruel, really. An entire week of suffering through exams after months of studying for them, and still they attempt to force us back into a normal routine as though we were just robots to be oiled and shined. As though we were not people with proper wants and needs. Truly, you cannot spell systematic oppression without mandatory

school sports."

"Just run the damn ball, Lupin!" James shouted from across the field, standing just beneath the goalposts of the great green rugby pitch.

Remus huffed and spun the ball in his hands before taking off at an indignant run towards the posts. Sirius met him half-way and he tossed the ball backwards to him, letting the other boy finish the play and score the practice point while he veered off to the other end of the posts toward the benches and Peter, who was standing by and watching the whole thing play out.

"Good try, Lupin," Peter said, and it took a moment for him to realise he meant 'good play' instead of a sarcastic quip. "Try", "maul", "scrum"—having to keep up with rugby terms was almost as bad as pretending to like football.

"I think this is the most dramatic he's ever been," Sirius said to James, as the both of them crossed the pitch and joined them.

"It's just a scrimmage match, Lupin," James sighed, clearly irritated with Remus' intention to have everyone share in his misery. Really, it was easy to enjoy sports when you had the arms and thighs of a Greek god. If Sirius was made in the image of a rebellious angel, James was made in that of a kindly saint—a saint who spent his free time doing press-ups and 100-metre dashes for fun.

Sometimes Remus just hated James.

Of course their uniforms didn't help his attitude either. His had never quite fit, with shorts that were too wide in the waist and always sagging down. He missed the comfort that came from his track pants, but not even the heat exhaustion he would've gotten by wearing them would've granted him a pass from Ms. Hooch, who seemed to live and breathe for physical exertion.

When she had told them that they would be celebrating the end of term with a fun, easy game of rugby, Sirius had beamed with joy. Apparently he liked rugby even more than football and was over the moon since they'd avoided the sport for most of the term, as James was in their class and an obvious expert at running football drills and coordinating games.

Remus had initially tried much harder in gym to disguise his aversion for the sport just to keep up the facade in front of the Hawkings' football captain, but he'd felt distinctly less motivated the closer they

got to the end of the year, and now with both exams and the FA Cup over with, and a live music show and the summer holiday to look forward to, Remus was done pretending he more than just tolerated team sports.

“I will not be taking gym next year,” he told each of them, as James and Sirius tipped their heads back, swigging out of their water bottles.

“You could try strength and conditioning instead,” James suggested. “You know, to keep active and maybe bulk up a bit?”

“You calling me skinny?”

“Well, you are sort of built like a cigarette. Sometimes I’m afraid you’ll just turn sideways and disappear.”

“You think you’re *sooooo* funny, Potter.”

“Aw, don’t worry about it, Lupin,” Sirius said, coming around the back of the bench and reaching over Remus’ shoulder to pat him on the side of his chest, “ 'least you’re tall.”

“Yeah, girls always go for the tall ones,” Peter nodded, and Remus was reminded of how the other boy had been bragging since his last visit to the school nurse that he’d grown an inch and a half since his last birthday.

“Moira tell you that?” Remus asked, and Peter made a sarcastic face. A moment later Hooch blew her whistle, indicating that their warm-up was over and their game was to begin.

James ended up one of the team captains of course, and Sirius in his eagerness to play, took charge of the other. Instantly both boys began talking smack as their gym teacher divvied up the rest of the class and handed out the coloured vests to each team (blue for James’, red for Sirius’), goading each other on with varying in degrees of viciousness until they were nearly wrestling and had to be pulled apart just to start the game.

After being given a blue tunic along with Peter, Remus pulled it over his head and went to stand on James’ side of the pitch, trying not to make direct eye contact with his friend, who to his own credit, had not scoffed or groaned when Remus joined him and instead only grinned and gave him a thumbs-up.

Another reason to hate James Potter: he was so bloody-fucking nice.

At least they had the vests, he supposed. Hawkings was too posh a place to resort to 'shirts and skins' which a younger, even skinner Remus would've appreciated in years 7-10.

"Try not to cry too hard when you lose, Potter!" Sirius called across the field, as he tied his long hair into a ponytail at the back of his head. He was the only one of the 4A boys who'd made it onto the red team and just because he knew it would annoy James, Sirius clapped Davey Gudgeon on the shoulder and wrapped an arm around the other boy's neck, shaking his fist in his best friend's direction.

"Lupin," James said very quietly, "if you don't put those long legs of yours to good use today, I swear I'll get Pete to forge your schedule papers for next term and make you run drills every gym class for the entire year."

Remus shook his head. "You know there's competitive, and then there's just plain evil."

"And I can be both."

James glanced sideways at him with a cheeky smirk, which Remus returned. He wasn't looking forward to the game, but the chance to knock Sirius Black down a peg? That he was excited for.

Following James' lead, Remus slipped his rubber mouth guard around his teeth and stepped up to the pitch's halfway line.

"Your kick-off, Mr. Potter!" Hooch called from the side of the pitch, her whistle already poised between her lips. James waved back in response and tossed the ball between his hands a bit as his team lined up at the pitch's centre line. Because he could, Sirius shot James the bird from across the pitch, tongue out. James dropped the ball to return the gesture, and they both got a clipped warning whistle from their teacher.

"Hey Pete," Remus said, standing with one hand on his hip, the other shielding his eyes from the sun, "want to make a bet?"

"A bet?" Peter said, squinting up at him. "What are the stakes?"

"Ten quid says that Black gets a foul within the first five minutes of the game."

Peter looked to Sirius, who had turned away and was stretching as though he were bored. The moment spun back around and caught his friends staring, he waved and shot them the bird too just for good measure.

Another whistle. “Mr. Black!”

“Sorry, Hooch!”

“No way,” Peter said, shaking his head, “I know a losing bet when I see one.”

“Then why can’t you ever win at poker?” Remus teased. He held out his hand for Peter to give a friendly smack, which he did, not even the least bit bitter.

As Ms. Hooch stepped up to the middle of the halfway line, each boy began to bounce back and forth on their heels a little bit more. Remus wasn’t a part of the forward line, but should anyone from the red team break through he’d be expected to give chase or stand in their way. It was almost laughable. Doss had once said that Remus was as likely to be folded up into a paper airplane as he was to get any sort of bulk on him; so naturally the concept of tackling his friends in gym class was not ideal.

“Whooo! Yeah! Let’s get it on!” Sirius called, as Hooch raised her arm into the air. One short whistle-blow later and James had sent the first kick of the game sailing across the pitch. It was impressive, and Remus found himself watching it fly for what felt like forever, until another boy on his team shouldered him forward into a run.

They all converged in one spot on the red team’s side of the centre line, boys falling into one another in attempts to snatch the ball. There was no way any of it would’ve been legal in a proper game of rugby, but as long as no one came away with a bloody nose or busted knackers, Hooch was perfectly content to let them ‘scrimmage’. It had already occurred to Remus more than once during the year that Hooch must’ve been some sort of sadist, but that was true for most gym teachers, he supposed.

“C’mon, Remus,” James said, after the whistle was blown and the game reset, “back to the halfway line.” He grinned at him from behind his sports goggles, a smile only elevated by the fact that his dark skin was already shining with sweat under the sun.

Following his friend, Remus returned to the line and waited for the

next whistle blow. This time Sirius was kicking-off, and he sent the ball soaring across the field. It arched over Remus' head and flew straight toward James, who stared it down before launching himself into the air, catching it in his arms much to the apparent glee of the rest of his team.

Everyone was running before Remus knew what was happening and after Peter screamed at him for freezing up, he followed suit. He couldn't remember what his position even was, let alone what he should've been doing—but that didn't matter much once Davey Gudgeon had caught him around the middle and sent him to the ground with a horrible thump.

There was a whistle blow, and Remus blinked up at the sky as James appeared over him, half-scowling at Davey who was sprawled out on the field next to him. Extending an arm, James helped Remus to his feet and clapped him on the back as another whistle blew.

"Illegal tackling, Mr. Gudgeon!" Hooch barked.

Davey rolled over on the grass and got to his feet, pointing at Remus indignantly. "I didn't tackle him! The nob ran right into me!"

James spat out his mouth guard in Remus' defense; "He didn't! You launched yourself at him!"

"Reset," Hooch ordered, breaking up the group. Still shaking his rattled head, Remus turned around to find Sirius right in front of him, a scrutinizing smirk on his face.

"You're not even trying."

"Yes I am," Remus said indignantly, picking a piece of grass off his tongue. "I just ate turf in case you didn't notice."

"Only 'cause you were practically running backwards." Sirius reached out and poked him in the shoulder, right over a newly-achieved grass stain. "If you tried you'd probably be faster than any of us."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" Remus sneered, holding his shoulder.

"Guess we'll have to see."

Sirius flounced past him in a little trot, joining his teammates as they waited for the penalty kick to be served. It took Remus several

seconds of idle standing to realise that he was the one who was to be doing the kicking.

“This can’t be a part of my job,” he muttered as James pressed the ball into his arms.

“It’s a scrimmage in gym class,” James said, “everything’s a part of everyone’s job. Just try and get it over the goal posts.”

“Jesus Christ.” Sighing, Remus stepped up to the line, as indicated by their gym teacher.

“Just an easy little kick, Mr. Lupin,” Hooch said happily, before tooting her whistle. Remus flinched at the sharp sound before turning to face the goal, which was made of two tall metal posts inset over a football goal. Just under the goal, straight ahead of him, Sirius gave a little wave and he felt that irritated feeling in his gut he always got when Sirius taunted him.

With more effort than he’d shown in the game so far, Remus gave a hearty grunt and dropped the ball just over his foot for a stern kick. Rather than sending it up toward the goal posts, the rugby ball clipped the tip of his trainer and flew straight forward toward Sirius, who scrambled to catch it and only ended up taking it straight to the throat, choking a bit as the ball bounced off toward another one of his teammates.

Before Sirius could recover, James snatched the ball from another red-shirt and took off down the pitch. He’d scored a point before Remus had even so much as taken a step forward, and every boy in blue threw their arms up in celebration.

“Fucking hell, Lupin,” Sirius wheezed as he fell into Remus’ side dramatically, shoving him a few paces to the left. “Were you trying to kill me?”

“Maim you, maybe,” Remus said, his cheeks hot. Despite his words, he obviously hadn’t meant for the kick to sail directly in Sirius’ direction, but he couldn’t remember looking anywhere else.

“You’re not gonna get away with that again,” Sirius warned, as another whistle blow signalled the end of the play, dissolving the teams onto their own sides.

After that, Sirius was always there to intercept him—which usually involved taking Remus to the ground with varying degrees of

savagery. Around the second or third tackle, he started to realise that Sirius was not only gunning for him, but he was having fun doing it.

“You’re guarding me!” Remus shouted, after Sirius had yanked on the back of his shirt during another play reset and screamed; ‘*Wotcher!*’.

“Am not,” Sirius said haughtily.

“Then stay away!”

“S'all part of the game, Lupin!”

It didn’t take another threat from James for Remus to start putting more effort into running after that. Sirius was quick, but he was also right, as usual; when he put his mind to it Remus was fast enough to outpace most of them. It helped that he had nothing to do with the scrums, which looked more akin to a tangled wrestling match than a sports maneuver.

By the end of the hour all of them were significantly sweaty and winded. Peter managed to score the last point before both teams regrouped for a final hurrah, desperate to break the tie they’d been struggling with since the middle half of the game.

“Bailey, Jackson, Murphy—you three are going to mind the centre,” James said, and all three boys nodded aggressively. “Mason, Poole—you bring up their rear as wing positions. Pete, you’re with Walsh and Roberts, flanking the tossers from the far side. The rest of you will scrum. Remus’ll run the ball.”

Remus gaped. “Then what’ll *you* be doing?”

“I’m going to be the one tossing you the ball, numpty. Unless you want to be in the scrum?”

He didn’t, but the idea that he was going to be the one responsible for scoring the winning point made him more than a little uneasy. “And you’re just assuming I’ll be able to catch it?”

“Don’t worry, Lupin,” Murphy said, slapping Remus in between the shoulder blades hard enough to make him flinch, “if you drop it, the others will just pile on you and we’ll get another chance.”

“Oh joy,” he scoffed. “And while I put my spine back into place you lot can carry me across the try line.”

“Glad you’re on board,” James said, before clapping his hands and letting all the boys disperse.

A moment later Sirius led his boys into position and Hooch checked her watch.

“Let’s make this last play a clean one!” She called.

“He’s going to go after you again,” James said into Remus’ ear. Turning around, Remus followed James’ gaze to Sirius, who was slapping his thighs in anticipation while both teams arranged themselves in the ridiculous scrum formation, heads ducked down onto one another like a great big hug-pile.

“Fake left,” James told him. “He’ll follow you, and then Pete and the boys can take him and the rest out while you go round the edge.”

“But that’s where they’re going to collide with the forward guys,” Remus said, not liking the idea of being caught in the middle of scrum. “I’ll never catch it if I’m tripping over them.”

“I’ll get the ball to you,” James promised, “just go left.”

“Fine.”

“Good man.”

Before James could clap him on the shoulder again in that sportsman-like way of his, Remus ducked away and stepped into his spot. The final point, it seemed, would be decided by who was fast enough after the ball had left the scrum pile, and he wasn’t sure that it was going to be him.

“Alright boys,” Hooch said, as the scrum group bent down over each other, James and Davey standing by to roll the ball into the middle of their grappled bodies. “Crouch! Hold! *Engage!”*

Like a pair of raging rhinos, the teams pushed against one another immediately, kicking the ball back until James finally freed it from their legs and sent it spiralling toward Remus. By some good god’s grace, he snatched the ball out of the air and a second later, caught sight of Sirius zipping through the crowd toward him. About to fake left, Remus noticed a tiny gap in the red team’s otherwise iron-tight defense on his right-hand side. Sending James a telepathically sarcastic apology, Remus dove through the scattered bodies, plunging ahead as fast as his legs could carry him.

The try line looming ahead, he could almost taste victory. He was so close, all he had to do was to touch the ball to the grass on the other side and then he'd have bragging rights over Sirius until they all broke for summer.

"Run Lupin!" James hollered, several feet to his left and running toward the try line like he could score the point for him. *"RUN!"*

And he did. He ran hard enough and fast enough that he was nearly flying across that pitch line—that is until Sirius dove forward and wrapped his arms around his thighs, dragging him to the ground in one fell swoop just as he attempted to slam the ball down onto the grass for the point.

Or at least, he dragged some of him to the ground.

Tripped up around the legs, Remus soared forward across the pitch, ramming both his face and the ball into the pitch while Sirius was left to tumble off to the side, rolling with enough force that he slammed to a stop on his back as well. Over a dozen boys skidded to a halt—blue and red shirts alike—all wincing as they watched the two of them tumble.

Shaking his rattled skull and feeling for his bruised forehead, Remus pushed up off the pitch, dazed and blinking at the rugby ball that had rolled to a tedious stop just ahead of him across the pitch's white line.

He'd done it then! He'd scored the point—Sirius hadn't gotten him!

Remus was about to celebrate, to turn to his mates and sneer at Sirius in glee, when he felt a peculiar bit of warmth down below. Warmth from the summer sun where it had never been before.

"Oh my god," one of the boys cried from behind, "you pantsed him!"

In sudden realisation, Remus shot upright on his knees. His gym shorts were missing, stolen from him by the tackle and now several feet away, clutched in Sirius' fist as he too sat up and looked around in confusion, hair loose and tumbling down over his forehead.

Remus clapped his hands behind himself and felt nothing but skin. He still had his underwear, but the briefs had been pulled down near to his knees. If not for the fact that all the boys were behind him on the pitch, they'd have received the full-frontal; but as it was all the boys got was a blinding flash from his poor, pale arse.

“Holy fuck,” James gasped in astonishment, and a moment later the whole class erupted into maddened laughter.

Mortified, Remus ripped his briefs back up around his waist and stood up, whirling on Sirius who had begun to look between him and the shorts as though he were at a loss for words. Of course knowing him, that loss didn’t last for very long.

“My bad, Lupin,” he said, breathing hard enough that Remus knew that he was just suppressing his own laughter. “Didn’t mean to turn you into an exibitionist.”

“Give those to me!” Remus roared, shooting forward. But before he could reach him Sirius had jumped to his feet and zipped away between the other boys, Remus’ shorts still in hand.

“Keep the nudist away!” He cried, and Remus fumed, his face a scarlet red from embarrassment. “I think he means to indoctrinate me!”

“You pisshead! How *old* are you?!” He shouted, as everyone parted around the boy with no pants and Sirius danced right into the hands of Ms. Hooch, who blew her whistle loud enough to make him wince and drop the grey shorts on the pitch.

“Mr. Lupin,” she ordered, though not unkindly, “please return your trousers to the lower half of your body.”

Amidst his classmate’s laughter, Remus stalked forward and snatched up his shorts, tugging them over his legs furiously as Sirius hid behind their teacher. Even James and Peter were giggling, and when he shot them a dirty look James only shrugged.

“Should’a gone left, Lupin.”

* * *

Remus tore across the berm, arms pumping with more effort than they had during the game. He was still rather dizzy after taking a head-butt from the ground and as a result, mostly ended up tripping over his own feet. His friends kept up with him from behind, gym bags slung over their shoulders as they hid their snickering behind fingers and smirking lips.

“We won though, Remus!” James said, for perhaps the thirtieth time.

“You won the game for us!”

“At the cost of my own pride! If *he* hadn’t kept gunning for me the whole time—”

“I keep telling you it was an accident,” Sirius called. “I didn’t mean to have you moon the entire class!”

“It really is sort of the best timing though,” Peter offered. “In a few days everyone’ll be going home and no one will remember that you showed off your cheeks in gym class.”

“I did not show off my cheeks in gym class!” Remus wailed, turning around on them and thrusting a finger out in Sirius’ direction. “He sabotaged me!”

“Oh c’mon, Moony,” Sirius said, “it was just a bit of fun. You’re lucky there weren’t any girls around. Or maybe you wanted to show off?”

Before Remus could lose it on him for the *horrible* nickname, Peter elbowed James harshly and all three of them peaked around him. “What’s that about girls?” He murmured.

Following their gaze, Remus turned around to find Lily standing in the middle of the pavement expectantly. Her red eyebrows were raised—probably as a result of their shouting. Arms locked behind her, she tilted her head in question and the brim of her sun hat dipped down over her forehead. Rather than her regular school clothes she was wearing a pretty green jumper dress, its straps buckled over a white blouse.

“You lot look happy,” she said, before noticing Remus’ face. “Or not.”

“Oh my god, Evans, you’ll never guess what happened to this one in gym.”

Before Sirius could finish, Remus turned around and shoved him. When he spun back to Lily he forced a beaming smile. “Lily,” He announced, “I was just on my way to find you!” Lacing his elbow with hers, Remus ignored her surprise and turned them both around, already marching her away from the boys.

“You were?”

“Yeah!”

“No he wasn’t,” Sirius called, “he’s just embarrassed ‘cause he—”

“Oi—I mean… Hey, Evans!” James called, and to *Remus’* surprise, Lily came to an abrupt halt and turned back to look at him with big eyes.

“Yes?”

Reaching up to rub at the back of his neck, James gave a smile that looked like he was trying not to wince. “I’m sorry,” he said, “for… going after Snape. I know it upset you and I didn’t mean to embarrass you either. Not that you should’ve been embarrassed! It was his fault —and mine! Just… sorry.”

Lily looked from James to Remus like she expected him to have an answer, and though he was still pissed at his friends, he felt himself deflate a little. Sighing, Remus nodded his head, gesturing back at James before looking away. Lily gave a little smile before glancing back at James.

“I accept your apology,” she said, the picture of decorum.

With surprise clear on his face, James straightened up. “Oh. Brilliant!”

Lily nodded firmly. “Sev sort of deserved it, too. He apologised later, in case you were wondering.”

“We weren’t,” Sirius said, and James punched him in the shoulder, making him hiss.

“Happy for you, Evans,” James said.

Lily nodded again, this time with a smile. “See you lot later then. Shall we go, Remus?”

“Yes, please.”

“No!” Sirius pouted, as the pair of them began down the road. “Don’t take our Moony away! We weren’t done with him! I was going to introduce him to the art club as their first nude model!”

Over his shoulder, Remus shot Sirius the bird and Lily gave him an odd look. Thankfully the boys stopped following, probably because James was just relieved to be forgiven and didn’t want to press his luck where Lily was concerned.

Letting Lily take the lead, Remus was pleasantly surprised when they approached the path leading toward the lake, which was the closest

thing to the sports fields aside from the garage where the school trolleys were parked at night.

“What’s the dress for?” He asked, as they made their way down the bank of Lake Dubh. They’d since dropped arms, and Lily was busying herself by collecting smooth rocks and tossing them into the water.

“Oh, the prefects always throw an end of the year party in last period and we’re supposed to dress up,” she said. “Do you like it?”

“Uh, yes?”

Beaming, Lily skipped further down the rocky lakeside, pressing a hand to the top of her hat to keep it from falling off as she bent over to continue collecting more pebbles. “You should be a prefect, Remus. You’re sensible, and since the year thirteens are graduating we have a hole in the ranks.”

“No way,” he scoffed, “I’m sure there’s someone more cut out for the job than me.”

Lily tutted. “Really, Remus, you need to get over this ‘oh, I’m so bad—I’ve got holes in my trousers and listen to angry music—everyone must run away from me in terror’ attitude of yours. It’s getting rather old.”

“Well, excuse me,” he muttered, as Lily tossed another stone into the lake and paused to listen to the ‘plop’ it made as it landed.

“Is there a reason you wanted to talk then?” She asked, as Remus followed her and kicked rocks out of his path. “I was on my way somewhere, you know.”

Remus winced, kicking a large rock out of his path and watching as it rolled down the bank into the water. “Sorry. Just wanted a bit of peace from those idiots who call themselves my friends.”

“Did something happen in gym then?”

“Let’s just say I’m never playing rugby again.”

Lily smirked. “What’d Black do?”

“How’d you know it was him?”

“So it wasn’t him?”

“Course it was him,” Remus huffed, rolling his eyes. “Bastard really tries my patience.”

“Well, what’d he do?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Remus said, desperate to change the subject; “You forgave James pretty easily this time around. What gives?”

“Oh,” Lily started, “well I talked to Mary and she sort of said I was being too harsh. He never hit Sev after all, just sort of embarrassed him. And I figure he’s learned his lesson after getting clocked in the chin like that.”

“He had to take his last exam with an ice pack taped to his face.”

Lily smiled down at the ground, shyly. “Still an idiot though.”

“Oh yeah,” Remus agreed, “don’t think that’ll ever change.” He looked down to his feet and Lily must’ve followed his gaze, because she jumped forward very suddenly, bending down between his feet and springing up with another stone.

“This one’s perfect for skipping!” She declared, before scuttling down to the very edge of the water. As Remus caught up with her on the bank, Lily drew her arm back and flung the flattened rock across the surface of the lake. It skipped five times before disappearing under the dark water.

“Good job,” he said, genuinely impressed.

Lily clapped her hands to her sides happily. “I’ve had lots of practice. Mum and dad used to take me and Pet around all sorts of places while they gathered research for their books. Once we—”

A sharp whistle cut across the lake from behind them, making both Remus and Lily jump before they swung around and found Barty Crouch and his favourite crony, Yaxley, at the top of the bank and standing in the middle of the path astride two school bicycles.

“Heard you gave a little show on the field, Lupin!” Barty called. “What, too embarrassed to try for it in forms? You should’ve told me, I would’ve brought a camera!”

“Fucking hell,” Remus grumbled. “Is there some sort of school-wide blower I don’t know about?”

Barty caught sight of Lily, glaring up at him beneath her sun hat and leaned over his handlebars. “You showing off to girls now too, Lupin? How pale is that arse of his, girlie? Supposedly it’s blinding.”

“What is he talking about?” Lily asked, and Remus ground his teeth together.

“Black... might’ve grabbed hold of my shorts during the last half of gym.”

“He did what?”

“He pantsed me.”

“So everyone saw your bum?”

“Oi!” Crouch demanded, as Yaxley gave another horrible whistle. “Lupin! Did you or did you not flash your nob to the entire track and field team? Or was Hooch just looking for a bit of side-action?”

Before Remus could even entertain a response, Lily took one of her pebbles and threw it up the bank, nailing Crouch in the shoulder. Even James would’ve been impressed by her aim.

“Bloody fuck!” Barty cried, holding his arm. “You—”

“Ooh,” Lily said, “that looked like it hurt. You’d better go see Ms. Pomfrey in the medical room for a bandage.”

“You can’t do that!” Yaxley said, and Lily threw another rock, beaning him in the forehead after he tried to dodge it and keep hold of his bike at the same time. Yaxley howled, slapping a hand to his head while Crouch gaped.

“Piss off you two, before I give you detention for all of next September,” Lily ordered, already primed with another stone.

“You’re fucking crazy,” Barty said, and Remus snatched up a rock of his own—this one much bigger than the ones Lily had been throwing. Before he could entertain which of the two to smack upside the head, both boys turned and fled on their bikes.

“You are kind of crazy you know,” Remus remarked, dropping the rock as they watched the boys retreat. He wouldn’t have really thrown it. Probably.

“Good,” Lily said, “I like keeping people on their toes.”

She glanced up at him, floppy hat dipping down over her pretty, freckled face, and it occurred to Remus that Lily Evans was the fiercest person he'd ever known.

Years later, after all the good had come and all the bad had passed, it would still be the truth.

Chapter End Notes

For those who were unsure, a "try" in rugby is what it means to score a point.
"Press-ups" are push-ups.
"Wotcher" is a friendly/cheeky greeting.
"Blower" is slang for telephone.

Fun fact: "Dubh" is just the Gaelic word for black. So I have indeed named my lake, "Black Lake", lol.

Chapter 28: Photograph

Chapter Summary

While the boys get ready for their personal end-of-the-year concert, Remus discovers something new about the school.

Chapter Notes

No CW's this chapter~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We can't dance, we don't talk much, we just ball and play,
Then we move like tigers on Vaseline;
Well, the bitter comes better on a stolen guitar,
You're the blessed, we're the Spiders from Mars;
Come on, come on,
We really got a good thing going;
Come on, come on,
If you think we're gonna make it,
You better hang on to yourself…

- "Hang on to Yourself" David Bowie, 1972

Friday 11th June 1976

"What is it we're doing again?" Remus asked, as he and Lily made their way through the forest, dodging tree branches and slipping around bushes wider than their dorm rooms. It was a beautiful afternoon on their last full day on campus and the sun was peeking through the treetops to cast a warm glow on the spongy forest floor. There was another flash of light as Lily's camera shutter clicked and she stood up, plucking the freshly-printed photograph from its end and immediately tucking it into her camera bag to develop.

"I'm taking photos of all the school's native flora before we go home," she said happily, tracing her fingers across the surface of the fern she just photographed. "I do it for my parents every year and today's my last chance. Over the summer we always make them into a scrapbook together. It might sound a bit silly but I think it's about as close as they can get to keeping track of me while I'm away from them."

“It’s not silly,” Remus mumbled, looking around. He’d never gone so far into the forest behind the dorms even on his solitary walks, but when Lily had found him on their last full day before they were set to return home for the summer, he found he couldn’t say no.

“You said your parents were botanists then?” He asked, looking over her shoulder as she stopped to take a photo of a bush.

“Yup,” she said, squinting through the camera’s viewfinder and focusing the lens. “They met through their work actually.”

Remus trailed his hand across a weeping tree branch. “So you’ve been around plants a lot.”

“All my life.”

He smirked. “And so your name… that can’t just be a coincidence.”

Before she could snap her picture, Lily’s head dropped back and she sagged, sighing as she released her camera to flop down against her chest on its strap. “Alright, have a go then—the plant-crazy parents named their kid ‘Lily’—ha, ha, so funny.”

“No, it’s perfectly normal,” Remus snorted, “honestly I feel more bad for poor ‘Petunia’. You definitely got the better half of the deal if she gets stuck with ‘Pet’ or ‘Tunie’ as nicknames.”

Despite herself, Lily gave a puckered smile. “Her full name’s ‘Petunia Marigold’ actually,” she said bashfully.

“No,” Remus gasped, “that’s horrid, Lils, what were your parents thinking? Oh my god—what they name *you?”*

Lily scooped up a pinecone and pelted him with it. “It’s not that bad!”

Remus thought back to all the times he’d seen Lily’s name written across her school books or clothing tags; *Lily J. Evans.* “C’mon, what’s the ‘J’ stand for?” He demanded.

“Juniper,” Lily said proudly. “Lily Juniper Evans.”

Remus bent down to scoop up the pinecone she’d thrown at him. “Well, that’s not bad at all. No wonder Petunia’s so damn sour.”

Lily smiled and looked away again, stopping next to a plant with curly purple flowers blossoming off its stem.

“What’s that one?” Remus asked, purposely poking the flower with his finger just as Lily went to take its photo. She scoffed but patiently waited for it to print before tucking the photo away.

“This is a marsh orchid,” she said. “It belongs to the family *Orchidaceae* and its Latin name is *Dactylorhiza incarnata.”*

Remus whistled, clearly impressed. “And that one?” He pointed to a cluster of tiny white flowers clinging to the roots of a nearby tree.”

Lily craned her neck to see. “Looks like Chickweed—*Stellaria media*—so named because farmers cultivate it to feed to chickens.”

“And that one?”

“Er—that’s a bush.”

Remus sighed. “And you were doing so well.”

“Oh yeah? You try saying *‘Dactylorhiza incarnata’,* smart-ass.”

Dropping his pinecone, he raised his hands in defeat. “I yield to your infinite knowledge of weeds, Miss Juniper.”

“Why thank you.” With a gentle tug, Lily plucked one of the purple flowers from its stem and reached up, tucking it behind his ear. “I normally prefer to leave the flora as I found it, but this—” she raised her camera; “will make such a cute photo.”

Remus raised his hand defensively. “No,” he whined.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who hates getting their photo taken too?” Lily drawled. “Really Remus, pick a struggle already.”

“Ouch.”

“C’mon, we’re not going to see each other all summer—at least let me take your picture!”

With a guilty sigh he dropped his arms and tilted his head to the side, smiling awkwardly. Beaming from behind the camera, Lily snapped his photo and tore it from its spout immediately, flapping it through the air. She giggled at him in that self-satisfied way of hers and Remus only shook his head while checking his watch.

“We should go,” he said; “You said you were gonna help organise the

dorm inspections with the other prefects, right? Well it's almost three."

Lily nodded and together they turned to go, weaving back through the trees the way they'd come. There was a narrow dirt path to lead them at least, but he got swatted in the face by a tree branch more than once.

"Look!" Lily cried once his picture had finished developing. She passed it back to him and he sighed, looking at the dopey photo with reluctance.

"I look high."

"Are you high?"

"No. I wish."

"Then you look handsome!"

"Thanks," he scoffed, before something in the corner of the photo caught his eye. It was blurry but just behind him through the trees, Remus spotted what appeared to be some sort of old building. He mentioned it to Lily, but she only shrugged.

"Could be another tree."

"Oh yeah, looks like Latin for 'it's-a-building-ous'."

She shoved him for his cheek, but after another glance they'd both agreed that the shape appeared too boxy to be another tree. Lily couldn't remember seeing it while snapping the photo, but eventually they made it back to House Lane anyway, where a flurry of students were already marching to and fro, lugging their rubbish to the school incinerators and shaking rugs out on the lawn.

"You guys have already cleaned, right?" Lily asked.

"Yeah—yesterday." He left out the part that they'd cleaned and packed early because they weren't going to have the time to do it that evening. Not with Simeon's concert to attend.

"Good. It better be *actually* clean—not like what those tossers did last year."

Before he could ask about 'last year', another prefect girl skipped up the lane in front of them, panting slightly as she smiled at Lily in

relief.

“Oh good, you’re here Lily! We need help at Crowley House—the boys have flooded the common room.”

“Oh my god—how?”

“Apparently no one told them there was such a thing as ‘too much mopping’—mop water *everywhere.”*

“Dear lord.” Lily turned to Remus and lifted her camera bag over her head. “Can you take my camera back with you? I’ll get it later, I just don’t want it to get ruined in the flood.”

“No problem,” he said, looping the strap over his shoulder.

“Cool, see you at dinner!”

He waved, knowing she wouldn’t, and together the girls loped back up the lane. Making his way back to his dorm alone, Remus made the climb to his bedroom and walked in to find his friends tearing through their already-packed trunks.

“Pete!” Sirius barked. “I swear to GOD if you don’t put your trousers on right now…”

“I can’t find them!” Peter wailed back.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU CAN’T *FIND THEM?!”*

Remus shut the door quickly. The sound made Sirius look up from his trunk to squint at him. “Moony, where have you been?”

Resisting the urge to pucker at the nickname—it would only make Sirius more smug—Remus tucked his hands into his back pockets. “Out with Lily. What are you guys doing? We’re not s’posed to be meeting Stan for a few hours.”

“I’m looking for that pack of cigs you hid—yeah I know about them, you stingy arse—meanwhile Pettigrew’s lost his pants again.”

“I can only find my school slacks,” Peter whinged, half of his body tucked up under his bed while he searched. Unfortunately the half that was facing Remus was clothed only in a pair of tighty-whities.

“Wear those then!” Snapped Sirius.

“Oh, hey Lupin,” James said, busy running a comb through his hair as he strolled out of the bathroom. It almost startled Remus—he didn’t think James Potter owned a comb.

With a grunt of defeat, Peter pulled his head back out from under the bed. “I can’t just wear my uniform, you guys look so cool!”

He did have a point. Sirius was wearing a plain white t-shirt and jeans, over which he’d paired the suede jacket he’d gotten for his birthday and cowboy boots, which should’ve looked ridiculous but somehow worked under the flared hems of his jeans. It was Simeon who’d lent him the boots, but Sirius did confess to having to double-up on socks just to get them to fit. James, ever his best-friend’s counterpart, looked just as good—albeit less like he was about to get heatstroke—having emerged from the toilet wearing a pair of fitted brown slacks cuffed at the ankles and a Doors t-shirt rolled up at the shoulders.

“There’s nothing wrong with dressing casual,” Sirius blagged, “I mean look at Lupin, he’s—Lupin, what are you wearing?”

Remus looked down at himself. He was wearing jeans and his favourite t-shirt, a faded Rolling Stones tee that was so well-loved a small hole had recently opened up in the armpit. He’d tucked the sunglasses he’d gotten from Tonya into the neckline of his shirt too, but the fabric was so stretched it tugged it down to reveal his entire clavicle. Lily’s camera bag was an unforeseen addition, but it wasn’t like he was wearing it to the concert.

“What? It’s ‘casual’.”

Sirius made a face, but said nothing as Remus went to his trunks to retrieve for the cigarettes he’d been looking for.

“Remus, can I borrow a pair of trousers?” Peter asked.

Pausing his search, Remus took a moment to look Peter up and down —all 5’5” of him—and then down at his own lanky lower body. “Uh, sorry Pete, but I’m not exactly sure we’re the same size…”

James stood up from where he’d been rifling around in one of his own trunks. “Here Pete,” he said, holding out a pair of dark-wash denim, “I guess we must’ve mixed up our stuff last time we did laundry.”

“If you two did your own bloody laundry it wouldn’t be an issue,” Sirius huffed. “We’re supposed to be going home tomorrow, and you

two still don't have your things straight. Lupin, have you seen the cigs? I can't bloody find them."

"Gimme a second!"

"So high and mighty," James said cheekily. "Doing laundry together saves water, and it means only one of us has to lug the basket down to the laundrette every week."

"Besides," Peter said, doing a little jump to pull on his slacks, "James and I are neighbours. If I leave my trousers in his trunk all I have to do is walk over and get them."

"Do you say that when all of your knickers go missing too?" Sirius had abandoned his own trunks and approached Remus' bed, scanning over his open trunks. "Enough books, Lupin? Pince'll maim you if you lifted them from the library, you know."

"They're from the girls," Remus shot, "and what, afraid of someone else touching your knickers, Black?"

"Careful Moony, or I'll string your knickers up the school flag post as a farewell to the rest of the school."

Sirius gave a playful smirk as Remus rolled his eyes and turned back to his trunks. They were all packed mostly: three heavy, black-clad leather suitcases with *'R. J. Lupin'* monogrammed across the top. He could've sworn that he'd left the last of his Embassys tucked into his winter boots but when he looked the boots were starkly empty.

"Did you go through my trunk?" He asked, shaking out one of the boots just in case.

"Yeah," Sirius said, "last week, after the spliffs ran out. You told me to."

"Fuck, yeah okay." Sighing, Remus tucked the boot away and shut the trunk.

"So no smokes then?" Peter asked, doing up his belt behind them.

Shaking his head, Remus dropped to his knees beside his bed. "No, I have some."

Hoping to save some for the train ride back to London, he'd stashed a pack completely out of sight weeks ago, in the one place he hadn't

bothered with since the beginning of term. Reaching beneath the bed, Remus withdrew his mother's trunk and lifted it up on top of the others, the white-leather a stark contrast with the dark, wood-grain colour of the rest of the room. Sirius watched intently beside him, and he could tell by the silence that Peter and James must've been craning their necks to get a look too. The trunk had been one of the things he was least willing to discuss, and the others must've picked up on this early because they'd never pestered him about it.

Apart from not being a very interesting point of discussion *("Here's the trunk my dead mother left behind, you see this stain on the edge, it's probably her lipstick, but it's red of course so one could only hope!")* the trunk only reminded him of memories that left more of an ache in his chest than comfort. It was like Superman carrying around his own personal supply of kryptonite; why had he even brought the trunk in the first place? It'd gone from collecting dust under one bed to another, but he knew that at least while it was at Hawkings with him no one else would be able to touch it.

Remus unlocked the trunk and lifted the lid as unceremoniously as he could. There was a short bout of silence, then Sirius spoke;

"Records?"

At least two dozen, all piled on top of one another, creasing corners and fading in the middle where their covers were rubbing together; and on top of those, a single pack of Embassy Number 1's.

Plucking out the carton and pressing it into his back pocket Remus made to close the lid, but Sirius stuck his hand out and caught the edge. "You had this many albums with you all year and you didn't play any of them?"

Staring hard at the trunk's tarnished buckles, Remus ran his tongue over his teeth as an eager James and Peter appeared on Sirius' other side. Before he could be stopped, Sirius reached out and began shuffling through the records. "Blimey, I knew you liked The Beatles, but—"

"They're not actually mine," Remus quipped.

"Who's then?" Peter asked. "Your mum's?"

The question felt like a punch to the gut. What would they think if he told them that no one else had laid eyes on the albums in years because he couldn't bring himself to so much as look at them? They'd

probably call him a sop, so the only thing Remus said was; “Yeah.”

“I still don’t get why you didn’t bring them out,” Sirius said. “There’s lots here that I don’t have. Our collection would’ve been the best in the entire school.”

“I thought your collection was already the best in school.”

“Well it can always be *better,* can’t it?”

Clutching The Byrds’ *Mr. Tambourine Man,* Sirius looked up expectantly, and Remus was suddenly reminded of how he’d looked the evening before, packing his favourite things in the world—his collection of albums and stereo—into James and Peter’s trunks and effectively saying goodbye to them for the next two months. They were mirror images of each other really; Remus had punished himself by locking the music away, while Sirius used it as a reward for enduring the home-life that should’ve been good and easy, but wasn’t. Whatever ‘home’ was like for Sirius was still unclear, but Remus thought he at least understood him a little better after spending ten months living side-by-side and sharing the bits of themselves that they could bear to speak about.

“Next year,” he said, gulping, “I’ll play them next year.”

Sirius watched him for a moment, before smiling gently. “Yeah, okay then.”

“Just another thing to look forward to in September,” James said, putting back the album he’d grabbed and shut his own trunks. Watching him, Sirius finally handed *Mr. Tambourine Man* back and while Remus’ hands were full, reached into his back pocket, pulling out the smokes and shaking the box a bit.

“I’ll take good care of these,” he said with a wink, and Remus scoffed.

“Tosser.”

Sirius spun away as his face split into a smile. Remus wished he could’ve framed it—and then he remembered the camera and the strange building in the woods.

“Hey,” he started, shutting Hope’s trunk and flipping open Lily’s camera bag to sort through the photos; “Is there supposed to be a building in the Eastern crop of wood? You know—just at the end of the lane?”

“No, don’t think so,” James answered, slumping back on his bed.

Remus found his photo and drew it out. “Are you sure? ‘Cause Lily and I were walking and we sorta—”

Sirius was there instantly, plucking the photo out of his hand to get a look for himself. Immediately his eyes widened in delight. “AW! Look at our Moony, isn’t he just cute as a button!”

“Give that back!” Remus hissed, but Sirius just threw himself across James’ bed and passed the photo to him.

“Is that really how you take a photo, Remus?” James sniggered, while Peter swooped in from behind. “Not that it isn’t completely adorable!”

“I think he’s even blushing,” Peter said.

“The power of women, really,” Sirius sighed.

“I could easily kill any one of you with one of James’ sport socks,” Remus threatened.

“*Anyone* could kill anyone with one of James’ sport socks,” Peter said, “those things fucking reek.”

“Maybe Black’s right—we should do our own laundry,” James scowled.

“I wasn’t trying to show you my face,” Remus huffed, “look at the corner—it looks like a building!”

All three boys squinted tightly, turning their heads to the side to examine the maybe-building. “Oh yeah,” James said, “I see it. But what’s a building doing that far in the woods?”

“Oh my god,” Sirius said suddenly, thrusting the photograph out ahead of himself, “oh my god! I can’t believe it—he’s found it!”

“Found what?” Peter squeaked.

Sirius gave James a sudden back-hand to the chest, making him flinch. “Don’t you remember what Sim told us that one time last year? About the shack in the woods that no one could find?”

“OH!” James’ eyes widened in recognition and he jumped into a squat on the bed. “OH MY GOD!” He turned to Peter; “PETE IT’S THE SHACK!”

“What shack?” Remus demanded for him.

“The Shrieking Shack!” Sirius grinned. “The haunted building on campus that no one can ever find! They say on dark nights you can hear screaming coming from the woods—that it’s the ghosts of the shack seeking retribution for their deaths!”

“Alright, sure,” Remus scoffed, snatching the photograph back from Sirius and tucking it into Lily’s camera bag.

“I’m serious, Lupin!”

“We know.”

“Hmm—you're a dick! But I’m not lying! God, I can’t believe you haven’t heard of it yet—it’s like Hawkings’ most famous urban legend. And you found it!”

“I didn’t even see the thing,” Remus amended, “just noticed it in the photograph.”

“That’s even better!” Peter added. “It’s evidence that it exists now, right?”

“Right! We gotta go see it.”

James checked his watch. “But we have the concert tonight.”

Sirius launched up from James’ bed. “We still have a few hours, that’s plenty of time to go look. And it’s daytime so we don’t have to worry about any ghosts coming out to snatch us!” Cackling, Sirius dove at Remus and rattled him by the shoulders. “C’mon, Lupin!” He moaned. “You gotta show us where it is!”

“Fine!” Remus moaned. “On one condition! You guys gotta take a stupid flower photo too.”

Sirius’ grin grew even wider as he began to laugh. “Sure, you bloody hippy—whatever you want.”

He wasn’t satisfied—not by far—but he also supposed there were worse ways to spend his last day at school than tracking down a haunted shack in the woods with his friends. It’d be a story to tell the others back home at least.

“If we’re going, we should go now,” James said, pulling on his trainers. Sirius and Peter set themselves back to righting their trunks

and Remus did the same. At the last second, while the others were piling out of the bedroom and into the hall, Remus remembered the map he'd compiled early into first term of every notable place on campus.

"Moony, you got a key?" James called from outside, dragging Sirius down the hall in a headlock after he'd suggested that the shack would be the ideal snogging hideout should James ever actually get anywhere with Lily.

"Yeah, I got it," Remus answered, taking a final moment to rifle around for his tattered map and tuck it into his back pocket.

"What?" Sirius grunted from the hall. "I'm only saying that a house full of ghosts would make the perfect cuddling situation! No way a scared girl is gonna bother leaving room for Jesus! I'm just trying to help you out, mate!"

* * *

You're welcome, Lily, Remus thought as he tucked the guys' photographs into the camera bag. At least now she would have a full set of flower-boys.

"I don't see anything," James said, trekking ahead of them as he held his hand over his eyes and squinted in the early-evening sun.

"Well if it was just out in the open I'm sure more people would stumble upon it," Sirius said, doing the same, though he'd already tried to steal Remus' sunglasses twice.

"Sim said that a teacher murdered twelve students in the Shack, and that's why it screams at night—its the sounds of kids getting butchered by their chemistry teacher," Peter said.

"I heard he taught geography," Sirius offered.

"And I heard it was twelve *groups* of students," James added.

"And I think you're all full of shit," Remus finished, bringing up the rear rather unenthusiastically.

"Lupin, you should be leading!" Sirius said. "You're the one that found it!"

“I told you—Lily and I just followed the path—I don’t know where else it could be.”

“How long were you walking for?” Asked James.

“I don’t know exactly. A while. She was taking pictures.”

Sirius swatted at his own arm. “Fuckin’ midges. God, I’d scream every night if I lived out here too.”

With sudden vigour, James smacked Sirius hard on the back of the neck.

“OW! What the fuck?”

“Thought I saw a bug!”

“You dirty liar! Come here, I’ll—”

“LOOK!” Peter wailed, making all of them jump. He thrust a finger out and they all followed his gaze, settling on a dark shape through the trees. Immediately Sirius took off like a light, James close on his heels with Peter behind him and Remus reluctantly bringing up the rear once more. What they found was a single abandoned house—three stories with every window boarded over with thick wooden planks. Though smaller than those Remus recognised, it looked exactly like a —

“It’s a dorm,” Peter said. “Not a shack at all.”

“Wonder what it’s doing way out here,” Sirius mumbled.

“Standing in peace,” Remus added. He didn’t like the look of the building. Its walls were made of a dark, weather-beaten wood unlike the stone exteriors of the dorms of House Lane and the foliage leading up to its front was dark and gnarled as though the very ground it sat on were poisoned.

“Well if I were a ghost, that’s where I’d hang out,” James said humbly.

Sirius started forward; “Let’s go in!”

“Are we absolutely sure this is what we want to do?” Peter winced. “Because I was pretty sure we had plans tonight and I didn’t plan on *dying* before I got to do them.”

“Don’t be a chicken, Pettigrew.”

“Oh yes, God forbid someone be the voice of reason as we waltz up to a decaying house in the middle of the bloody woods!”

“I’m with Pete,” Remus said. “We’ll probably just end up falling through the floor.”

“Come on,” Sirius whined, halfway to the front door, “how ‘bout if I buy all the drinks tonight?”

“Where’d you suddenly get the money to do that, Mr. My-parents-cut-me-off?” James asked.

“I can be resourceful when I want to be,” Sirius said snottily, “now are you three coming or should I leave you to take more photos and braid each other’s hair?”

James went forward first but eventually they all followed. Unlike the windows, the boards over the Shack’s front doors had been pried off presumably by other undaunted students, leaving the leftover bits to cling to their original rusted nails. The door handle was broken so they were able push it wide, hearing every strained squeak of its rusted hingers. The moment they crossed its threshold, the horrible smell of dust and decaying wood flooded Remus’ nose and he pinched it while they looked around what had to have once been a common area but was now nothing more than a dilapidated shell. The covered windows allowed very little light inside, leaving the corners and halls darker than the forest would be at night.

“Well this is cheery,” James said, nudging an overturned chair in the middle of the room that appeared to have three of its legs ripped off. Other debris scattered the floor and a small ring of dried leaves had collected around the front door, crunching under their shoes and leaving smudges in the thick layer of dust that had settled over everything.

“We should split up and explore,” Sirius suggested, peering around in the dark.

“Haven’t you ever seen a movie?” Peter gasped. “That’s exactly how everyone gets murdered!”

“Well I wanna know what’s here, and if we’re to make the show on time then we don’t got the freedom to skirt around in a group like little girls!” Twisting his head around, Sirius scanned the dusty floor

until he'd come back with a long stick, which he broke into four pieces of varying length. "Shortest stick takes top floor, second-shortest gets second floor. The other two will search around down here."

"What is it that we're looking for exactly?" Remus asked, while James and Peter eagerly snatched up a stick.

"Evil geography teachers—dead bodies—disgusting supernatural creatures—take your pick, Moony." Smirking, Sirius waved the last two sticks at him.

"Cut the 'Moony' crap or I'll murder you myself," Remus tsked, choosing his twig. One by one they all opened their palms to compare and Remus let out a long sigh.

"Guess you're climbing some stairs— *Moony,"* Sirius sniggered.

Remus turned to James. "If I don't come back, you get the record collection."

"Aw—no fair!"

Sirius had ended up with the second-shortest stick, and so while James and Peter began weaving their way through the ramshackle ground floor, they started up the stairs, taking them slowly and wincing at every strained groan that echoed up from the rotting wood beneath them.

"This is so stupid," Remus muttered.

"It's *cool,"* Sirius insisted. "You found something really cool, Lupin!"

He knew deep down that the reason why Sirius had become so restless in the last few weeks was directly linked to everyone returning home for summer, and though he didn't have the words to explain it aloud, Remus understood. At least he had Tomny and the others to fall back on—Sirius had no one. He would be alone at his family's estate for nine whole weeks, relying only on the written communication of his friends to tide him over. So for this reason, Remus stopped complaining about the Shack.

They made it to the second floor landing and peered down the looming hallway together. Without the light peeking through the front doors, the upstairs was even darker and left a nervous thrumming in the base of Remus' throat.

“Well,” Sirius started, sounding a little less sure of himself than he had not two minutes before, “guess I’ll see you in a bit.”

Stiffly, he straightened up and began tiptoeing down the hallway by himself, his inky-black hair instantly camouflaged in the darkness.

“Don’t fall through the floor,” Remus called with a stilted chuckle before glancing up at the rest of the staircase. “Ha… Fuck me.”

Now, Remus had never really considered himself easily-frightened. He’d walked through the East End at night by himself before, and that alone was ten times as frightening as some old building in the woods that was falling apart at the seams. However, seeing the scuffs in the dust on the third-floor landing as though a body had been dragged up or down the stairs left him more than a little concerned. Judging by the lack of dust settled in the centre of the drag-marks, whatever had done them had been there recently. Against his better judgement, he followed the scuffing down the hallway, pausing before every doorway to peer inside. The bedrooms were mostly empty, some with the decaying remnants of old mattresses left on wire bed frames that looked rustier than a scrapyard in the rain. A few times he had to push a door open just to peer inside and every creaky groan of the hinges made him clench from top to bottom.

The scuff marks ended in the final bedroom at the end of the hall. It was the biggest of all of them—perhaps a teacher’s room once, and it was so dark that peering inside was like being swallowed by a black hole. Remus could see the faint outline of a large four-poster bed, its curtains rotting on their rungs, and across from that, a heavy oak wardrobe. It appeared to be finely made, though that could’ve just been its sheer size. It was a miracle the thing hadn’t crashed through to the floors below yet.

About to turn away and return to his friends with word of only more dust and rot, Remus froze when he heard the echo of a furious scratching coming from the wardrobe.

“Oh fuck,” he breathed, “please god no…”

He paused, praying that he wouldn’t hear it again, but only a few seconds passed before the familiar scratching cut across the dark room. Hardly breathing, Remus shuffled into the bedroom, dragging his feet and leaving fresh marks in the dust.

“Please don’t be a ghost,” he murmured, “please just be a fucking rat or something…”

Reaching out, Remus nearly laughed at the dim sight of his trembling fingers. The wardrobe's handles were rusted as well but cool to the touch and as he gathered a decent grip and steeled himself against keeling over and vomiting on the floor, Remus took a final breath and threw the doors wide.

There was a screech and something flew out of the cabinet, almost smacking into the centre of Remus' chest as he fell back on his ass with a great thump. Heart beating a mile a minute, he only had time to see the tiny ball of fur streak out of the room before he collapsed against the floor in relief.

"Oh fuck… oh thank god…" He moaned, rolling around in the dust some more before finally pulling himself to his feet. Examining the inside of the cupboard, he found three shelves of nested twigs and field cotton as well as enough spiders to kill every fly in Professor Kettleburn's barn.

Shutting up the wardrobe as he'd found it, Remus returned to the hallway and began making his way back to the stairs.

"Good news," he mumbled to himself, "no dead bodies or killer teachers, just your regular Scottish squirrel."

"Moony…?"

Sirius' call cut through the darkness like a knife and Remus straightened up.

"Moony, you there? Where are you, say something you daft dimbo!"

Suddenly feeling rather petty, Remus slipped into one of the side bedrooms and behind the door. He could hear Sirius' creaking footsteps making their way down the hall, and with his heartbeat still echoing in his ears, he glanced down to Lily's instant camera and carefully slid it free of its bag.

"Moony!" Sirius hissed again. "Lupin, where are you? I swear to god if that noise was you and you—just come out!"

Biting his lip to keep from laughing, he waited until he was sure Sirius had passed him before slipping out and creeping back down the hall. He found him standing before the wardrobe and carefully slid his feet across the floor so as to not make any noise. Raising the camera, he waited for Sirius to reach out and when he did—

“GAAHHH!”

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!”

Practically launching himself a foot in the air, Sirius spun around and was instantly blinded by the flash of Lily’s camera as Remus took the photo and reeled back, killing himself laughing.

“MOONY! YOU *DICKHEAD!”* Sirius roared, pressing his fingers into his eyes to soothe his fried retinas.

“You absolutely deserved that!” Remus crowed, stepping back as Sirius used one hand to blindly swat at him.

“I think you’ve blinded me!”

“It’s just a camera, you twat. A few spots in your vision never killed anyone.”

Pulling his hands away, Sirius blinked furiously in the dark while Remus plucked the photo from the printer slot and slid Lily’s camera back into its bag. The photo he tucked into his back pocket—he’d earned it.

“The sun is shining inside,” Sirius said, waving his hands about. Smirking, Remus grabbed him by the arm and tugged him out into the hall.

“You satisfied yet, Black? There’s nothing here apart from spiders and squirrels.”

“I didn’t see a squirrel. All I saw was your cowardly arse.”

“Then that would make this round two of ‘Moony’,” Remus said at his own expense, chuckling as he and Sirius took the stairs down.

They met James and Peter on the ground floor, both of them wide-eyed over the screaming and the loud thump before that.

“Nothing,” Remus said, “just an old house.”

“Same down here,” James nodded. “Good thing too, we’ve got to go.”

“We’ll be back,” Sirius muttered, still blinking, “I’m sensing a brilliant prank in this place’s future.”

“Well, it’s gonna have to wait for September.” Slinging his arm around

Sirius' shoulders, James led them outside, where they were all left squinting in the sun, another shared memory tucked under their belts. As they went, Remus glanced back at the Shack in all its tarnished glory and allowed himself a single smug smile.

"Hey," he called, untucking the photo from his back pocket, "anyone want to see what Black looks like when he's pissing his pants?"

Chapter End Notes

'Midges' are annoying little insects that can bite. They're a fucking menace in the Scottish Highlands.

We're almost at the end of the year! One more chapter to go, lads ^^

Chapter 29: Float Me to the Moon

Chapter Summary

End of the year, and it's concert time for the boys.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking, drinking, allusions to drugs.

Spotify Playlist for this school year: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5YHpqO4otGr4QkScIjL4oG
It includes every song referenced in the fic so far, so check it out if you like the vibes. There will be one for each school year. Let me know if you think I should release it ahead of time next time or at the end of the completed year, cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And I'm blinded by the neon,
Don't try and change my tune;
'Cause I thought I heard a saxophone,
I'm drunk on the moon…

- "Drunk on the Moon" Tom Waits, 1974

Thanks to the hubbub of move-out, no one noticed four boys meandering down the campus street in the warm summer air. Curfew wouldn't start for hours and though they wouldn't be present for it, the whole school was looking forward to what everyone called 'The Final Feast', a great dinner provided by the school for making it to the end of the year. For them, the plan was to meet Stan outside of the school's eastern gates, where they'd pile into the back of his car and make the long drive to the concert. There they'd have the time of their lives for a single evening before squishing into the sedan and making the trek back in the wee hours of the morning. According to Simeon, if all went well they'd return to school with plenty of time before their buses were scheduled to depart for the train stations. Then they could sleep in the car or on the bus or train, and no one would be the wiser.

After leaving the Shack behind, they returned to their dorm room one final time to drop-off Lily's camera and ensure that everything was tidy for their inspection. The day before Remus had experienced

mixed feelings as he watched each of his friends pack their lives into a few measly trunks. Their dorm hadn't felt so empty since their first week and without Sirius' stereo or James' football posters hanging about, the room felt distinctly cold. Remus' corner had stayed rather bare all year apart from the constant stack of books by his side table, but after seeing the empty room he had silently promised himself that when he returned to Hawkings the following autumn, he would hang up something that claimed the space as his own. Lee could probably find him a few cool posters, or even a busted-up lava lamp. The others would definitely get a kick out of that.

"You don't think Lily will see this as us leaving her out again, do you?" James asked, staring down at the pavement as they made their way to the eastern gates.

Sirius shook his head, exasperated. "Who cares? She already forgave you for pulverizing Snivellus."

"I didn't actually hit him," James grumbled, "but I also don't fancy spending another year as 'Undesirable #1'. Do you?"

"There's only four tickets anyway," Remus said, amicably. "And we didn't tell the girls, so just keep your lips to yourself tonight and there won't be any problems."

As Peter and Sirius began to laugh, James flashed Remus an irritated smile. "What's it going to take to get you to stop being so vicious, Moony?"

"Stop calling me 'Moony' and we'll talk."

"Don't be so put-out, Potter," Sirius said, "if you really want a kiss I'm sure one of us can do it. Don't think Lily will mind that as much."

"Oh yeah? Come here then, Black. Put your money where your mouth is!"

With a hoot, Sirius streaked away and James gave chase immediately, cackling as he ran after him. Peter joined in too, and after finding himself suddenly giddy in the early night air, Remus burst into a run after his friends. Soon all four of them were sprinting down the street, yelling and hollering at the top of their lungs like the yobs they were. They passed other kids, dodging each of them as they mulled around out front of dorms, carrying books and other things that needed to be returned to the school before everyone left for home the next day. Among them were Cass and Deacon, pushing their dorm's

telly up the street on a large cart.

“Where’s the party boys?” Cass called, as they all flew past. Remus turned around mid-run to shout back at him.

“Ask Sim!”

Cass shook his head at them, smiling, while Deacon leaned up against the cart for a break. Remus waved at them before turning around and running headlong into Peter, nearly taking them both to the ground.

“What are you doing, Pete?” He demanded, before looking up to find Sirius and James just ahead of them, standing in front of their Headmistress as she stepped down from the path leading up to Byron House. She was wearing that formal school robe of hers, her grey-streaked hair tied up in its usual, severe bun.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” McGonagall said, holding a clipboard out ahead of her.

“Good evening, Professor,” they all said, in varying levels of excitement.

“Not on your way to dinner?”

“No,” Sirius said quickly, “just meeting some friends. We’ll be heading to the hall after.”

“I see.” McGonagall took a moment to look them all over, and when she glanced at Remus he felt his eyes widen a bit. He hadn’t spoken to the Headmistress since they’d gotten that earful for setting off the firecrackers on Sirius’ birthday—though neither Sirius nor James could claim as much, having been in detention much more recently than he had.

“I’m afraid I haven’t made it to Godric House yet,” McGonagall said, looking down at her clipboard. “I assume though that dorm 4A’s inspections will come away nicely?”

“Sparkling,” James said, honestly. “We’re already finished packing in fact.”

The Headmistress raised a thin eyebrow. “How wonderful that you’re all so punctual. I seem to remember you leaving a few things behind last year.”

All three of Remus' friends puckered, and James finally managed to spit out an answer.

"Yes, well, not this year."

"Good," the Headmistress said, smiling, "because I would hate to see such a mess stain your records again. I might even have to consider continuing detentions next term."

"Don't worry professor," Sirius said, having swallowed whatever laughter that had been tempting him, "everything is spick and span this year."

"No chickens then?"

"No chickens!" Peter chirped.

"Wonderful. In that case I hope all of you boys have wonderful summers, and I look forward to seeing each and *every* one of you again in the fall."

Remus did not miss her pointed look in his direction.

"The feeling is mutual, Professor," Sirius promised.

"Goodbye, my 4A boys," she said, before moving around them and continuing up the pavement toward the next dorm. Watching her go, Remus waited only a moment before he smacked James and Sirius on the shoulder.

"Chickens, really?"

"We may have borrowed some from the Agricultural barn at the end of last year as a little surprise," James confessed. "I assume they all made it back after the cleaners found them."

"I quite liked that prank," Peter said, "stealing the chickens was Miles' idea. Too bad he wasn't around to see it."

At the mention of Miles, Remus looked to Sirius, who glanced up from the ground with a thoughtful smile.

"Yeah well, we still pulled it off." Surging forward, Sirius locked his arms around both James and Remus' necks, bending them together into a circle in the middle of the pavement. James grabbed Peter and Remus did the same, until all of their foreheads were nearly pressed together.

“And we’re gonna do even better next year,” Sirius promised. “More pranks, more parties, more music—screw school. They’re gonna remember us.”

“Like The Three Musketeers,” James supplied.

“There’s still four of us,” Peter said, “the name’s misleading.”

Remus smiled and nodded. “Pete’s right, we need a new name. Something other than that and ‘the 4A boys’.”

“Messers?” Peter offered.

Sirius shook his head. “No, it’s too tame. And besides, that was the old us—we need something more interesting. A good moniker.”

“The Lost Boys,” James tried, but that too was shot down.

“Nope, those suckers ended up going back to crummy old London to grow up. I never want to grow up, least not the way they all want us to. We’ll just have to find a name of our own.”

Remus locked eyes with Sirius. “We’ve got time.”

“Yeah,” Sirius said with a wink, “we do.”

“Well,” Peter started, unwrapping one arm from James to take a glance at his watch, “not really. We’re supposed to be meeting Stan right now.”

“Oh shit.”

They all unravelled from one other and set off down the lane again, almost shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the street. When they’d finally made it to the east gate, where they’d be meeting their ride, Sirius reached into a bush set up against the school’s brick wall and produced two bottles of booze, both wrapped in a brown paper bag.

“Refreshments for later,” he explained, “one for us to pre-drink, and one to tip Stan.”

James took one of the bottles and peeled back the paper, revealing a very rich-looking bottle of Hennessy. Tomny and Lee would’ve killed for a sip.

“You jammy bastard,” James breathed. “Where’d you get these?”

“I know a guy,” Sirius smirked.

“And you say Lupin holds out on us.”

“Well I can’t pick a lock *avec les doigts dans le nez.”*

“I don’t know what you said but I feel insulted,” Remus said.

“Um, lads?”

“It wasn’t an insult,” Sirius grinned. “An insult would’ve been to say *‘j’ai eu un coup de foudre pour toi’.”*

“I’ll coo your foodruh.”

James snorted. “Black, your language must be atrocious if even Moony's scandalised.”

“Oi, Lads?”

“Je t’aime aussi, Potter.”

“Can you understand him?” Remus asked.

“No, I don’t speak the ‘le francais’*,* I have my hands full just trying to understand my mum when she shouts at me in Hindi.”

“And your parsi accent is abysmal. I’m on team Mum.”

“Up yours, Black.”

“Laaaads!”

The three of them turned to Peter, who was standing at the middle of the wrought-iron gates, shaking a thick padlock back and forth vigorously.

“It’s locked.”

James approached the gate and looked up, a hand over his eyes to block out the sun. Like the rest of the brick wall, the top of the gate was decorated with nasty-looking spikes, probably old and rusty enough to give you tetanus after one misstep.

“Think we could try and scale the top?”

“Why don’t you suck it and see, Potter,” Sirius said, tucking one of the

bottles into his jacket.

“Well how about the lock then? Think you could bust this open, Lupin?” James asked, squinting at the heavy-duty padlock.

Remus reached for his back pocket. “Don’t need to.” Pulling out the Hawkings map, he unfolded it and traced the line that indicated the school’s outer wall until he found the east gate. Like he’d thought, he found a little note he’d scribbled in just before Halloween.

“Over here.” Turning, Remus walked back toward the bushes, and after a few confused glances, his friends followed.

It took a few minutes for Remus to find the right spot (the bushes were thicker the further you got from the gate) but eventually they came upon it; a small hole in the brick wall, big enough for a single body to slide through. The bricks around the hole were worn away like whoever had done it had spent countless hours whittling away at the mortar until they could pry bits of the wall away one at a time.

“No fucking way,” Sirius breathed, after pushing aside the bushes to get a look. Remus smiled a bit to himself and ducked his head to squeeze through, emerging on the other side of the wall. James followed him, then Sirius and Peter.

“Moony, how’d you know that was there?” Peter asked, awestruck.

Remus waved the map around. “I found it.”

Sirius snatched the map out of his hand and turned it so the rest of them could get a look. “You just *found* this? Where?”

“I meant the hole,” Remus said, suddenly feeling more shy than he had a moment ago. “The map’s mine.”

Three pairs of eyes—one grey, one brown, one blue—all widened at the same time.

“When the hell did you have time to figure all this out?” Peter asked, tracing the spot on the map where Remus had walked the edge of Lake Dubh and marked off all the spots where the usually-muddy beach gave way to decent bits of sand. “You must’ve walked forever.”

“All the times I was trying to hide from you lot, mostly. And I happen to like walking.”

“That’s it!” Sirius cried. “No more holding out on each other—no more bloody secrets! Do you know what I could’ve gotten done this year if I had this sort of information?”

Remus shrugged. “Probably would’ve had a lot more detentions.”

“Moony, you git. First the Shack and now this! When we get back you’re going to explain everything *aaaannnd* how you just so happened to find a secret passageway your first year here!”

Remus snatched the map back, folding it up. “It’s just a hole in the wall, you drama queen.”

“It’s a bloody cool hole in the wall, Lupin,” James said. “Last year we had to crawl out the rubbish chutes next to the science building just to get outside.”

Remus grimaced. The bins around the Galilei Block smelt terrible, mostly thanks to the biology department. He couldn’t imagine wiggling their way out that way to get to a party had been very pleasant.

“I wanna see that again later,” Sirius warned. “It’s an entire map designed for pranking.”

“I didn’t make it for pranks. I made for—”

“We know what you made it for, Moony,” James said, holding two fingers to his lips and giving an exaggerated inhale.

“Doesn’t matter what you made it for originally,” Sirius said, “because we’re going to use it. And then just maybe, we’ll make a true prankster of you yet.”

As his friends started up the road on the outside of the school wall, Remus tucked the map back into his pocket opposite Sirius’ photograph and followed. He never would’ve admitted it, but he was —very secretly—just the tiniest bit pleased.

They found Stan a ways down the road, leaning against the hood of his car while smoking and reading the paper. He waved indifferently before dropping it closed and grunting at them to get in; “I’m paid by the night, not the hour, so let's get moving.”

Piling into the rusty old Ford Escort ended up being more eventful than they’d anticipated. Sirius had immediately called bagsy and

despite Peter's moaning, hopped in the passenger's front seat, practically vibrating with excitement.

"First concert or first time in the front seat?" Stan asked, obviously kidding.

"Both!"

Stan gave him an incredulous look and Sirius just shrugged. "We have drivers."

The drive passed by slowly, perhaps because Sirius was not the only one having trouble sitting still. Stan held a monopoly on the radio of course, but it being the Scottish Highlands, the only station they could get a decent signal on was some local channel that took turns playing church songs and disco, and none of them could decide which was worse. Eventually Stan spared them by turning the radio off completely.

Peter and James passed the time in the backseat by playing a game they called 'bumps' which essentially just involved punching each other every time the car hit a pothole. Remus lasted all of fifteen minutes before begging Stan to pull over so he could switch spots with Sirius, who didn't mind really, since he'd turned around in his chair halfway through to join them.

When fields and hills began to fall away in favour of well-travelled roads and *(thank god)* pavement, Remus perked up in his seat and reached behind him to bat at his friends' knees. Somehow they'd all fallen asleep on each other's shoulders and he'd been left to stare out the window on his own, just grateful that Stan wasn't much of a chatterbox.

"I'm awake!" Both Sirius and James said in unison, blinking the sleep from their eyes as they looked around. They were just outside of town now, and the radio was alight with actual music, courtesy of a local disc jockey named 'Slim Jim MacDuff'.

"Shit, we almost there?" Sirius asked, reaching forward to tap Stan's shoulder.

The trolley driver shoved him off, but nodded. "The show's happenin' downtown, 'cording to your tickets."

Sirius snapped his fingers. "Moony, quick, pass me the stuff."

He was about to ask what he meant before Sirius pointed down at his feet, where the bottles of Hennessy had been rolling around since they'd left Hawkings. He handed him one of the bottles, and Sirius crushed up the paper bag before tearing away the foil covering the cork. "Shit."

Remus sighed. All these rich prats and never a single corkscrew. "Hand it here."

Sirius did so, and Remus pulled out his keys before realising that the cork was only made of wood. *Fancy shit.* Wrapping his teeth around it, he pried it back until the bottle opened with a dull pop.

Remus passed it back as Sirius grinned. "Cheers lads," he said, before taking a deep gulp. When he pulled back from the lip of the bottle he grimaced, and Stan laughed at him in the rearview mirror.

"Little boys shouldn't be drinking a man's drink anyway."

"We've got a bottle for you," James said, taking the booze from Sirius and taking his own swig.

"But you're not going to drink it until we're back at school," Remus said pointedly. He'd seen enough wasted chavs to know that downing an entire bottle would not make the twisting roads back to Hawkings any easier of a drive.

"Jus' mind your own, smart-mouth," Stan advised. "Pettigrew paid me for my petrol and my time, not to tolerate any lip."

Stifling a glare, Remus sat back in his seat just as Peter passed him the Hennessy bottle. It burned on the way down, of course, and made him a little ill in the pit of his stomach, but it was still nothing compared to alley juice or Lee's scrumpy.

"You better chug that, lads," Stan advised. "Show's starting in thirty minutes."

That certainly ignited a fire beneath their sixteen year-old arses. They passed the bottle around like it was an Olympic sport until it was finally empty and all of them were considerably more rattled in the head and gut.

"I feel gross," James hiccuped, staring down at his shoes and swaying.

"You toss it in my back seat and I'll leave you stranded on the curb!"

Sirius spent the rest of the short ride patting his friend on the back, and by the time Stan pulled up outside the pub, each of them were right buzzed and that first-drink queasiness had mercifully passed.

“I’ll meet you a street over after the show,” Stan said out his window. “Don’t make me wait!”

They waved goodbye as the Escort pulled away from the curb, and then for good measure, each of them shot the car’s boot the bird and turned to race into the pub.

“You go first, Lupin,” Sirius said, pushing Remus ahead of him.

“What? Why?”

“Because you’re the tallest! They ain't gonna ask if *you're* eighteen.” Sirius plucked the sunglasses off the front of Remus’ shirt. “Pete, put these on.”

“But it’s dark out.”

“Just do it.”

“No one’s going to say anything anyway,” Remus grumbled, but Peter had already shrugged and put the glasses on, leaving him to resist the urge to snatch them back.

They stood on the street outside of the club, its sign flashing the name "Dice’s Attic" in neon over their heads. They waited in line to get inside behind a small group of girls who were all wearing dark lipstick and tight miniskirts, and who had immediately begun to whisper and giggle once Sirius flashed them a smile.

Once they were inside—the guy ripping tickets had barely looked at any of them before waving them on *("Told you, Black.")*—the four of them went straight to the bar and Sirius ordered several shots, handing the bartender a small wad of cash.

“Where did you get the dosh?” Remus had to shout to be heard over the music. The band hadn’t come on stage yet, but the stereos lining every wall were blasting rock and roll music at full volume. He followed his question up by reaching over to Peter and plucking his sunglasses off his face, much to Peter’s disappointment.

“I liked those,” he whined to James.

Sirius knocked his vodka shot against Remus'. "I made a good deal!" He smiled and downed the booze in one go, and they each ordered another, drinking right up until Dick Very and the Headways made their appearance at the front of the club, when they were all well and truly knackered.

The band played a mixture of their own songs and covers just to keep the crowd involved, and though none of them knew any of the originals, it hardly mattered; the music was everything. People crowded the little stage, girls fawning over the band members so ferociously they might as well have been Led Zeppelin themselves. Near the front of the stage, Sirius was in his element. The Headways could've played the same church songs they'd heard in Stan's Escort for all he seemed to care; as long as the room was moving, he was too. He hooted and screamed, and when he knew the words he sang along. The crowd cheered with him until Remus thought his hearing was going to be shot for good, every moving body in the room infected with the same energy. James had to keep hold of Peter, who seemed very intent on joining a table of punks on the far side of the room. In turn, Remus kept hold of James, who had always been the least coordinated version of himself while drinking. Sirius was content to bounce around all of them, head-banging perfectly in time with each song.

'Rockin' and rollin',
Pumpin' and thumpin';
You got my rabbit heart going motorway speed,
I'm telling you, baby, you're the only one I need!'

As the lead singer belted out the chorus of their only half-decent original song, the crowd went crazy, fist-banging the air with the tempo. Drunk and living for the thrill of each note, Remus swayed between his friends, cheering and hollering at the top of his lungs along with everyone else. They definitely owed Simeon his own bottle of Hennessy and then some for setting it all up.

As the band was finishing up a Black Sabbath cover, Remus felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find one of the girls who'd stood in front of them outside of the club. She smiled up at him, her mouth moving like she was saying something, but her voice was too quiet and Remus just shook his head, pointing to his ears.

"Can't hear you!"

Undeterred, the girl pressed up onto the tips of her high heels and

grabbed his neck with one hand, putting them chest-to-chest. Her lips brushed his ear, sending a shiver down his neck and immediately Remus pulled back like she'd given him an electric shock. As he did, the smile vanished from her face and she turned, quickly fleeing back through the crowd.

"MOONY!" Sirius barked next to him, apparently having witnessed the whole thing. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING YOU NUTTER? SHE WANTED TO SNOG YOU!"

Remus looked at Sirius like he was crazy. "How could you know that? We barely said a word to each other!"

Sirius shook his head like he was a lost cause and as the song ended Remus leaned in closer.

"You go then!" He shouted. "If you're so inclined!"

Sirius drew back with a funny expression, but nodded, turning his nose up a bit. "Fine!"

He pulled his arm from around James' neck and slipped past him, disappearing into the crowd in the direction the girl had gone.

"Where's he going?" James hollered, just as the music started up again.

"I don't care!" Remus snapped.

"What?"

"DON'T CARE!"

"PRAYER? SIRIUS DOESN'T PRAY!"

Using his thumb, Remus indicated toward the bar and then the floor. "STAY HERE!"

"YEAH SURE, I'LL TAKE A BEER!"

Patting James on the shoulder, Remus squeezed through the rest of the crowd until he emerged on the far side of the pub and was able to park himself by the bar top. Sirius had given him a little cash after their first round, and he used it to order whatever was on tap. If the bartender cared that Remus had barely begun to show the wisps of facial hair, he said nothing and simply passed him a tall glass of beer. It was much darker in colour than anything he'd ever had in Tomny's

flat but he drank deeply anyway, appreciating the low buzz it kept going at the back of his head. Stan had called the Henessey a man's drink, but Remus disagreed. Beer was a man's drink, if only because it could be found everywhere from sports stadiums to funerals. Having been around enough bitter chavs, Remus was pretty sure he knew why men drank; men drank to feel familiar, to wind-down at the end of a long day, but most of all they drank because they were afraid of the Almighty beyond.

Maybe that was why boys didn't know how to drink; they didn't have the fear of God ingrained into them yet. They would one day—everyone did—but for now, they were God incarnate, or at the very least, beautiful, defiant angels. God had created Sirius in all his wannabe-rockstar glory. He gave him his grey eyes, those slender musician's fingers, a sharp tongue and an even sharper wit, and most of all, He gave him his talent. That, and his ability to love so fiercely it sometimes hurt. It was a love that was especially painful when you couldn't understand why it stung in the first place, and it was scarily akin to how it felt to watch Sirius Black from across a crowded pub as he shoved his tongue down another girl's throat.

Clutching his man's beer, Remus stared across the room at Sirius. He'd done exactly as he'd said he would; he and the same girl from before were straddling each other at another bar top, hands fisted in each other's clothes, faces locked together without so much as a care as who was around to see it. No one else noticed of course—there were enough fraternizing couples around they could've filled half of Wembley Stadium—but Remus had seen it, and he had an indescribable urge to be anywhere but there.

Desperate for another distraction he felt around his pockets for his cigarettes, but Sirius had them, and Remus wasn't about to march across the room and ask for them back while he had his hands up the girl's cherry-red tube top with "Whole Lotta Love" playing in the background. So instead he abandoned his drink and rushed out to the front of the pub, emerging onto the pavement. Outside was little more than a cloudy haze of hash and cigarette smoke, but the air was cooler and Remus took several deep breaths as though his addiction could be satiated just by breathing in the second-hand smoke.

"Wanna bum a smoke?"

Remus glanced sideways to find another kid, who couldn't have been much older than him, standing just outside another circle of teenagers. He had spiky blonde hair and was wearing eyeliner.

“Yeah, thanks,” Remus grunted, accepting the cigarette and light. The kid nodded and looked him up and down before turning back to his group of friends. Remus watched him, taking short puffs, and finally the kid turned back, smiling slyly and indicating with his head for him to join them. Obliging, Remus stepped up, casually nodding to a few of them as they chittered back and forth over the dull roar of the pub’s music.

He learned the blonde kid’s name was Ashley, and he and all his friends were from Elgin, but were following the band around the Highlands just for something to do. They got a bit of a kick out of Remus’ accent, but Dick Very and the Headways were from Birmingham, which might as well have been another world to the Scottish teens, so none of them questioned why he’d come to the show.

"Ye come tae many o' these things?" Ashley asked him, passing a spliff along.

"Yeah," Remus lied, taking the joint. "Er—my friends and I just got done seeing this American band, Aerosmith, dunno if you've heard of them."

"Na, ah haven't. They any good?"

"Yeah, totally."

Ashley smiled at him again and another girl appeared between them, her eyes rimmed with dark kohl and covered up to her elbows with bangled bracelets.

“You’re gey tall,” she said, stepping up to Remus and holding her hand up to measure herself against his height. She only came up to his shoulder.

“London rains a lot so we grow like weeds,” he said.

“What?”

Remus bent down to repeat himself in her ear and she giggled. Then she turned her face to kiss him.

"C'mon, Aoife," Ashley scoffed, but then there was a chorus of laughs.

Her kiss had surprised him at first—mainly because of how easy she'd made it—but suddenly Remus didn't care. He kissed her back, letting

her wrap her bangled-arms around his neck and gently push him up against the wall of the pub. He knew they had an audience, but if Sirius could handle it then so could he.

It was James who found him first, or more accurately, James who stumbled out the front doors of the pub and promptly threw up off the curb. Remus spotted him over Aoife's shoulder and pulled away. “Sorry, s'my mate."

"Find me efter?" Aoife murmured against his jaw.

"Sure." He pulled apart from her and pat Ashley on the shoulder. "Nice talking to you. Thanks for the cigarettes.”

Stepping away, Remus crossed to James and gathered him into his arms, leading him to the other side of the street where he could regurgitate his dinner away from the crowd.

“Here,” he said, passing James one of the half-smoked cigs Ashley had given him. He relight it for him and once he’d calmed down, James smoked it until there was nothing left but ash.

“Where’s Sirius and Pete?” Remus asked.

“Making new friends,” James answered. “You’re supposed to do that at a pub, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Remus said bitterly, trying to push the image of Sirius and the red tube top from his mind. “I’m going to go find Pete,” he said, patting James on the shoulder once before standing.

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, just stay here.”

“I’m not sick anymore!” James drunkenly insisted. He staggered to his feet and used that uncanny strength of his that came with being an amateur football god to grab hold of Remus’ shoulders so he was forced to lead him back across the street and into the show like a two-person conga line.

Eventually they found Peter, completely gassed and sitting between two blokes whose faces were made up of more metal than skin. It took some convincing, but Remus was able to pry him off the punks, who seemed as reluctant to part with Peter as kids with a new toy. They offered a baggy of pills in exchange for the three of them to stay and

hang out, but Remus just shook his head and slung one of Peter's arms over his shoulder.

Staggering away with him, Remus snapped his fingers in front of Peter's face, but the portly boy didn't so much as blink. By now the band was about ready to finish their set. The lead singer shouted into the microphone, asking if they wanted an encore, and as the crowd cheered in response, fists thrown into the air, Remus caught sight of Sirius across the room, sitting at a table with a few girls.

"STAY HERE!" Remus barked at James, letting them both slump against the pub's wall. James flashed him a thumbs up and Peter matched him, though there was a strong chance he had no idea where he was anymore.

Still decently drunk himself, Remus stumbled a bit while crossing the room as the band took their break before the encore and the pub's own music returned. By the time he made it to the table he'd banged his knee on a toppled stool and was swearing like a sailor.

"Sirius!" He hissed, and both Sirius and the pair of girls looked over at him with lazy eyes. The one he'd snubbed earlier scowled, grabbing one of Sirius' arms. Despite the fact that it was hotter than hell inside the pub, she was wearing his suede jacket.

"Moony!" Sirius gasped. "There you are!"

"Yeah and it's time to go."

"The show isn't even over yet!" The suede-girl pouted.

"I think Pete took something," Remus said. Probably just to spite Simeon, who'd made them promise no drugs.

Sirius gave him a confused look. "Pete was just here." He looked around as though he hadn't realised he'd been apart from his friends for half the night.

"We're going," Remus ordered, and one of the girls snapped at him.

"Who are you, his boyfriend?"

"Shut up," he snarled. "And give that coat back."

Halfway back to James and Peter, Sirius moaned about needing to throw up, and Remus turned them toward the front doors. He could

get the others later, provided they'd actually listened to him and stayed put.

The street outside was still littered with people, and a disappointed glance around told Remus that Ashley and his group had moved on, either back into the pub or elsewhere.

Dragging Sirius away from the haze, he set him down on a small patch of grass between the pavement and street that didn't look too damp (things were always damp in Scotland).

"Go on then, vomit," he quipped, and Sirius gave a little moan, turning away and slumping back against the side of the building, eyes closed as though it were the perfect place for a nap.

"Oi," Remus huffed, squatting down and lifting Sirius' chin, snapping his fingers a few times in front of his nose. "Wake up, you alkie."

Sirius blinked as though initially dazed and then gasped; "Remus! Did you hear all that?"

"Yeah," Remus drawled. "Your new friend really liked that jacket."

"No but like—did you HEAR that? The music? Oh my god, s'like it's in my bones!" Sirius waved his hands around like he always did when he spoke, though it always got more exaggerated when he was drunk. Remus shook his head and crouched down next to him on the grass.

"You shouldn't have drank so much."

"Oh-ho-ho-ho," Sirius chuckled, "I didn't. Haven't had anything since the vodka. Knight's honour."

"Why're you acting so pissed then?"

"... Might've took somethin'…"

Remus raised an eyebrow. "I'm telling Sim."

Sirius waved him off. "You really should try it, Moony. It feels like you're floating." He gasped suddenly. "Oh my god—floating! You could've floated up to the moon! You could've been the moon, Moony!"

"You're such an idiot," he scoffed, but Sirius only smiled at him. "I didn't agree to play mother hen all night, you know. I'm not any good at taking care of people."

“Nah, that’s horseshit,” Sirius said stubbornly. “You take care of people all the time, you jus’ won’t admit it. You took care of Lily and James. You got ‘em to stop fighting.”

“You did that.”

“Nah, I jus’ pushed you into it.”

“Oh? Sirius Black showing some humility? Now I’ve seen it all.”

“Take a picture why don’t you, tosser.”

Remus smiled and gently stroked the suede jacket in his hands. Sirius was lucky he hadn’t spilt anything on it, since suede was such a bitch to clean, according to Tonya. At least he hadn’t actually thrown up.

As they sat on the curb in silence Sirius began to sway his head to the pub music. Eventually that music stopped and was replaced by the sound of instrument feedback and finally, the band’s encore song, which Remus recognised immediately.

‘Is this the real life?
Is this just fantasy?
Caught in a landslide,
No escape from reality;
Open your eyes,
Look up to the skies and see…’

“Oh god, Moony, you hear that?”

Remus opened his eyes—he’d almost drifted off. “Yeah. Can’t believe this guy’s trying for Mercury’s range.”

Sirius shot to his feet, nearly falling over in the process. “We gotta go back in!”

“You can barely stand!”

“Then bloody carry me! If I have to spend the whole summer in exile, I’m going to hear this song live first!”

Staggering to his feet, Remus tied the suede jacket around his waist and relented. “Okay, Black. Okay.” He took Sirius’ arm again and they began limping back toward the crowd of heat and smoke as Sirius began to sing into his ear.

“Mamaaaaa… just killed a man… put a gun against his head… pulled my

trigger now he's dead…"

Chapter End Notes

And there goes our final chapter of year 11. It's been amazing ride, and I can't wait to give you more. Stick around for summer 1976, and as always, rock on~

Slang dictionary:
'Calling bagsy' is the British slang equivalent of 'calling shotgun'.
A 'disc jockey' is a radio DJ. (It's where the term 'DJ' comes from.)
'Scrumpy' is A cloudy cider often high in alcoholic content.
'Dosh' is slang for money.
'Alkie' is slang for 'alcoholic'.

Chapter 30: Summer, 1976

Chapter Summary

Summertime. Remus goes home.

Chapter Notes

CW: Drugs, smoking, violence, homophobic language, the whole nine yards, really. Enjoy this work of fiction and be kind to yourselves! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No more pencils,
No more books,
No more teacher's dirty looks;
Out for the summer,
Out till fall;
We might not come back at all…

- "School's Out (For the Summer)" Alice Cooper, 1972

The summer of 1976 was the hottest recorded temperature the British Isles had experienced in more than three-hundred and fifty years. It was so hot that if one were to stand in one place for too long they risked letting the soles of their shoes melt to the pavement. Luckily for all of them, Tonya had the sense to push Tomny into buying an air-con, which they set up on the living room front window. In a country of radiators, the air-con was a welcome blessing. On the really rough nights, they would sleep bare on the floor in front of it, since even a blanket would leave one too hot to function.

Despite the dreadful heat Remus was happy to be back, and both Tomny and Tonya seemed perfectly eager to put him up for as long as need be, provided that he followed a few set ground rules. The first being that he kept his head low and his mouth shut.

Like he'd been expecting, the hold various gangs and mob groups had over the throat of the East End had solidified since Christmas. East of Aldgate Pump, they ran everything; if you had a rent to pay, you paid it to the mob. If you happened to be one of those blokes able to make an honest living, that honest living was in moral support of another

mob. If you wiped your arse, you thanked that mob for the opportunity. The neighbourhoods still long-suffering from air-raids leftover from WWII were now ground zero for radical gang reunification. This naturally led to a new world order, one Tomny seemed adamant that Remus would have nothing to do with. He spent his entire first day back getting lectured on what he could and couldn't do. Tomny still managed to tip-toe around the real information, like what it is the boys were actually running now—narcotics of course. Gone were the days where they were just running money or bets for bookies or bulking up the protection rackets of Whitechapel Lane. No, they'd all moved on to bigger and better stuff, throwing their lot in with those who guaranteed it would be worth it. Provided they kept loyal and didn't get caught.

Remus had already seen clear evidence that the area's drug problem had only gotten worse—his friends' along with it—but there was also the violence; kids getting jumped in alley ways just for talking to the wrong person, guns showing up on the streets, more and more turf wars breaking out amongst the smaller groups. It was a far cry from the place the End had been when he'd left the year before, and Tomny made sure he knew it.

"You wanna stay? Then you're gonna to do what I fuckin' tell you," he said, with no room for argument. "If you wanna be around, you can stay with Tonya. Go with her when she goes out—it'll give Vint and Doss a break at least."

Remus had instantly soured at the thought of spending another holiday locked up in the flat. It wasn't the fact that he would be playing chaperone, but that it was summer and he wanted to go out and run the town with his boys, even if the heat would most definitely have killed them. The only problem with that wish though, was that none of them were boys anymore.

"You understand?" Tomny snapped when Remus didn't answer. "Ain't a game no more."

"Never thought it was a game," Remus shot, defensively. Tomny's eyes tightened, before his shoulders dropped and he shook his head with a smile.

"You know I love you, Lu." Tomny got up from his recliner and pulled Remus into a hug. He hugged back, feeling the ache in his chest that had been there since last Christmas, as Tomny rubbed his back and spoke into his hair. "Jus' don't want you gettin' too caught up. Fun's

fun, but life always catches up."

Being stuck inside the flat again made Remus wonder what Tonya's life was like when he wasn't around. It had to be lonely, staying cooped up while your boyfriend and his yobs peddled others' goods, but Tonya kept herself busy by cooking, reading, listening to music or else taking care of the tiny box garden she'd set up on the flat's balcony. All of the plants looked limp and frail in the intense heat, but Tonya watched and watered them religiously, no matter how brown they seemed to get.

"You should let me cut that hair of yours," Tonya would push at least three times a day. "Can't go back to school looking like a mutt off the street."

He'd eventually let her, and she'd done a good job, all things considered. It felt good to get some of the bulk off the back of his sweaty neck, though Tomny had been slightly disappointed there was now less 'Lu hair' to ruffle.

To pass the time he and Tonya read to each other. Since he'd been there last, a small shelf had taken up residence in the corner of the living room and was now overflowing with books of all genres. Most of them had been collected second-hand from various bits and bobs shops and were missing pages but Tonya didn't seem to mind. A natural storyteller, she used her soothing voice to read aloud to him, occasionally throwing in bits of French and Russian just to keep him on his toes. Sirius would've enjoyed it, having been able to understand her better than Remus could've, and like him, Tonya was a romantic. She'd collected countless novels where the lead rode off into the sunset with their true love, or else died tragically just before achieving eternal happiness. Those weren't the books he liked to read to her, really. Instead when she pushed for him to show off, Remus would always choose a more melancholy story; one he could enjoy without having to monologue extensive love confessions.

If his reading was ever boring Tonya never said so, and when Tomny came home they took turns reading to him until he'd passed out from the day's exhaustion or had smoked or drank himself into a stupor. Days passed like that, and Remus found himself falling into a routine. It felt like Hawkings almost; wake up, get baked, eat breakfast, read or watch TV, eat lunch, maybe play cards with Tonya and whoever happened to be around at the time. Then they'd smoke some more, make dinner, eat again, put on an album, and start drinking or smoking all over again. Or, Remus would; Tonya never stopped

getting high, and eventually it occurred to him that he'd probably never seen her sober, but that was a commonality. The only thing that set her apart from the rest of the boys was her routine bathing habits. How she tolerated a steaming bath when it was already so hot out, was beyond him.

The first time Tonya locked herself in the bathroom it took until around the two hour mark for Remus to get really nervous. He began pacing the living room, thinking of all the horrible things that could happen to someone high off their arse in a bathroom. What if she'd passed out in the tub? Or fallen and hit her head on the edge of the sink?

Unable to stomach the idea of telling Tomny that he'd let his girlfriend accidentally drown herself, Remus pounded on the bathroom door until Tonya opened it wrapped in only a towel.

"Jesus Christ, *what?* " She demanded, holding her head.

Remus retreated back from the door a few steps. "Thought you'd drowned."

Tonya blinked at him, and then burst into laughter, nearly dropping her towel. "Oh, sweet, sweet love."

After that came the knocking, which had been Tonya's idea—a system to keep him from having to interrupt or otherwise go insane with worry. Every once in a while, when he started to feel antsy, Remus would knock on the bathroom door and Tonya would respond in one of two ways; two knocks for 'I'm okay' and one for 'I need help'. No knocks meant 'I'm already dead, bury me with white roses', which Remus only had to worry about one time, after Tonya had submerged herself beneath the water and didn't hear him.

Eventually though she would emerge, smiling, skin steaming, and they'd sit together on the living room couch, listening to music while the noise of the End drifted in through the open windows. It was mostly the moments he was alone with Tonya that Remus' mind drifted to his mother, and since they were alone a lot, Hope Lupin occupied a significant space in his brain for the month of July.

What flowers had Hope been buried with? It should've been her favourite flower, that seemed kindest. But if ten year-old Remus had ever asked what that was, he'd long since lost the memory. It was funny really, how the only ones you wanted to forget stuck around. Maybe it was the guilt, the kind that shouldn't belong to children but

did anyway; the sort that woke you up at night screaming questions there would never be answers to.

It sounded like a song. A sad song.

Some days, when they could bear to be away from the air-con for longer than fifteen minutes, they'd go out. Never very far, mostly to the local market to window-shop or pick up that day's shopping. Tonya loved the florists the most, and it was during one of these rare trips out that Remus learned that she'd always wanted to open a flower shop of her own.

"Roses," she said, leaning down to smell a bouquet of yellow flowers, "they're my favourite—white especially. As a little girl I used to imagine that I had this cart I pushed up and down the streets, peddling my white roses."

"So you don't just want to be buried in them?" Asked Remus.

"Well, if I sold them then you could bury me in my own roses. Sounds sort of romantic, don't it?"

"Or morbid."

"Romance always is, somehow."

"Why white though? Why not red?"

"Too traditional. White is the colour of purity and freshness… of good things and new beginnings."

"Cocaine's white."

"Oh yes, well, coke too."

It was an easy existence, and pretending as though Tomny's problems were his problems helped Remus forget that he had spent nearly a year out of London, where he'd met new people and learned things about himself that he still wasn't entirely sure were for the better. Those people demanded parts of him that no one in the East End ever had. They wanted not only his thoughts but his feelings too. They wanted to be important and yet somehow still felt like it was okay to be at odds sometimes. It was the strangest sense of loyalty he'd ever experienced, and having to go back to Hawkings in September was going to hurt like no other, but still Remus remained conflicted.

Conflicted, because no matter how much he loved Tomny and the others, and no matter how much he hated going back to his father's estate, he was—very secretly—looking forward to seeing his friends again.

James, Peter, and the girls had all given their phone numbers to keep in touch over the summer months, but Remus had hardly been home since being back in London, and Tomny didn't have a phone. It had only been different for Sirius, who had subtly admitted that he wouldn't have much chance to call. Instead he'd given Remus the address of one of the boys who worked in his family's estate's kitchen who could be trusted to pass letters along to him without his mother knowing. Remus had given his address too, to be polite mostly, but being chatty over the phone was hard enough; what did you even put in a letter? The only written correspondence Remus had ever received were formal complaints from his schools about his poor behaviour and condolence letters following Hope's death from people he hardly knew.

He'd never read any of them.

Sirius might've, and then he might've used those feelings of anger and sadness to write a song; a tortured artist through and through. Using their empty words as inspiration, he would've twisted the sympathy or accusations into his own disillusioned rhapsody, and anyone who heard it would've fallen in love.

Honestly, the whole affair sounded exhausting.

* * *

It took until the end of July before Remus finally fessed up about Lily, and even then he couldn't bring himself to say that he'd lied about having a girlfriend, just that they'd had a very amicable break-up after Christmas. Tonya, of course, didn't believe a word.

"So, tell me again, why did she dump you?"

"I wasn't dumped."

"Right," Tonya nodded, " 'Remus Lupin was not dumped. It was a mutual break up. You just wanted different things'." She spoke like she was reading off a script.

It had been stupid to lie in the first place. Remus didn't like Lily—well he *did*, but only as a friend—James liked Lily, and the idea of him finding out that he'd tried to pass his childhood crush off as his own girlfriend made him more queasy in the stomach than Lee's alley juice and the Hennessy put together. It was a secret he was determined to take to his grave, at least as far as his Hawkings' friends were concerned.

"Too bad though," Tonya continued, kicking a stone out of her path with the tip of her sandal. "I would've liked to meet the girlie that could charm your tender heart."

"Sarcasm is a disease and we're all infected," Remus said, and then; "You know she lives in Liverpool anyway."

"Mhm." She was smiling.

"We're still friends."

"Oh wonderful. S'good to have friends."

As they walked, Remus readjusted the paper shopping bag in his arms. Tonya had decided that morning that she'd make a loaf for dinner, and since they'd run out of eggs and milk the day before it meant a trip to the local market was in order. Remus didn't mind—it got them both out of the house, a rarity in the last couple of weeks, as Tomny had grown increasingly paranoid. He never said why, but the blinds were to be kept closed at the flat at all times, and unless you knew someone was coming over and they didn't have the key, the front door was never to be opened. At first Remus thought it was the drugs—there were more narcotics and artillery scattered around the flat than ever, though most of it wasn't intended for the people that lived there—but Tomny was hardly the only one who had turned manic.

Lee had taken to walking around with a loaded pistol, something Remus had nearly dropped out of shock after he'd discovered it in the pockets of the other boy's jacket while digging around for a lighter. Tonya had screamed at him until he got it out of the flat, and made everyone promise that no weapons would be allowed so close to home. Everyone had deferred to Tomny at that of course, but he acquiesced to his girlfriend's wishes and from then on no one brought so much as a kitchen knife out outside of meal times.

Afterwards Remus had rebuffed himself for being so shocked over the gun. He should've been used to it—Lyall had a staggering collection of hunting rifles, and Remus had even fired one himself when he was

fourteen. He'd never had much interest in guns or hunting, but after jimmying the lock on his father's safety case, he took the gun out into the back trees behind the estate to shoot at a few cans. It only took one shot to give himself a black eye after the gun's kickback smacked him dead in the face, but he'd gotten what he wanted.

That day he'd received his worst tongue-thrashing Lyall had ever given him. Remus had egged him on of course, thought for sure Lyall would smack him in the other eye, but nothing. Two days later he was off to another school, this time in Croydon.

The guns and the paranoia began to make sense the evening he stepped out onto the balcony for a smoke and noticed a couple bodies standing across the street. At first he just assumed they were loitering —you got a lot of drifters in the End—but then they'd pointed at the flat, directly where he was standing and Remus felt the hairs on his arms and legs stand up. It was dark and there were hardly any street lamps in Tomny's neighbourhood, which meant getting a look at their faces from such a distance was near impossible. Remus crept back inside and watched them for a bit through cracks in the blinds while The Animals played off the turntable, and eventually group turned and shuffled back up the street.

When he'd brought the strange encounter up to Tomny the response had been to smoke inside, keep the doors locked, and stop going out. Tonya seemed bothered by the extra-level of isolation, but apart from Tomny and a few random acquaintances she didn't have any other friends in East London, so she kept her mouth shut and smoked whatever Tomny brought home to keep herself busy.

Why aren't you leaving? A tiny voice would echo in Remus' mind. Going back to the estate would've been the smarter idea, and Tomny had even hinted at it a few times, but since he had to assume that Remus' home-life wasn't as spiffy and sunny as a heritage estate in Blackheath should've been, he never pushed him into leaving.

"You jus' worry about going back to school," Tomny would say, leaning up against Remus' shoulder on the couch. He'd started doing that more; the recliner would be abandoned in favour of the two of them sidling up on the sofa next to each other, usually with Tonya draped over their laps like a cat. It had happened so often that Tonya had started calling herself Cleopatra. Tomny was her Caesar, and Remus, her Mark Antony.

"Caesar?" Tomny had said. "He's the Roman bloke, yeah? King of his

own empire—got all the statues? Bet he lived a life."

Remus hadn't the heart to tell him.

The only good thing to come out of the widespread paranoia was the telephone, which had appeared unceremoniously in the kitchen one day. Remus had had the instant inclination to call James or one of the girls, but he'd left their numbers back home in his school trunk. Resigning himself to just apologise for the lack of communication when he went back to Hawkings in the fall, he ignored the obvious neglect and instead threw himself into another book reading with Tonya, this time narrating with fervent enthusiasm. It was clear anyway that Tomny wasn't going to allow him to not go back to school, and if he was being honest with himself, things in the End had changed more than he had been banking on when he pictured himself running away from the college all those months ago.

"Remus, come look at this!"

Turning back to Tonya, Remus snapped himself out of his daze. She'd stopped outside a pub and was staring at a noticeboard.

"We agreed no getting side-tracked," he said, stepping up behind her. The flier she was staring at advertised a live show by Eddie and the Hot Rods, some pub band from Essex.

Tonya tutted. "We should go see it. I miss live music, there's nothing like it."

Remus agreed with her of course. He'd spent the better half of the summer humming along to the tune of Dick Very and the Headways' "Rabbit Heart", but he couldn't remember all the words and Tonya had never heard of them.

They looked for a little longer at the notice board, taking in all the sun-bleached handbills and ads for car boot sales, before Remus knocked their elbows together. "C'mon, Tomny said he'd be back before six."

Nodding her head slowly, Tonya stepped back from the noticeboard and turned to follow him home. Eventually the more crowded market streets gave way to their familiar neighbourhood, roads lined with rubbish and the familiar smell of burning tar and rubber. It didn't suit Tonya, with her long lashes and even longer legs, and Remus was reminded of Christmas.

“You still thinking of moving?” He asked her.

Tonya shrugged, lacing her arm in his. “Dunno where I’d go.”

“There are nicer parts of London, you know.”

“Oh I know, but Tomny’s here and it’s not exactly easy to hold down a job with a blow habit.”

Remus could’ve winced at her blasé attitude. “You’re startlingly self-aware sometimes.”

“I try,” she winked.

They made a left at the local off-license and Remus almost stopped to go in, but they didn’t bring enough money with them for both booze and the shopping.

“What about Asia?” He asked. “Thought you were going to dip again?”

“Gotta have money for the ticket.”

“And Tomny wouldn’t give it to you?”

“No… I think he would, but he’d see it as me abandoning him. He’d never leave London.”

There was nothing to be said about that, because she was right. It didn’t matter if he was born in some nowhere Scottish town, Tomny was a London-boy through and through. He’d die there, probably. Remus just hoped it was in his bed, in a better flat, at a ripe old age. Like fifty.

“And I would be abandoning him,” Tonya continued, looking down at her feet while they walked, “but that’s part of travel. You meet people, they change you—you change them, and then you start all over again in another place, with other people. It’s like taking a shower; rinse and repeat, then a few days later, you rise and repeat again.”

“Sounds like a waste of water.”

“You cheeky thing.”

They both shared a smile as they rounded the corner of the alley that connected them to the flat’s street. It was still light out and would be for some hours, and the days leading up to that moment had been

quiet; perhaps the reason why they both had their guard down and why the group of strangers had been able to follow them all the way from the shops.

“Oi!” A rough voice barked from behind. Tonya jumped, still holding on Remus’ arm, and they both whirled around to see five bodies—boys or men, Remus wasn’t sure. It was hard to tell in a place where childhood was so often stolen away by circumstance.

“You Armstrong’s bitch?” The one in front asked. He had an Irish accent and his eyes were mean yet startling blue. His shirt sleeves were ripped away at the shoulders and he had dark heavy boots on despite the heat, same as all his friends. None of the guys were much taller than Remus, but each of them were bigger, and they crowded into the end of the alley as though they were nine feet tall.

“I’m nobody’s bitch, *bitch*,” Tonya spat.

The leader ignored her with a sick smile. “ 'e’s been skippin' out. Got’s a message for him.”

“Give it to him yourself, then!”

Remus took a breath. He was still holding the shopping bags, and Tonya’s hand had turned into a vice on his bicep. Despite her snappy retorts, he could practically hear the hitch in her breathing. The street was just behind them, the flat only one corner away. *Would Tomny be back already? Would anyone be around?*

“We would,” one of the cronies said, “ ‘cept no one can find 'im.”

“Slippery that one,” added another.

“So we’s thought you could pass the message along,” blue-eyes said, almost kindly.

Remus felt the gravel grind beneath his shoes as he slowly backed Tonya up toward the end of the alley. The group had advanced, taking bigger steps as though they weren’t afraid of scaring them off. Which made sense.

They were already scared.

“Armstrong owes. And the group’ll get what it’s owed.” He was only a few feet away now, but Remus couldn’t back up any faster without running, and he doubted either he or Tonya could outrun the group of

them in a pair of beaten up trainers and beach sandals.

“We don’t have anything on us,” Remus said. *Could he throw the shopping? How much time would a carton of eggs buy them?*

“We only need you to take a message,” blue-eyes repeated, “nuffin' more. We’ll go after we’ve passed it on.”

“What’s the message?” Remus asked, his insides turning to ice.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, poofter.”

There was a round of nasty chuckles from the group. Then blue-eyes’ arm shot out towards them, but Remus was faster. He yanked Tonya back behind him, dropping the shopping bags to the ground, the sound of a shattering milk bottle echoing off the alley walls.

“Don’t touch her!”

Blue-eyes stared back in shock, but Remus didn’t wait. He shoved Tonya away from himself and turned, ready to scream at her to get away—to get someone, anyone—but he never got the chance. A hand clamped down on the back of his shirt, wrenching him backwards so harshly his feet came out from underneath him. He went to the ground on his back, the wind knocked out of him as he gaped up at the boiling sky. A moment later the sun was blotted out by a boot descending over his head, and what followed was a sickening crunch.

The pain was instantaneous. Over it Remus just barely heard Tonya scream his name.

“Don’t just stand there, one of you grab ‘er!”

With a mixture of a cry and a gurgle—he was choking on blood as it gushed from his nose—Remus threw himself onto his stomach and made a grab for the nearest pair of legs.

“TON—YA, RUN!”

“You little shit!”

More pain; this time from a kick to his ribs. Another boot caught him in the back, and as the beating started Remus had no choice but to curl in on himself, holding his arms over his head as the boys circled him.

It felt like an eternity. Remus was sure he’d never walk again. They’d

broken his spine, pulverised his ribs—he couldn't even see anymore. There was blood in his eyes.

" 'Ere's your message!"

"Tomny's next if he don' own up!"

"Ya fucking bender!"

It would have been better if they'd shot him. He almost thought they did, when the sharp bang sounded and they all jumped back and scattered. Remus didn't move—afraid they might come back, but also because he couldn't feel his arms and legs. The rest of him felt like he'd been hit by a train.

A few moments after his beating had ceased, a set of heavy footsteps echoed across the gravel. Remus couldn't see who it was.

"That's hard cheese, lil' buggar."

A pair of big hands reached down and grabbed him, and Remus finally passed out.

* * *

And, what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?
And, what'll you do now, my darling young one?

Waking up made Remus wish that Vint had aimed the pistol at him instead of the alley wall. By the grace of their bitter God, Tonya had managed to run screaming into the truck-sized man on his way home and he'd been the one to scare off the bleeders who'd jumped them, using a 9mm to shoot up the alleyway. Remus would later think how ridiculous it was for the only words he'd ever heard Vint say aloud was 'that's hard cheese', but for now he was too busy trying to keep perfectly still on Tomny's bed. Even the slightest movement had his entire body screaming in agony. He could've really used a magical healing potion at that moment. Luckily, there was plenty of magic medicine to be found.

He spent nearly a day and a half knackered with pain and drugs. They'd given him a couple of benzos to help him sleep through the

really horrible bits, like when they'd snapped his nose back into place —though that had required some morphine beforehand, too. When he was finally coherent enough to speak he got no answers out of the boys, all of which were watching him with guilt and sympathy.

All except Tomny, who wouldn't see him at all.

"He's angry," Tonya said from her perch at the foot of the bed. She was smoking, but her hands were so shaky it had taken her several tries to light the cigarette.

"Wasn't my idea to get jumped," Remus said, before groaning. None of his limbs were broken, miraculously, but he shifted every now and then to keep from sweating into one spot on the bed, and his torso always screamed in objection.

"Not at you. At himself." Tonya sucked her cigarette. "He blames himself. Didn't think it was good to keep ya, but couldn't bring himself to send you off. Now he's angry."

Remus stared up at the ceiling. "Well. That's shit."

"Mhm."

Tonya passed him the cigarette.

* * *

Remus blinked awake to the sound of the air-con kicking on in the living room. It was a sound he'd never quite gotten used to, unlike the snoring from his roommates or the occasional sleepy grunts from the London boys.

The only light in the room came from the kitchen's oven lamp as it leaked yellow through the cracked bedroom door. He knew without looking that Tonya was asleep next to him on the bed. She'd hardly left his side except to go to the bathroom or to cook meals he refused to eat. It hurt to swallow. Breathing sucked too.

The real surprise came when he realised they were not alone. Tomny sat next to the foot of the bed in his patched recliner, nursing a beer bottle against the centre of his chest. He was staring at a spot at the wall, but his eyes snapped alert when Remus shifted on the bed.

“Where have you been?” Remus’ voice was hoarse but he didn’t want to ask for water in case Tomny left to go get it.

“Cleaning up.” It was obvious he didn’t mean the flat. “You’re gonna have a scar.”

Tomny indicated to his own nose with the beer bottle, and Remus resisted the urge to picture his face. Tonya had already said he had two black eyes, but the gnarly cut was clean at least.

“You should’ve been a shrink,” he said. “You’re so good at making people feel better.”

Tomny cracked a smile, but it disappeared quickly. “S'my fault.”

“Hm. Probably.”

“You *shouldn’t* be a shrink.”

“No shit.”

There was a bit of silence, and Remus felt his nerves spike. Silence with Tomny was a terribly lonely thing. He had to break it.

“It’s okay, you know. I’m not mad.”

Tomny sat up very quickly. “Well you should be! You should be blaming me! You should be fucking furious!”

“Don’t. You’ll wake Tonya.”

Tomny glanced at his girlfriend and slowly settled back into the chair. “Nah. She took some downers.”

Remus sighed and then winced as his chest twinged. “I want some.”

“I’ll get you some, but first we’re gonna talk.”

“…Okay.”

Tomny considered his beer for a long moment, then; “You gotta go home.”

Remus almost sat up himself. “What? No.”

“What do you mean fuckin' ‘no’, Lu? You got your ass beat a few yards from here. They came into our fuckin' backyard and tried to get at you

and Tonya, two people they shouldn't have even known existed in the first place! And you're sayin no? Well, *I* say no. You gotta go."

"Go *where?"*

If Tomny hadn't looked up at him from the beer bottle Remus might've thought he'd had a chance at keeping up the charade, but he did, and he knew he was caught.

"To Greenwich," Tomny said sharply. "To Blackheath. To your fuckin' father."

Remus fisted the bed covers next to him. "No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Fucking yes!" Tomny slammed his hand down on the recliner's arm. "You're going! I shouldn't have let you come back in the first place! I was ready to let you go last summer, but you insisted on sticking around like a bad fuckin' cold."

Remus almost whimpered. "Why did you then? Why didn't you just send me packing, Tom?"

Tomny scoffed bitterly. "Because I was a fuckin' idiot, that's why. I should've kicked yer posh, pretending-arse to the curb. Sent ya back to that fancy house with a fat lip so you'd have stayed away."

"How long have you known?" Remus asked, his lower-lip trembling.

"I've always known."

"What the fuck are you on about?"

Tomny let out a breath. "Kids show up in the End all the time, that's nothin' special. But kids speaking perfect RP without so much as a scratch on 'em? Nah, you looked about as world-weary as a newborn kitten. So this one time when you went home I had Doss follow you. Imagine my surprise when he came back and told me where he'd been."

Remus stared at Tomny incredulously. Doss was a couple years older than Tomny himself, but he'd always been friendly. How had he been able to look at Remus while knowing who he really was? Anyone else would've hated his guts, would've sent him to an early grave for

having the gall to pretend they were so much as slightly hard done by. Remus might've, had he been in Doss' shoes.

"Who else knows then?"

"Just Doss. Made him promise to keep hush."

Remus released the bed covers. "Then I don't get it. Why'd you let me stay if you knew everything? Why *didn't* you send me back with a fat lip? Others would've done worse."

"Others have. You've got a busted face and several broken ribs, I figure."

"Then why not save those fucks the damn trouble?"

"Because I was immature and stupid!" Tomny shouted. "Because I looked at you and thought 'how funny would it be to fuck-up some old codger's kid'. Turn 'em dirty, jus' like the rest of us!"

"So it was all a joke then," Remus said, huffing a bitter laugh.

"It bloody well started like that, innit."

"And *now?"*

Tomny looked away sharply, teeth pressed into a bitter snarl. "And now fucking like you. I started to like you and wanted to keep you around. It was all about fun back then, just causin' chaos and being yobs. But it's different now. You're a smart kid, Lu—smarter than me."

Tipping back his beer for a long swallow, Remus watched as Tomny's Adam's apple bobbed. He still had that same mole on the back of his neck, and he stared at it until he pulled the bottle back.

"You know things aren't good around 'ere," Tomny huffed. "Honest people have been losing their jobs for a while now. The strikes have done nothin' but make people angry and tired. They can't feed their families anymore. People are scared, and that fear… It gives groups like the Irish a chance to grab hold of the under belly until they own it all. And the only ones winning are minted few. Poor yobs like us—we're just surviving. And not even all of us."

"What do you mean?"

"Flacky's dead, Lu."

A muscle in Remus' jaw jumped and he looked down at himself, bruised and busted all over. Flacky had been thirteen the last time Remus had seen him. Too small for a beating.

"Was he…?"

"No," Tomny said quietly; "It started as a fever, then it got worse. Way worse..."

It took a long time for Remus to say anything else, and when he did, it was barely a whisper; "When?"

"Last October." Tomny's voice was quiet, and Remus didn't need light to know his eyes were wet.

"Before Christmas?"

"Didn't wanna worry you. You were only back for a short bit."

Remus ground his teeth together despite the ache it gave him in his face. "You still should've told me."

"Maybe. But it wouldn't have done nothing anyway. Five days 'a festering in his own bed and just like that... no more Flacky."

"You still should've told me!"

"I didn't want to, alright!" Tomny took a ragged breath, clenching his hands on the arm of the recliner. "I was 'fraid that if I told you one thing, the rest of it would just come pouring out 'til I couldn't stop it no more. Back then, shit was messy! Overnight s'like the Irish owned everything. No one had any bloody idea what was gonna happen—even Burrin had fucked off. I tried my best to stay on top 'a things, ya see? Make sure all my lads were being taken care of, but I still couldn't do nuffin' when Flacky got sick. His dad was an illegal, innit. And his mum was stuck taking care 'a six kids—she couldn't handle a sick one too. So it was me—I saw it. I watched him die... And through it all I realised that I was no better than any other waster out there. I ain't got nuffin', me, 'cept my boys. And I ain't gonna let another get taken from me. Not by a fever, and not by some Peckham bastards who think I owe 'em shit."

The pieces had begun to fall into place for Remus.

"So… all the work...? That just your way of 'staying on top'?"

Tomny nodded bitterly. “Go ahead, be a moralist. But I told myself I’d never jus' sit back and do nuffin' again, innit. My boys deserved better —*I* deserved better. So yeah, I run with the crowds, I do their dirty work, but I'm glad fer it. S'good money, and it's got it's side benefits."

"You mean drugs."

"Keeps the demons away," Tomny muttered, deep purple bags sown beneath his eyes. "But I should’ve seen this comin'... You don’t get work in East London without owing someone sumffin'. You were jus' the one who got stuck paying the price... I'm sorry, Lu. You should'a never been dragged into it.”

Suddenly Remus couldn't breathe. He saw Tomny's next words hurdling toward him like a freight train, and he was the fool who couldn't get off the tracks fast enough.

“I can help,” he tried, pitifully; “I can get money so you don't have to do it anymore. Or I could ask Giles to—”

“No, Lu. You’re gonna go home.” Tomny pressed his lips together tightly. “You’re gonna go home, get patched up for reals, and then you’re gonna forget about this place. I never should’ve asked you to remember it.”

Remus shook his head, feeling a sob build up in his chest as he squeezed his hands into fists. “No.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll come back. Send me away and I’ll just keep on coming back.”

“You do, and I’ll send you off with more than a fat lip.”

Remus felt his nails bite into the flesh of his palms. “Don’t make me leave.”

“I gotta, Lu. You’re gonna go back to school, and I’m gonna clean up this mess best I can. I’m glad I never told you about it. Didn’t want you to look at me any different.”

“I could never hate you, Tom.”

“I know.” Tomny smiled sadly. “But it wasn’t hate I was worried about.”

Unable to look at him anymore, Remus turned to the small body

asleep in the bed next to him. She looked younger asleep, like that little girl who dreamed of roses.

“What about Tonya?”

“She’ll be okay. She’s pretty tough, y’know.”

“She called one of the guys who jumped us a bitch.”

Tomny chuckled humourlessly. “Sounds like her.”

Letting his head fall back against the pillow, Remus ran his tongue around his teeth. He could still taste the blood from his nose, lingering in the back of his throat like gasoline.

“So when are you making me leave then?”

“Tomorrow,” Tomny replied. “You can use the phone to call that driver of yours. I know he comes and gets you near Aldgate.”

“Fine. But I want something in exchange.”

“Figures the gentry-toff would ask for a favour of the poor sod.”

“Shut up,” said Remus. “I want a phone call.”

Tomny raised an eyebrow. “You can use the phone whenever you want.”

“Not me—you. I want you to call me while I’m at school. I wanna know you’re still breathing, you stupid prick.”

“Sounds like long-distance.”

“I’m sure you can afford it.”

The corners of Tomny’s mouth quirked up, sadly. “Okay, Lu.”

“Okay, Tom.”

They both fell back into silence after that. Eventually Tomny got him a cigarette and they smoked together before the aches got to be too much again and he had to take another pill to put him out of his misery for a few hours. Before the drug could take hold, Remus tried hard to focus on the quiet of the room—the peace and tranquility despite the pain. It occurred to him that like Sirius, he’d always hated silence, but the kind he found at the flat was unlike that of his

childhood home. Where the Lupin Estate felt cold and empty, Tomny's flat had always been warm and inviting. No matter how quiet and still it got, there was always the unequivocal promise that it would be noisy again; filled with all the poetic sounds and colours of life.

That night he dreamt of Hawkings and its green lawns and brick walls. He had always seen the school's walls and gates as something meant to lock him in—to keep him from the things he really wanted—but in this dream the wrought-iron and stone felt protective. They kept everything nasty out and made it so people could stay together in a place where goals and expectations were clear and fair. Familial bonds were clearly a mere illusion meant to hide the true importance of choosing loved ones for one's self. Journeys were comfortable because no matter how long they lasted you always knew they would come to an end, and that that end would be just. Music was the magic that fed everyone, and night and day were companions, not enemies.

In the dream everything was straightforward. There were no fathers or mothers or death or loss, just life and friends and stories and music. The walls that kept them felt inspiring, and in the dream he wrote a song about them. As he sang Sirius was beside him playing the guitar and all their friends sat around them, crying. Remus was crying too, but he didn't know why because he felt so happy. He couldn't tell if it was a good song, but it felt joyful and he sang it with all the love he could muster until everyone else knew the words and was singing it back to him.

Like so many things, the dawn stole that dream from him, and by the time he'd woken up the next day he had no idea what it meant.

Chapter End Notes

> This is a bitter sweet end to a summer for me. New chapter we'll be back at school for year twelve. Cheers and Love xx
>
> Slang Dictionary:
> A 'bookie' is someone who facilitates gambling.
> A 'protection racket' is a scheme where a group/gang takes money from people/businesses in exchange for not hurting them.
> A 'bits and bobs shop' is a second-hand store.
> 'Artillery' is slang for the equipment used for injecting drugs.
> A 'car boot sale' is a form of market similar to a flea-market.
> An off-license is a liquor store.
> The lyrics after the second break are "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" by Bob Dylan, 1962.

'Benzos' is slang for benzodiazepines; a tranquilizer drug like valium, Ambien, or Xanax.
'Downers' are also tranquilizers; depressants.
RP [received pronunciation]—a “posh” British accent that is correlated with good education; ie. the ‘Queen's English', 'Oxford English' or 'BBC English'; associated with London and the Southeast of England.

Chapter 31: Back to School

Chapter Summary

Remus returns to school feeling sore after being jumped in the East End alleyway. Good thing he has his friends to comfort him.

Chapter Notes

WOW. Tbh never thought the fic would get this far. This is definitely something big for me, and trust me when I say I have plenty of content ready to share with you guys. This fic won't be ending anytime soon ^^
As a little preface, year twelve has some heavy tones, so expect that when you read! Some big mistakes, some arguing, some craziness, but all speckled with pure love and friendship, I swear.

Playlist for this year: here .

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Guess who just got back today?
Them wild-eyed boys that'd been away;
Haven't changed, had much to say,
But man, I still think them cats are crazy;
They were askin' if you were around,
How you was, where you could be found;
Told 'em you were livin' downtown,
Drivin' all the old men crazy;
The boys are back in town...

- "The Boys Are Back in Town" Thin Lizzy, 1976

Wednesday 1st September 1976

As far as Remus could tell, getting clapped on the back by James Potter while having three fractured ribs was a lot like throwing yourself in front of an oncoming train. There was no waving or conventional "hellos" to be had, just a single upright dog-pile as James and Peter charged up from behind on the busy station platform. With a great hurrah they grappled him by the shoulders and he nearly threw his mother's white trunk across the station cringing in pain. Thankfully the excitement didn't last long; the moment the other two

rounded him and got a decent look at his front their delightful expressions vanished.

“Lupin, what the hell happened to your face?” James exclaimed.

Remus knew he looked rough. Still yellow under the eyes from the bruising and with a scabby cut over the bridge of his nose that extended all the way up into his eyebrow, his appearance shocked anyone who got too close. Fracturing his ribs meant that he hadn’t gotten a decent breath-in in weeks, though his nose had healed in a relatively straight line and the stitches were finally gone. The doctors said he’d probably have the scar forever, just another more permanent reminder of his refusal to play by his father’s rules. If Lyall Lupin had hated the sight of him before, he detested it now.

“Football accident,” Remus said flatly. He’d been practising the lie for most of August while he’d slummed around the estate, whining and wincing without Tomny’s downers. “I guess I make a pretty poor goalkeeper.”

James winced and Peter called it “hard cheese”, nearly making Remus laugh out loud at the thought of Vint’s last and only words to him; but at least they hadn’t badgered him for more. Like Giles (who’d had more than enough to say after picking Remus up and driving him straight to the hospital) the boys rarely overstepped boundaries, even ones never explicitly said aloud. Remus suspected it was a de facto result of being friends with Sirius for so long.

“So where’s Black?” He asked, glancing around the busy train platform just in case Sirius was getting ready to spring up and break the rest of his ribs.

“He’s already at school,” James said. “Reg made prefect this year so they had to come a day early.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, his train would’ve come through yesterday. But c’mon, let’s go claim a carriage before they’re all full.”

Once on the train, Remus was pleased to find that that year he’d be riding in a private carriage with air con and windows working latches. As Peter and James busied themselves with a round of cards, he planted himself by the window with a book. He’d been thinking a lot about Sirius lately—or at least, more than usual. It had started when the butlers finally brought him the letters, which he’d read while

bedridden and half-delirious from the pain in his face and chest. They were well-written of course, with that same Sirius Black wit that Remus had grown so used to, only now accompanied by his perfect penmanship as well.

Tucking them into the pages of his book so his friends wouldn't see, Remus scanned the letters, reminded of the bit of guilt he'd been carrying ever since he first plucked up the courage to open them. There was one for nearly every week of the summer holiday, but Remus had read them so many times he could've almost recited them off by heart.

Dear Moony,
(After a summer away Remus still cringed at the nickname.)

Summer's shit, but what else is new. Dad's away in London most of the time at least, but mum found the couple of albums I got the bloke in the kitchen to stash away for me and tossed them into the salon's fireplace. Such a bloody waste—I didn't even get to play them! At least now the salon stinks so badly that we don't do afternoon tea in there anymore. I figure they're going to be airing the place out for weeks to get rid of the smell of burnt PVC.
James says he can't ring you. I thought you said your family didn't do holidays?
I know you don't understand the romantic and sophisticated past-time that is letter writing and your handwriting is pretty shit, but if you get this one, post me back.

Sirius.

Dear Moony,

Where do you think is the most effective spot for hiding a body? I'm about ready to murder Reg's damn dog. He's only an ugly little thing, so I figure the flower beds in the front garden would be a safe bet, though Mum would just as quickly bump me off for disturbing the begonias.
You and James don't know how good you've got it. Brothers are a nightmare. I'd give anything to trade Reg for Simeon—at least he's good for something other than whinging like a girl. I'm pretty sure Reg pays Kreacher in bacon to piss in my shoes.
You've got dogs, where do you bury them? The front or back garden?
Write soon.

Sirius.
PS: I swear I really do like dogs. Most of the time.

Moony,

I'm starting to wonder if your dad's as strict as mine or if you're just illiterate. I know the second can't be true because you're never without a bloody book in your hand, so I'm just going to put your lack of return-correspondence down to you being a lazy arse.
If it is the first one though then you should write a song. A great, bloody fuck you to dear ol' dad. Wouldn't that be something? I'll write one too, then we can compare in September.
I've been trying to write actually. All of it's shit, but even the best wrote shit sometimes right? "The Laughing Gnome" must still plague Bowie, I swear.
Heard any good music since school ended? Andy's all over this group called the Ramones lately, but they've only got one album out and I haven't heard it.
Hope you're enjoying the heat.

Sirius.

He was half right at least; Remus was a lazy arse, but he was also without so much as a sophisticated or romantic bone in his body, and a few of the ones he did have were broken, so that was a decent enough excuse right?

At first Remus told himself the neglect was because he felt so damn horrible all the time; after all he'd barely left his bedroom for the last month of holiday, but eventually he had to put his lack of correspondence down to plain nerves. Even if he did write Sirius back, what would he say?

'Hey, summer's been peachy. Got beaten to a pulp and might've lost all my friends but did you catch that last episode of the Pops?'

Lord.

When he finally did write Sirius back, it was nearly the last week of summer holiday. After he'd explained that the letter was going to a school friend in Bath, Giles agreed to post it and get it expedited, but there was no telling if the letter had made it to Sirius since he hadn't written anything else back.

It didn't matter, Remus told himself. It was just a short thing anyway —hardly a Nobel Prize in literature. He and Sirius could just catch up at school, and if the other boy wanted to pummel him for ignoring him all summer Remus would at least request that he avoid the nose.

"Oi, Lupin," James called from the other bench, "put down the bloody book and come help me whip this tosser in rummy."

"Not even Lupin can't save your sorry arse, Potter," Peter grinned evilly, expertly twirling the stack of cards around in his hands.

Snapping his book shut over the letter, Remus turned back to his friends and smiled. "Fine," he said, "but we're playing aces high this time."

* * *

"Everyone got your room keys? Come get your schedules if you haven't got 'em already!"

Kenny, the new Godric dorm monitor, was doing his best to holler over the group of year 7 boys as they mulled about on the front lawn of the dorm, looking distinctly small and nervous after moving from the western primary half of campus to the bigger upper-secondary half where they'd be expected to spent the rest of their menial youth.

James waved at Kenny as they passed, both of them being on the football team, and Peter elbowed Remus, almost dropping one of his trunks in the process.

"Do you reckon you were ever that short, Lupin?" He teased, pointing at the kids.

"You reckon you'll ever be any taller?" Remus asked, and Peter knocked his trunk into the back of his legs in retaliation, nearly buckling his knees.

"Hurry up or they'll start thinking we're part of the welcoming party," James chastised, carrying two of his trunks in one hand and another over his shoulder.

They made their way up the steps of the dorm, passing the plaque depicting the Godric griffin and through the front doors. Immediately they were met with the familiar woody scent of the pine-panelled

hallways and the smell of fresh tea coming from the kitchenette across the hall. Other boys were mulling around with bags in hand same as them, and even more were in the common room, greeting friends and exchanging stories of their holidays.

All three boys peered into the main rooms as they went, just in case they could spot Sirius, but he was nowhere to be found on the dorm's lower levels, so they trudged on to the stairs.

"You go on without me," Peter moaned just as they reached the third floor landing. "I can't do it anymore." He dropped his trunks in the middle of the staircase, slumping over them dramatically.

"You're not even the one carrying the stereo," James quipped, ignoring his friend and continuing up the stairs.

"Is there no sympathy for a man who just lugged three trunks across the biggest campus in the Highlands?"

"Not when he's blocking the stairs," Remus said, gently nudging his friend in the heels until he got moving again.

The sight of their dorm room after two months away was as familiar now as that of Tomny's flat. It wasn't like his room at the estate, empty and wide and quiet. The walls were as bare as they'd left them last June and the room was clean and untouched but in less than twenty-four hours it'd be filled with pictures and posters and all the things he and his friends loved. Eventually there'd be dishes waiting by the door for someone to take them downstairs, and stray slacks and socks would begin to pile up on the floor until one of them—usually James—picked them up. There would be chatter and snores to fill the in between moments and of course there would be the boys those noises belonged to. It was something to look forward to. Usually.

"Dear god!" James groaned as he made his way into the room, dropping his trunks to wave a hand across his face and fend off the smell from the thick haze that had enveloped the room. "What'd you do, Black, hot-box our room with your grandmother's moth balls?"

"No, I asked your mum for hers." Jumping up from his bed eagerly, Sirius plucked a fat cigar from his lips and tapped its end on an ashtray he'd obviously nicked from the common room downstairs. "Alright, lads?"

"Alright!" James answered, as Remus lugged the rest of his things into the room. His chest burned so horribly that he had to stop to lean up

against one of his bed posts, and even worse—it seemed as though seeing Sirius again had knocked more than a few ribs loose. Sirius had returned to school with a newly chiselled jaw, no longer that belonging to a growing boy but a man. His dark hair still curled just past that jawline and he'd gotten taller but somehow avoided the lanky-limb syndrome that plagued Remus. It was so bloody unfair.

In an attempt to break himself out of his daze, Remus coughed around the room's smoke and sent himself into a spasm of pain while James and Sirius flew forward, grappling each other in a ferocious hug.

"You okay, Remus?" Peter croaked, still breathless and red in the face. Remus waved him off and clutched an arm across his tender ribs as he slid to the floor next to his trunks.

With a delightful yell James picked Sirius up off the ground and spun him, only releasing him once Sirius had caught his feet on one of his bed posts and pushed off it, nearly toppling them both. The cigar had been thrown halfway across the room, spilling ash everywhere, but their expressions remained like that of the sun after a spring storm, bright and elated; two brothers reunited after a bitter fate had sought to try to separate them.

Never wanting to be left out, Peter surged forward to receive a hug of his own, one that was just as vigorous and ended with Sirius grinding his knuckles into the top of the poor boy's head for good measure. As Peter wailed and batted at him, Sirius looked over and finally noticed Remus, still sprawled among his trunks and trying not to wince. The smile he gave him was only that of amusement at first—like a kid who'd discovered a toy he'd forgotten about—but like everyone else so far, the shock and realisation dawned as he got a better look at Remus' face.

"Fucking hell." Releasing Peter, Sirius leapt forward and dropped down into a squat, staring like he was watching a monkey in a zoo. "What chewed you up and spat you out again?"

Sirius reached out as though he might grasp him by the chin, but he was already too close and Remus felt more aware of the other boy than he normally was. He smacked Sirius' hand away and cleared his throat before answering; "It was an accident."

Sirius clicked his tongue in judgement. "This the reason why you ignored my letters all summer then?"

"Knew you wouldn't let that one go."

“ ‘Course not.” Sirius bit his lip over a smile, the expression almost endearing.

Almost.

“So, you bloody lunatic,” he continued, “what the hell did you do?”

“It was a football *accident,”* Remus said, enunciating each syllable. “Sorry to say I won’t be trying out for the team this year either.”

Sirius snorted but finally fell back and popped up to his feet, extending an arm to help him up. Remus took it and stood up, straightening his shirt.

“You got taller,” Sirius said once they were both standing, squinting at him a bit.

“So did you.”

“Yeah but you’re going to have to duck to get through doorways soon, you giant.”

“And you’ll have to turn sideways just to fit that fat head through them,” James chimed in, opening the window between his and Sirius’ beds to air out some of the cigar smoke.

“Probably true,” Sirius said, before licking his lips and slowly extending his arms out to the side like he was waiting for a hug. It took Remus all of three seconds before he realised he was expecting a hug from *him.*

“C’mon,” he said wryly, “the least you can do after ignoring me all summer is give a little cuddle.”

Remus shook his head and slipped away. “I’m an injured man, keep your mitts off.”

“Aw, where you going, Moony? I’m not gonna hurt you!”

“That nickname isn’t funny anymore!”

“But touch is the language of love, Moony!”

“You speak enough languages for all of us, Black.”

Sirius let his arms clap back against his sides. “Fine. But one day when I’m dead and gone you’re going to regret not hugging me.”

“I would agree,” Remus said, dragging a trunk toward his bed, “but then we’d both be liars.”

After Sirius had put out the cigar he’d apparently stolen from his father’s office and the room was at least semi-breathable again, James and Peter began regaling them with tales of their joint summer. They’d spent most of it at their families’ neighbouring summer homes, located in some charming sea-side town in Devon. The two of them took turns narrating the same story, interjecting when the other forgot something or when they had a differing opinion on how a scene had played out. Having already unpacked the rest of his things, Sirius seemed content to listen to them yammer while setting up his stereo and turntable, the first thing that had emerged from James’ heavy trunks.

It was with great pride that Remus used the empty wall space over his side table to blu-tack the Queen poster Lee had presented him with in early July. Over his bed he pinned pictures of other bands like The Stones, Deep Purple, and of course The Who. Once he’d finished with the stereo Sirius came over to admire them.

“Looks great,” he said.

“But I’m still missing the best part,” Remus answered wryly, before leaning forward and tacking Sirius’ Shrieking Shack photograph to the wall for all to see. Sirius scoffed immediately and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Yeah well, you’re a bleeding hypocrite if you think any of these toffs are any less fruity than Bowie.”

Remus sighed. “If I throw a stick, will you chase it and leave me alone?”

“Do you have a stick?”

Remus shook his head and reached for the remaining posters on his bed. “Potter, Pete, here.” Unfolding them carefully, he proudly presented his friends with posters of their own—The Kinks for James and Cream for Peter, the latter of which had been hard to procure since the band had broken up before they’d even hit puberty. Remus was half-sure Lee had simply ripped it off a record shop’s wall.

“Think of them as belated birthday gifts,” he said as James and Peter shared giddy looks and thanked him.

“Here’s yours,” Remus said, handing Sirius his own poster. Sirius eyed him with a slightly raised brow before unrolling it.

“Oh, bless ya, Moony!” Turning, Sirius happily showed off Bowie’s Aladdin Sane image to the rest of them.

“Maybe his fruitiness will add some colour to the room,” Remus said as Sirius rushed to his side of the dorm to hang the poster up.

“You’re right, it does add some colour,” Sirius said, standing back to admire it.

“There’s also this.”

A little more shyly, Remus handed him the copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* that Tonya had let him keep after the summer. She’d marked little notes into the margins of her favourite scenes and he’d yet to get tired of reading through them, but he knew Sirius would appreciate the story.

“Is it my birthday or something?” Sirius asked as he plucked the book from his hands and skimmed through its pages.

“It’s just ‘cause you liked Dumas’ other stuff,” Remus said, sticking his hands in his pockets.

“So what, you annotate your books now?”

“No, not me. It belonged to a friend.”

Sirius looked up, another perfect eyebrow raised; “Lily?”

“Er… no.”

“So vague.” Smiling a bit, Sirius closed the book and tapped its spine against the centre of Remus’ chest. “Can’t wait to read it. Cheers.”

Nodding sheepishly, Remus turned away only to find James standing directly behind him with a stack of records in his hands and a sly grin on his face.

“Five quid says he doesn’t read it.”

“I read!” Sirius huffed. “More than you anyway, you thick jock.”

Snatching the albums from him, Sirius set them down on his bed with the rest of his collection before setting a vinyl up on the turntable and

dropping its needle onto the surface. Remus recognised the opening beat of *Diamond Dogs* before Bowie had so much as uttered his first line, and Sirius smirked back at him, winking while they listened and enjoyed the company of friends they'd been missing all summer.

"Moony, want to help me organise these?" Sirius asked, turning back to the pile of albums scattered about his bed.

Remus looked back. "What am I, your maid?"

"So you won't do it?"

"Ugh… move over, tosser."

* * *

The rumours about the muggings, the unfortunate fencing mishap, and even the Ibiza helicopter accident could've all been tolerated, but Mary's pestering about the secret BDSM sex cult that practiced knife throwing in the nude was really beginning to weighing on Remus' mental well-being. Of course he'd been expecting all of it—not many well-to-do kiddies returned to school looking like they'd lost a knife-fight with a blind bag lady—but he would've at least thought the rumours would have remained more grounded in reality. The truth might've been less surprising to the general student body than some of the other things that were being said, but Remus wasn't quite that desperate yet.

Despite her riveting summer spent travelling around the country's coastline while her parents compiled a new reference guide on seaside flora and her older sister Petunia hogged the phone to dial-up her boyfriend, Lily's newest impassioned topic of interest became Remus' face the moment she'd laid eyes on him. He could hardly fault her for it though—everyone stared, though Remus actually had to give it to Crouch for coming up with 'scarface' and 'scratching post' all on his own.

"Remus, please just tell me what happened," she begged, leaning down over her breakfast and attempting to look him in the eye. They were sitting with James on one end of their usual dining hall table while the rest of their friends compared beginning-of-term homework lists on the other and Mary gave Sirius his first manicure of the year.

Expertly avoiding Lily's gaze, Remus continued spooning the bran

cereal he'd mistakenly picked up in the cafeteria line-up into his mouth. He'd already had to pour enough sugar into it to make James grimace just to make the taste bearable. "I told you," he mumbled, mouth full, "football accident. Broke my nose."

"That's rubbish," Lily snapped, astute as always. "You hate football. And you look like you got hit by a bus."

"Your love really knows no bounds, Evans."

James leaned in to interrupt, looking at Lily rather pointedly; "Daisy, just let the man be."

"You butt out," Lily instructed, blazing past the nickname that made Remus momentarily pause his cereal-spooning in surprise. "All summer and not a single phone call—I didn't even *know* if you were coming back. Then you show up looking like this. Now I want the truth," she ordered, "or I'll… I'll give you detention!"

The corners of Remus' mouth turned up. "Sounds like abusing your prefect-powers, Evans."

"And here I thought Remus was the only one immune to your viciousness," James added, sharing in his entertainment.

"Secrets hurt people," Lily whined. "Just look at his nose!"

Remus pushed away his empty cereal bowl. "Well, my nose doesn't hurt anymore, however my feelings are certainly taking a beating."

Lily gave him a glare that said she'd very much like to prolong said beating, but relented and finished her own breakfast in grudging silence.

"Want some more tea?" James asked her eventually.

Lily nodded. "One sugar, please."

"I know. Fancy a cuppa, Lupin?"

"Yeah, four—"

"You're getting two," James said, snatching his mug and standing up.

"Like the bloody sugar police," Remus grumbled as James crossed the dining hall. Lily turned around in her seat as he did, chewing on her thumb nail absent-mindedly. Watching her, a suspicious feeling began

to bloom in Remus' gut and after a few seconds he rapped his spoon on the table top, making Lily jump and spin around again.

"Nice view?" He drawled.

Lily's eyebrows knit together in the centre. "What?"

"I asked if you liked the view."

"What view?"

"Of Potter's arse."

Lily turned beet-red. "Don't be ridiculous. He has a stain on his trousers, that's all. I was going to tell him when he got back."

"Oh, of course."

"He did!"

"Yeah, okay. And this 'Daisy' stuff? What's that about?"

"It's just a stupid nickname. He does it because he knows it bothers me, that's all."

"Mhm, sure."

"I *will* give you detention."

Before she could make good on her threat, Sirius dropped down on the bench in James' spot and clapped his hands to the top of the table, fingers splayed and painted in a pattern of red and black.

"It's some of Macdonald's best work!" He declared, grinning. "And look!"

With one hand, Sirius pointed to his eyes, and Lily's eyebrows rose to her hairline.

"Is that *eyeliner?"*

"Yeah! Mary did it like hers," Sirius said, looking extremely pleased. Between that, the nail polish, the earring, and the silver chain tucked just under his collar that Sirius had apparently taken to wearing over the summer, he looked about as close to a rock star as Remus had ever seen him.

“Why are you wearing eyeliner?” Lily asked.

“ ‘Cause it’s cool,” Sirius said, snootily. “Jagger wears it.”

“Does Jagger wear it at eight in the morning on his way to organic chemistry?”

“I’m not even sure Jagger would know what organic chemistry is,” Remus said, finding his voice for the first time since Sirius had sat down. The dark-haired boy smirked back at him and a moment later James slid in next to Remus with three cups of tea in hand, organising them on the table in front of himself. Finally he glanced up at Sirius and gave an impressed smile.

“Well, don’t you look spiffing.”

“See,” Sirius drawled, rolling his head toward Lily, “at least *someone* can appreciate true artistry.”

“Slughorn’s going to write you up for sure,” Lily said, shaking her head as she reached for her tea. Remus noted with slight amusement that she was smiling though.

“Nah. Blind bat would have to stop his fluttering and focus on my face for longer than three seconds to do that.”

“At least he remembers your name. He called Davey, ‘Mr. Crumpet’ the other day.”

“That’s not even close to ‘Gudgeon’,” Remus said.

Sirius smirked. “It’s ‘cause he can’t be bothered to remember anyone’s name outside of his silly club.”

“So what does he call you?” Remus asked. “ ‘Mr. White’?”

“Just ‘Black’ actually. James and I got the notice at the end of last year—an invite into Sluggy’s inner circle.”

James nodded, and Lily’s mouth dropped open. “No *way.* Both of you got an invite to the Slug Club?” She narrowed her eyes at James, who gave a sorry smile and a shrug.

“It was supposed to be a surprise?” He said in a guilty voice.

Remus, who was thankful every day that he did not take chemistry, peered at them questioningly; “Not to be dim or anything but what

the bloody-fuck's a 'Slug Club'?"

"It's Professor Slughorn's private chemistry group," Lily explained. "It's as close as we'll get to an official academic association before university and it's very good to have on applications, especially Oxford and Cambridge since he taught there."

"Yeah, well I don't plan on filling out any of those," Sirius said, examining his manicure.

"So you're not going?" Lily asked.

"No, I'll go."

"Why does that sound suspicious?"

It was impossible for any of them to miss the look that passed between Sirius and James, and Remus answered for them; "Because it is."

As James lifted his tea to his lips, Lily gave a groan and opted to do the same rather than prolong the conversation. Before Remus could reach for his own, Sirius stretched across the table and scooped up the last mug.

"Just think about it this way, Evans," he started, waving the cup around, "you've got two of Hawkings' finest by your side every club meeting, though I do warn you that I plan to marry Potter for his money, so you'd better back off."

Both Lily and James coughed into their tea and Sirius smugly sipped his own before gagging and nearly dropping the cup. "Fucking hell Moony, your taste in tea really is murder."

* * *

Thursday 9th September 1976

Peter wasn't very happy to hear that they'd lifted the headphones from the AV room the year before, but they were already one week into the school year and Sirius' musical habits were definitely starting to get old. It had taken some convincing on Remus' part, but once Sirius had progressed to playing The Zombies' "Tell Her No" on repeat just to be annoying, Peter had finally caved.

“Here,” he said, emerging from the AV room with a pair of headphones in hand. He passed them to Sirius, who strung them around his neck happily.

“It’s more for our benefit than his, Pete,” Remus promised, as Peter locked the door behind himself.

“I’m still distinctly under the impression that you lot won’t miss one measly set of speakers,” Sirius said, casually holding his hands behind his head.

“Your stereo is loud enough on its own!” Peter snapped, making a point of ensuring that the door was locked tightly behind them. Sirius blew his tongue at him as they all turned down the hall and made their way out of the building. Outside, other students were mulling around, taking in the remaining summer heat and enjoying themselves before the term’s inevitable worries of homework, tests, and studying set in.

“Seems like kind of a shame though,” James surmised as they emerged onto the pavement; “I mean, waiting for Halloween to have any fun?”

“You’re as bad as Sirius,” Peter huffed. “We’re not playing more Led Zeppelin in church—Francis would never believe me a second time!”

“Get your knickers out of a knot, Pete,” Sirius scoffed. “Playing the same joke two years in a row would be shameful. There’s got to be *something* we can pull out of our four gobs that’ll kick off the year right.”

“Didn’t you already ask Bobby to make us more fireworks?” James asked.

“Oh, because those turned out so great the last time,” Remus groaned.

“Really Moony, between you and Pete I don’t know which is the worse stick in the mud,” Sirius said, letting out a yawn just as they passed Castle Hall. Suddenly he slammed to a halt in the middle of the pavement, letting Remus walk right into him.

“Oi, watch where you’re—”

“When was the last time either of you lot paid a visit to our dear Headmistress?” Sirius asked out of the blue. Following his gaze to the top of Castle Hall’s staircase, Remus spotted Headmistress McGonagall talking to a few teachers.

“She called me in early last year,” he answered.

“And I had to talk to her about the team’s trip to the tournament,” James added, “but Lily visits her office all the time for prefect’s stuff.”

Remus smirked a little at the back of Sirius’ head. “I’m sorta surprised she didn’t haul you in last year, Sirius. You know, after that red mark in History. I thought the Blacks were supposed to be perfect in everything.”

Sirius turned around, looking scandalised. “Is that our Remus Lupin, bragging?”

“Can’t be,” James agreed.

Remus shrugged innocently. “What was it you said last year, Black? ‘Every dog’s allowed an off-day’?”

“Well, it might interest you to know that I didn’t actually fail that exam,” Sirius mused, equally as innocent.

A moment of silence passed between all of them, then; “What?”

“The kid who sat behind Potter and I—Langston Hobbs—he paid me to take the test for him so he’d pass the class. He wrote my name on the top of his exam while I wrote his name on mine. It was good money too, more than enough for a few drinks at some dingy Scottish pub show.”

There went the metaphorical rug, and Remus began to piece everything together. “So… your poor mark…”

“Yup.”

“And… the money at the end of the year…”

“Uh-huh.”

“And my beating you in history…”

“Mhm.” Sirius looked back at Remus, his expression so smug it was sour. “You actually beat Langston, not me. Sorry, Moons.”

It took a clap on the back from James to stir Remus out of his stunned silence. Once his daze was broken, he let out an incredulous laugh. “You fucking wanker! You let me believe I actually beat you in a class for a whole summer?”

“Maybe if you’d written me back I would’ve had time to fess up.”

Never underestimate a Black.

“What a bitch,” Remus said to James and Peter, who were sniggering at the both of them. “I’m gonna get you,” he swore. “This year all bets are off.”

“Bring it on, Lupin,” Sirius said. “But in the meantime, how up to snuff are your lock-picking skills?”

Instantly sobered of his humour, Peter moaned; “Lord have mercy.”

But the plan had already been hatched; Remus could tell from a single that the practical joke gears were already turning inside Sirius’ skull.

“What are you thinking, Black?” James asked, kicking his ankles playfully.

“Nothing,” Sirius said simply, “just that McGonagall must be feeling lonely after a whole summer apart from all her favourite students. Maybe we should pay her office a little visit? You know, like any good group of Hawkings students…”

Chapter End Notes

Rummy is a card game.
A 'bag lady' is a homeless [woman] who carries her belongings around in various bags.

Really excited to give you the next chapter. Pranks are the best to write ^^

Chapter 32: Prongs

Chapter Summary

The boys do some good ol' fashioned breaking n' entering. 'Prongs' is born.

Chapter Notes

Impulsively posting this because it's a fun chapter, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Band on the run, band on the run,
And the jailer man and sailor Sam,
Were searching everyone;
For the band on the run, band on the run,
For the band on the run…

- "Band on the Run" Wings, 1973

Castle Hall was imposing enough during the daytime with its stone columns and endless front steps, but come nightfall the building really took after its namesake, appearing as a daunting stone palace that looked as though it housed more than a few blood-sucking creatures. Situated at the very heart of Hawkings' campus, the only building older than the hall was the church itself, which had been built before the boarding school for Britain's most well-to-do children had even been conceptualised. The only modern-looking thing about it was the flat roof, which made for very good pranking as far as Sirius was concerned.

"It always looks so creepy," James said as they skirted around the bushes lining the driveway and made their way up the pavement.

"I think I saw someone in the window!" Peter whimpered, pointing to one of the old stained-glass windows. All the windows were sitting dark, as the hall normally was past sundown.

"Pretty sure it was just your torch's reflection, Pete," Remus said. Peter looked down at the metal flashlight in his hand and clicked it off for good measure.

“No one’s around, you ninny,” Sirius hissed, the first one on the steps and zipping up them with about as much energy as a jackrabbit on dexys.

Peter scowled after him bitterly. “If Filch catches us I’m letting him skin you first.”

All four of them went up the stairs together, their trainers scuffing across the stone until they made it to the top flagstones. Bending down in front of one of the double doors, Remus snapped his fingers at Sirius until he handed him the hairpins.

“You think Mary’s going to start noticing she’s missing a few of these?” He asked, bending them into the right shape before sliding the bits of metal into the lock.

“Nah,” Sirius said, leaning back against the wall next to him and clicking the spring of his lighter; “girls always have an endless supply of ‘em.”

“Yeah but you plucked those ones right out of her hair today,” James mused.

“I know. Thought she was going to murder me when her hair puffed up like that.”

James and Sirius shared a cheeky fist-bump before James turned his back to the front doors while he kept watch of the front lawn. Peter did the same, though he appeared distinctly more nervous about the whole affair; it was one thing to break into an empty church or his own AV room after hours, another to bust into the Headmistress’s office when anyone could just happen upon them.

The thrill should’ve bothered him—he didn’t have time to spend another month in detention if he was going to beat Sirius come exam time—but Remus was too delighted by the idea of the prank to care all that much for nerves. It was a simple task really, apart from the manual labour, and no one would get hurt so even if they were caught the punishment couldn’t be that bad. Right?

“Jesus, Lupin, I thought you said you were an expert on breaking and entering?” Sirius huffed when Remus failed to get the door open after several minutes.

“I never said anything about being an expert,” he shot, “you just always assume whatever’s most convenient! Why don’t you stop your

whinging and get me some light?"

Instead of reaching for Peter's torch, Sirius bent down next to him and clicked the lighter on, holding it next to the door handle where he was working. It was a pathetic attempt but Remus knew without even seeing his face that he was just being an ass anyway.

"Should we try another way in?" James suggested, turning to peer over Remus' shoulder. "There's gotta be a back door right?"

"There is but it leads down into the boiler room, and the door up to the rest of the building is locked from the other side," Remus answered.

"What'd you do, go around trying every door on campus?" Asked Sirius.

"No… maybe." Clumsily, Remus' fingers slipped and he lodged one of the pins deep into the lock, jamming it instantly. "Shit," he cursed, trying to wrench it free only to be thwarted by the sweat that had collected in his palms.

"Let me." Ushering him out of the way, Sirius grasped the door handle and the end of the pin. He yanked hard but the metal was slippery and didn't give.

"Here," James said, trying his best to get the pin out.

Peter chuckled, slapping his palm with the head of his torch. "How many lads does it take to get a pin out of a lock?"

"Two less than it takes to whoop you one, Pete," Remus quipped, standing up to give his knees a break while James continued to work at the stuck lock. Taking a moment to wonder if he might have a chance at the lock in the boiler room, Remus stepped up to the other door and grasped the handle, turning it. "Do we have another pin—?"

There was a crisp click and the door opened, falling toward Remus as James and Sirius stared in shock.

"It's fucking open?" Peter cried. "You mean you didn't even check to see if it was locked in the *first place?"*

Sirius shot upwards, clapping Remus on the shoulder. "Good job, Moony. Knew you'd get the job done!"

“Bunch of numpties, you lot are!” Peter grumbled as they all slipped inside, leaving the stuck pin behind. “Is no one even slightly worried over why the front door might be unlocked in the first place?”

“If I see anyone, I’ll ask,” Sirius said, making his way down the hall and toward the main staircase.

“There could still be teachers around!”

“It’s nearly midnight,” Remus whispered. “I doubt anyone’s around.”

“And if they are, Pete, you were just saying earlier that you needed help with some homework!” James finished, patting his friend comfortingly on the back.

While Peter used a harsh whisper to outline the impracticability of asking for help with maths during a break-in, they made their way up the stairs, trying their best to keep their footsteps quiet on the ancient staircase.

“Maybe time to cut back on the cigs, hey Moony?” James teased as they made it to the top and Remus stopped to muffle a cough with his elbow. It made his chest twinge and he leaned against the railing for support while his friends stopped to wait for him.

“If I did, you lot would just badger me until I got more,” he rasped. “Bunch of chain-smoking drunkards, you are.”

Sirius flicked his zippo on and off as he waited at the top of the stairs. “Messers, tramps, numpties, chain-smoking drunkards, what do you figure’s next? The Three Musketeers?”

“There’s four of us,” Peter pointed out.

“Read a book, Pete?” Remus sighed, before finishing the rest of his climb and emerging at the top of the staircase next to Sirius. “But alright, I’ll indulge you. Which Musketeer are you then?”

Even in the darkness of the hallway he could see the cheeky glint in Sirius’ eye. “Obviously I’m D’Artagnan. None of you are romantic enough to carry an entire story.”

“I call Athos then,” James chimed, making Sirius nodded in agreement.

“Pete’s obviously Porthos, and you my dear Moony, simply scream

Aramis. I just know you're waiting to run out on us, you sneaky bastard."

"Okay, walk on then, you poof," Remus scoffed.

"What, don't tell me you're offended? You know I'm right!"

Rather than answering him, he gave Sirius a little shove that had him nearly tumbling over a decorative chair left outside an office doorway. It was amusing to watch the normally graceful Sirius catch himself on the seat of the chair and bounce back, knocking into a hutch set next to the chair and almost toppling the vase of fresh flowers sitting on top. James caught it at the last second and Sirius straightened up, shoving Remus gently in return while they cackled.

"That was very graceful, Black, good show," Peter snickered.

"I try," Sirius scoffed lightly, shooting a squinted smile in Remus' direction.

Once they'd staunched their laughter and James returned the vase to its rightful spot they continued on to the end of the hall, stopping outside the Headmistress's office.

"I've always wondered what 'O.M. First Class' meant," James said, peering at the plaque next to the door.

"Well, maybe you can ask the old bird herself." Reaching up, Sirius grasped the heavy, lion-shaped door knocker and slammed it down onto its base—once, twice, three times. Each bang echoed down the dim hallway, making the rest of them seize up in alarm. They were all deadly silent for a long moment after, just waiting for the sound of footsteps or an office door being opened. When nothing came, three pairs of shoulders slouched with relief.

"It's like you want us to be caught!" Peter hissed, and just Sirius winked as he grasped the door handle. It fell open under his grip, also unlocked.

"Pete," he started, as though he were lecturing a child, "we're going to be lifting half of her furniture and leaving it on the roof—if you haven't already prepared yourself for the chance of being caught then you're not a proper Musketeer."

Stepping inside the grand office, Sirius waited until they'd all filed in before taking Peter's torch and lighting up the room. The air was

warm to the point of being stuffy but smelt softly of freshly cooked biscuits, with various novelty items, odd plants, and heavy books crowding every surface.

“Isn’t much one for interior design, is she?” Peter said, staring into the face of the grandfather clock leaning up against the wall closest to him. As if on cue, the clock struck midnight and Peter flew backward into James who had to clap a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing. Delighted, Sirius began to trail a hand over the red velvet sofa in the middle of the sitting area.

“Oh I don’t know,” he said happily, once the chiming had ceased, “it sorta looks like our salon back home, only with more… ambiance? No —character.”

Remus glanced at the fireplace and imagined throwing a record into a lit fire, watching it melt and smoke and fill the room with the scent of burnt plastic. If he’d written back to that letter of Sirius’ he might’ve told him to put Walburga’s curtains in the flames for good measure, or smash her best china. No album deserved such a nasty end—not even disco.

“Barely any dust though,” James said, standing on the opposite side of the room and trailing his fingers over one of the bookshelves, rubbing them together.

“Someone’s been cleaning,” Peter observed, pointing his torch at a small trolley of cleaning supplies on the far side of the room.

“We’re not moving all of it, right?” Remus asked, lifting a small snow globe off of the table in front of the fireplace.

“No, just enough for it to be noticeable,” Sirius said, testing the weight of an armchair.

“Good, because that desk must weigh a thousand pounds,” James said, pointing further into the office. Sirius followed his line of sight and nodded slyly.

“Moony, think you can work on getting the door to the roof open?”

“If it’s not already open,” Peter scoffed.

Remus set the globe down. “Yeah I can do it.”

Plucking another pin from his own hair this time, Sirius tossed it to

him and he fumbled to catch it in the dark, looking away before he started staring at the way Sirius' dark waves tumbled down over his pale forehead.

Leaving his friends to take stock of the room, Remus borrowed the torch and crept down the quiet hallway by himself. He made it to the short staircase that led up to the little doorway letting out onto the roof and bent down in front of it, getting to work. The door was indeed locked but he managed to get it open in decent time—*Take that, Black*—and after a quick peek out onto the roof, Remus made his way back to the office and slipped inside, shutting the door behind himself. Rather than casing the room for furniture that could be hauled up to its new home, he found Sirius sitting on top of the desk with several file folders in hand while James slouched back in McGonagall's leather chair, spinning around and staring at the ceiling as though he were intentionally trying to make himself sick. Peter was lounging on the sofa in front of the fireplace, chin propped up against one hand and half-asleep already.

Remus cleared his throat; "Thought we were moving stuff out, not moving ourselves in."

"We're just taking a little break before the back-busting work begins," Sirius said, licking his thumb before flipping the page in the file he was reading. "Barty Crouch really is a bloody idiot. Who fails art in year ten? Oh, wait—his final project was a collage of nudie magazine clippings. That's actually kind of funny."

"I want to see," Peter said, jumping up and joining James over Sirius' shoulders, leaving the sofa's pillows significantly skewed.

"Oh! And here's his dad's phone number. How do you reckon he'd react if someone from the Communist Party of Great Britain called looking to 'thank Barty for his ongoing support'?"

I live with highly educated idiots, Remus thought as he went to right the pillows, keenly aware that they were only there to leave things a mess in the first place. As he sorted out the cushions the same cat statue he'd seen on the fireplace's mantle when he first arrived in the Headmistress's office caught his eye—only now there were two of them. An unperfect pair, the first cat was a striped grey and distinctly tall and noble in appearance while the second appeared the colour of dust and little more than a shaggy skeleton in the dim light of the room. Though unlike the other statue its eyes were distinctly lifelike, catching the light of Peter's torch as he waved it about the room.

“Oi, guys look what I found.”

Leaving the cats in peace, Remus crossed the office to join his friends as Sirius pulled another file from the cabinet behind McGonagall’s desk.

“Who’s is that?” James asked, looking up from a different file—his own.

“Evans’,” Sirius grinned, using the file to fan himself as James launched himself to his feet.

“You should put that one back.”

Sirius gawped. “Put it back—don’t you want to know what dirt McGonagall’s got on your favourite ginger?”

James shook his head firmly. “Nope, don’t need to.”

“Why not?”

" 'Cause!"

" 'Cause'? Are you joking?"

Remus reached over Sirius and snatched the file from his hand. “Leave Lily out of your pranks. I thought we had a job to do?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “You two really need to stop licking the bottom of Evans’ boots.”

“Can we just get on with this?” James blagged.

“Yeah, it’s school tomorrow,” Peter added, stifling another yawn.

After a bit more griping from Sirius they returned the files to what they hoped were the right places and began to move about the room, sliding things closer to the door as quietly as they could. Carrying their heavy loads, they made their way down the hallways one by one and from there, up onto the roof, which was open to the stars and without any light at all. The only other way off the roof was a fire escape leading down to the ground at the back of the building, which was so old they couldn’t tell if it was painted red or just entirely rusted over.

“Watch the pipes,” James warned, carefully stepping over a vent while carrying a potted plant in his arms. Of course Remus immediately got

his foot caught, going to the ground in attempts to save the lamp he was carrying.

“Fuck,” he hissed, as his friends stifled laugher behind their shirt sleeves.

“S'like a newborn giraffe,” Sirius mocked, helping him to his feet.

A half-hour later, and they’d managed to move almost half of the office’s contents up to the roof. Remus did his best to keep his feet under him, which was easier said than done after Sirius had decided that the sofa would be next.

“Knew we should’ve made Potter lift this one,” Sirius grunted, holding the bottom end as Remus walked backward up the roof’s stairs.

“He’s sorting the desk!” Remus reminded him, slumping at the top of the stairs to catch his breath.

“They always make it look so easy on TV. Just a cut-to and all the furniture’s sitting pretty on the roof.”

“Less lip and more lift,” Remus ordered, wiping the sweat from his forehead before grabbing hold of the bottom of the couch once more. His ribs were screaming but it would’ve felt like too much of a pansy excuse if he told his friends about the full-extent of his injuries in the middle of a prank. And that would just lead to more questions he didn’t care to answer.

After a bit more grunting and griping, the two boys finally set the sofa down in the middle of the roof, listening to the tiny gravel crunch under their feet.

“Just give me a second,” Remus huffed. He collapsed onto the sofa and dropped his head back while slinging an arm over his eyes, gritting his teeth to stave off the pain. A moment later he felt a gentle kick at the sole of his trainer before the sofa dipped and he lifted his arm back to find Sirius next to him, staring up at the sky.

“You see that star, the really bright one?” He pointed up, and Remus squinted before nodding. The star seemed to twinkle with a dozen different colours, blinking like it was watching them back. “The Egyptians associated that star with at least a dozen gods,” Sirius continued. “They used it to mark their New Year and built temples and pyramids aligned to its rising and falling. They call it the Morning Star, because you can see it best at dawn. Wanna guess its other

name?"

Remus frowned. "Something Egyptian?"

"No," Sirius laughed, "Sirius. I'm named after that star."

Remus squinted more, though he didn't have to. The star was brighter than anything else for miles. Not even the busy city lights of London would've been able to drown it out. "Suddenly the insufferable god-complex makes much more sense," he said.

"I'll push you off the roof," Sirius quipped.

"I'll take you with me."

Chuckling, Sirius readjusted himself on the sofa and propped his feet up on McGonagall's matching ottoman. As he did his hand just barely brushed Remus' pinky, but Sirius didn't seem to notice. "Everyone in my family's named after some star or whatever. Just another stupid tradition to rope us in. Reg's got two stars actually, and Andy's got an entire galaxy out there."

"Sounds like you've been chipped then. I mean, only *one* star? That's chump change."

Sirius glanced over sharply, smiling. "Rich coming from a guy whose name is essentially 'Wolf Wolf'."

"Dickhead," Remus chuckled, looking down at his hands. When he glanced back up again Sirius' eyes were on the sky and he was bobbing his head, quietly humming a tune just for the two of them;

"Hmm… Hmm… 'Star baby… flashy little shiny little two timin' mama singin'… Star baby—shiny little flashy little lovin' machine…' " Pressing his chin to his shoulder, Sirius smiled to himself. "That's the only bit I know, but I think The Who got it right with that one."

Remus punched him lightly in the shoulder. "That's The *Guess* Who, you numpty. Thought you were supposed to be a musician."

"Ow, Moony!" Sirius moaned, half-laughing. "I was only kidding."

"Then that bruise is your own fault." Remus stood up and flexed his sides gingerly. "C'mon, I'm tired and this mess was your idea, so see it through."

"Ooh—yes, sir."

Sirius popped up from the sofa and together they crossed back to the stairs, taking them two at a time until they'd made it back into the hall. It was still quiet, but by the time they'd made it back to the office they could hear Peter's familiar whining.

"You nob, we weren't supposed to break anything!"

Stepping inside, Remus immediately spotted the deer in the headlights on the other side of the office—or more accurately, he saw James clutching the stag's head that should've been hanging over McGonagall's desk, while Peter shone an accusatory torch on him.

"Oops," James said, holding the deer in one hand and the plaque it normally hung on in the other.

"You two destroying personal property now?" Sirius called, scampering over to the desk to join him.

"It's hollow inside!" Squinting in the light of Peter's torch, James peered down into the stag's head before tipping it back and dropping it down over his shoulders like a Halloween mask. It looked ridiculous —the body of a boy with a full snout and antlers to boot—which meant everyone was laughing instantly, even Remus.

"It suits you, Pot," Sirius said, reaching up to pet James' furry nose; "Snug fit?"

"Yeah," James said, voice muffled by the mask as he swung his head back a bit and nearly took out a row of books on the shelf behind him. "Bloody stinks in here too."

"What does it smell like?" Peter asked.

"Like plastic and death."

Sirius grabbed hold of one of the antlers. "I wanna try."

"Hold on, I'm not done yet. Anyone got a camera?"

Shaking his head hopelessly, Remus glanced about the room. So far they'd managed to move the sofa, its matching ottoman, two side tables, a floor lamp, several random bits and baubles, and even the fireguard screen from in front of the fireplace. They didn't have much hope in hell of moving the desk, he figured, but at least when the Headmistress returned to her office the next morning she'd definitely notice something was off.

While the others continued to amuse themselves by testing how high James could reach with his antlers (he knocked several books off of the bookshelves doing this, but Sirius seemed to have just as much fun catching them as they fell), Remus turned back to the fireplace. For the most part all of the furniture that could be moved by them alone was already up there, and he didn't fancy messing with the student records and shelves of paperwork—that would just be making a mess no one would be laughing at. A few more bits and bobs though, now that couldn't hurt.

Using an empty magazine rack, Remus piled several more things into his arms before remembering the cat statues—or rather, the *statue.* When he went to retrieve them he found only one left; the noble, grey tabby. Scooping it up, he tucked it into the crook of his arm before turning to the door. He'd only just gotten it open when he looked up to the wall shelf hanging above it and nearly dropped everything he was carrying as he gasped in alarm.

The second scraggly little statue was there, resting on the top of the shelf like a little spy and staring down at them with those glowing eyes.

Remus turned, his heart still hammering in his chest. "Who left the—"

"Watch the antlers, Potter!" Sirius cried, moving around the desk as James followed him, arms outstretched as he stumbled along blind. In an attempt to steer clear of him, Sirius crashed into Peter, who went down with a great *'omph',* letting his torch skitter across the floor and momentarily blind Remus as it spun to a stop in his direction.

"Bunch of toffs," Remus mumbled, turning his face away as yellow spots filled his vision. He reached for the statue, thinking it was best to take the pair together. Only, he hadn't expected it to reach back.

Quick as lightning, the cat extended a single paw and swatted at him, hissing as it left three long claw marks across the back of his hand. The noise of surprise that left Remus' mouth was more akin to a dying goat than a sixteen year-old boy. He leapt back from the door, nearly dropping everything he was holding while two boys and a stag turned toward him in shock.

"It's alive!" He exclaimed. "I-I mean—it's a cat!"

Retrieving his torch, Peter raised the light to where Remus was pointing and paled instantly.

“Oh shit—it’s Mrs. Norris,” he squeaked as the feline licked her lips.

“Who?” Remus demanded.

“Filch’s cat!”

“And just what kind of freaky cat doesn’t fucking move when you’re staring right at it?”

Suddenly Remus heard a voice echo up from the stairs through the open door ahead of him.

“*Mrs. Norris, are you up there my sweet?”*

“No!” Sirius called in a high-pitched voice, making every one of his friends—including James the deer—turn toward him in horror. At least he had the gall to look regretful.

"Oops."

“WHO’S UP THERE?”

“Time to go!” Peter yelped, rushing past all of them and out into the hall with his torch in hand. Desperately, Remus looked around for a place to get rid of the statue and the magazine rack before Sirius appeared at his side, taking half the load from him and tossing it aside with a loud clatter.

“You heard Pete,” He said. “Potter, come on!”

“It’s stuck!” James said, scrambling to get hold of the bottom of the deer head.

“What do you mean it’s stuck—stop playing around.”

“I’m not!”

As Sirius grabbed hold of the antlers to yank the taxidermy head off his best friend’s real one, Remus went to the door. He could hear the heavy thumps of Filch’s footsteps coming up the stairs while he continued wailing at them.

“Blimey, it really is on there,” Sirius grunted, yanking with both hands now.

“Ow! You’re going to break my glasses. *And my face!”*

“WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE BUGGERS?” Filch roared, even closer now. Any second he’d emerge on the top of the landing and cut off their only escape.

Remus turned back around and grabbed Sirius by the shirt collar, yanking him toward the door. “Just bring it.”

“What?” James shouted, but it was already decided. Guided by Sirius’ hold on his antlers, he was dragged from the office and forced to keep up as they booked it down the hall, passing the staircase and Filch, whose torch light could already be seen flickering up from the floor below.

“I HEAR YOU! STUDENTS OUT OF BED! STUDENTS IN THE CORRIDOR!”

They made it to the stairs, where Peter was waiting and appeared about ready to faint. After shoving James through, Remus slammed the door behind them and emerged on the roof next to his friends.

“Now where do we go?” Peter moaned helplessly.

“The fire escape.” Sirius took off across the roof, still dragging James behind him and Remus and Peter followed. Avoiding the scattered bits of furniture, they swung themselves onto the rusty bit of metal, taking the stairs two at a time and nearly toppling onto each other in their urgency to escape. As if to announce their presence, James’ antlers ratted off every bar on the way down;

Ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-d-d-d-d-ding!

“This is horrible!” He screeched. Following from behind, Remus briefly wondered if he was crying under his furry helmet.

“Shh—! Shut up, James!” Peter said.

”I can’t!”

*“*Fucking—*STOP!”* Sirius, the leader, slammed to a halt just at the bottom of the metal staircase, and Remus nearly took an antler to the eye as he crashed into James’ back.

“Why are we stopping?” Peter barked.

“Ran out of stairs.”

Looking over the edge, Remus saw that Sirius was right—the fire

escape ended several feet off the ground over a small pit of gravel, probably to deter students from doing exactly what they'd caught themselves in.

"Some bloody emergency exit," Peter moaned.

"WHEN I CATCH YOU I'M GONNA HANG YEH FROM THE CHURCH STEEPLE BY YER FRONT TEETH!"

They all looked up, apart from James, who was hooked on a hole in the grate of the stairs overhead. Remus almost thought he could see the light of Filch's torch flitting around the sky. He didn't think the headmistress would let Filch make good on his threats, but they'd also just finished moving most of her belongings up onto the roof.

"Are you gonna jump or not?" Remus hissed.

Sirius turned around to gape, before a tenuous smile split across his face. "Did I hear you right, Lupin? You said we should jump?"

"Unless you'd rather I push you."

Unfazed, Sirius shrugged. "All for one and one for all, right?" He said, before launching himself off the bottom of the stairs. James thrust his arm out at the space his best friend had been occupying just a moment before, waving it around like he could catch him.

"Sirius?!"

"Bend your knees, Potter," Remus said, before giving his friend a shove from behind. With a strangled wail, James toppled over the edge and before he could let himself look too long at the ground, Remus jumped after him. Surprisingly Peter wasted no time with his own free-fall and all four boys found themselves in one bruised pile at the bottom, half lying on each other as they wiggled to get free.

"Bloody hell, I think Prongs here got me," Sirius moaned, holding his side as he rolled away from them and staggered to his feet. James did the same, though now missing an antler thanks to their crash-landing. The groan that came out of Remus as he flipped himself over and got to his feet would've made the rest of them wince had they not been nursing injuries of their own. At least the gravel had been round little stones and not like the nasty, gritty stuff that was on top of the roof.

A loud clanging came from above—Filch was banging his torch on the bars at the top of the fire escape.

“I HEAR YOU! YOU STAY RIGHT THERE!”

“Not bloody likely,” Peter chirped, scrambling in the stones and taking off across the lawn at a full sprint.

“You see that little bugger run?” Sirius said, still rubbing his ribs.

“No,” James said. “I can’t see ANYTHING!”

“Shut up!” Remus lashed, gathering hold of the remaining antler and giving a sharp tug. The head stuck firm, earning him only another grunt from James.

“WHERE ARE YOU?”

Remus released the antler, and tsked. “Guess you’re running home like that, Potter.”

”WHAT?! NO WAY!”

“Oh-ho-ho! Fuck yeah!” Sirius cried, shoving James forward and breaking into a run. Despite his dire straits, James dashed on and soon all three of them were taking off across the campus after Peter, Filch’s torch shining after them like a flimsy spotlight.

“GET BACK HERE!”

“Yes, yes, yes! Suck it Filch!” Sirius screamed as they ran, as though it had all been part of his plan all along. They took turns pushing the man-deer between them to make sure he stayed running in a straight line rather than veering off into a tree. It didn’t take long to catch up to Peter and eventually they all made it back to House Lane, collapsing onto the front lawn of their dorm as they wheezed and howled with laughter.

Well, all of them apart from James.

He was too busy crying under his new hat.

Chapter End Notes

A torch is a flashlight.
'Dexys' are slang for the stimulant drug, dextroamphetamine.

This chapter was suuuuper fun to write. One of my favourite to date, hope you enjoyed! And yes, The Who and The Guess Who are two different bands ;)

Chapter 33: Sheila

Chapter Summary

> Remus' connection to Hawkings hits closer to home than he thought.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eleanor Rigby,
Picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been,
Lives in a dream;
Waits at the window,
Wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door,
Who is it for?

All the lonely people,
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people,
Where do they all belong?

- "Eleanor Rigby" The Beatles, 1966

Monday 20th September 1976

“So… what do you think?”

Remus lowered the notebook, eyebrows raised. “Mm? Oh, yeah. It’s… good. This part, ‘moon, star, acoustic guitar’, yeah that bit’s good…”

“It’s shit.”

“What? No. No… Well… Maybe… But not all of it.”

Huffing, Sirius gave a grumpy strum on his guitar, legs tucked up beneath him on his bed. Remus sat across from him on the floor, back pressed against the edge of James’ bed as he flipped through the notebook Sirius had kept with him over the summer. Like his letters

promised, he'd been trying to write, but most of the songs ended up being a reflection of how being at home made him feel. Either horrendously gritty or intensely dark, with many that involved setting fire to the house or giving his mother a rather (gruesome) piece of his mind. Not all of it was terrible though—several of the lyrics had promise, and Remus quite liked the lines that went;

Loving you is how it feels to be done dirty,
Without you I was clear and now all I've got are all these worries;
I never asked for none of it,
But you were always generous,
'Cause love and kind and worry are just so fucking effortless.

It felt like real rock and roll, or in the very least, melodramatic, which was Sirius' favourite brand of rebellious sentiment anyway.

"Have you shown James?" He asked, turning the next page, which was mostly just a scribble of crossed out lines than anything else.

"No. I wanted you to be the first."

"O-oh?" Remus' licked his lips and forced a chuckle. "Why? 'Cause it doesn't matter what I think?"

Sirius looked up from his guitar very quickly. "No. 'Cause you're harder to impress. James is too nice. Even if it was all shit he'd never say so—but you would. Makes me want to work harder, I think."

"Oh…" Remus suddenly found the scribbled page very interesting, staring down at it to avoid Sirius' intense gaze.

"Besides, can't hardly ever get the dumb idiot to slow down nowadays. Did you know that before you got back to the room, he blasted out of here so fast he didn't even give himself time to dry his hair. Looked like he got hit by lightning."

"So not much different from usual then?"

Sirius tossed his head back and forth a bit in cheeky consideration. "No, not by much. Gotta love him, that Prongs."

"That's your worst nickname yet," Remus said, thinking back to the weekend before, when they'd nearly had to cut the stag head in half with a pair of kitchen scissors just to get James out of it. Now it hung on a peg inside their bathroom, looking distinctly worse for wear and now missing not only an antler as but one of its eyes as well. Despite

that fact, Remus still felt like he was being watched every time he took a shower or did his business, but Sirius insisted on keeping the ugly thing as some sort of horrendous trophy.

“Does this mean you’re coming around to ‘Moony’?” Sirius asked.

“No—never. Not unless you want to be ‘Starman’.”

“Well—”

“Shut up, forget I said anything.”

“You’re no fun,” Sirius grumbled lightheartedly, before mercifully returning to his guitar. Remus smiled to himself and flipped to another page in the notebook. It only had four lines, like a fleeting thought Sirius put down on the page and immediately forgot about.

Couldn’t ring you,
Couldn’t swing you;
There’s too much distance,
Haven’t found that path of least resistance.

Because he was selfish, Remus immediately thought of Tomny. It had been nearly a month of school and there hadn’t been any attempts on making good of that promise they’d made to one another over the summer. They’d talked once while Remus was recuperating at home, but even then Tomny’s answers had been short and tame in comparison to the boy he’d used to be. Not Tonya though; halfway through the call she’d stolen the receiver from her boyfriend and regaled Remus of her everyday—which was pretty much the same from dawn till dusk, and yet somehow she still managed to make it sound fascinating.

There had been no word since then though, despite the fact that Remus double-checked that they had the dorm’s direct phone number and made Tomny swear to call before letting him hang up. Of course it made more sense for Remus to phone him first, but that felt a lot like plunging off the deep end, and he was half sure he’d rather take another spill off Castle Hall’s fire escape. Plus he felt indignant; Tomny was a big boy—he needed to make good on his own promises.

Sort of like him.

Now, he’d never actually promised to write over the summer, or even pick up the phone when James or Peter called, but he did commit to other things; like taking Sirius around London one day, and playing

Hope's records. And since he'd done neither…

There's too much distance,
Haven't found that path of least resistance…

"Sorry I never wrote," Remus mumbled.

Sirius' fingers stopped on the Rickenbacker's strings; he'd been practising an Elton John song, one Remus only recognised thanks to Tonya's affinity with the colourful musician.

"What do you mean you're sorry?"

"I'm sorry I never wrote back," Remus said, more firmly. "You wrote a lot—clearly, but I—"

"But you did write, Moony."

Remus looked up. "Huh?"

Reaching for his guitar case, Sirius began sorting rifling through the small pocket on the lid. From between the countless music sheets he pulled out a small envelope, covered in with postage stamps and yellow expedited stickers. Sirius opened the envelope and pulled out the letter, unfolding it and clearing his throat.

" 'To Sirius, sorry I haven't written much, summer's been buzzy'—'buzzy' Moony, really?"

"Don't!" Remus surged forward and tried to snatch the letter away, but Sirius just rolled backward on his bed, leaving the guitar abandoned between them like the Berlin Wall.

"Don't be rude, Moony, I'm not done reading. Now where was I? Ah yes. 'Sorry to hear about Reg's dog—that is if you've already bumped it off. The garden is a good bet though, as long as—'"

"Give me that!" Remus climbed up onto the bed after him but Sirius was too quick, slipping off its end to bounce across the room.

"It's not even embarrassing!" He insisted. "And look you made me lose my place again! Let's see… 'you write too much, Black.' That's funny coming from someone who can devour 'War and Peace' in a week."

"I've never even read 'War and Peace'! No one has!"

Sirius ignored him. " 'You're lucky you haven't seen any of the

‘Pops’—it’s all disco nowadays. I swear, if I have to hear ‘Shake Your Booty’ one more time I’ll put my foot through the telly’.”

Scrambling up from the bed, Remus chased after Sirius, who soared across Peter’s, keeping enough distance between them that he could still wave the letter back and forth like a dog with a bone.

“Why did you keep that in your bloody guitar case?” Remus demanded, reaching over the bed to swat at him. Sirius danced just out of reach, grinning like a hyena.

“To read it to you of course! Sort of thought I’d get the chance to do it with the other lads around, but I guess an audience of one is better than an audience of none—*ooh,* think that could be a lyric, Moony?”

“Sod off!” Remus threw himself over the bed for one last go, making his chest twinge in pain, but Sirius only cackled and ran around it, diving across James’ bed and upsetting the pile of laundry James had obviously neglected to put away before racing out of the room.

Hauling himself to his feet, Remus picked up one of the pillows he’d knocked off Peter’s bed and tossed it after Sirius with more force than was probably necessary—unfortunately he’d never had the best aim. The pillow sailed across the bedroom and slammed into the front of the stereo, making it clatter backward on the hutch. Both of the boys froze, almost afraid it would topple sideways from the collision, but by some miracle the hi-fi remained upright, and a moment later a faint click sounded as the tape inside the stereo came to life with a faint whirring.

‘Well, Annie’s pretty neat,
She always eats her meat;
And Joe is awful strong,
Bet your life he’s puttin’ us on;
Oh lordy!
Oh lordy!’

Remus couldn’t help himself. He sank down on top of Peter’s bed, pressing his face into the covers to smother his laughter and the sweet relief that came along with it.

The letter had made it to Sirius, all his worrying and he hadn’t even mentioned it until now, the tosser. But Sirius *had* gotten the letter—and he’d kept it. He’d kept it just to torture Remus later—he’d bet on it. He’d hoped for it.

When Remus had finally laughed enough that he was able to raise his head up again, he found Sirius there, leaning over from the bed's other side, the corners of his eyes pinched with a smile.

'I saw you watchin' from the stairs,
You're everyone that ever cared;
Oh, lordy!
Oh, lordy!'

"You could take it back," Sirius said, holding out the letter, "but I bet you won't."

Remus gave him a long look, grinding his teeth together behind a haggard smile.

This bloody tosser.

Using the back of his hand, he smacked the letter away and pushed off the ground. "Fine, keep it then."

Smugly, Sirius stepped back and neatly folded the letter back up, crossing back to his side of the room and carefully tucking it into its envelope. Remus watched, suddenly struck by how alike the back of Sirius' head was to Tonya's. They could've passed as siblings. Both of them shared the same black waves and pouty lips—they were pretty and they knew it.

Woah—uh-uh, you miserable toff.

Remus let out a deep breath and returned to his own bed, throwing himself onto it and staring up at the ceiling. Sirius had already tucked himself back up on his own, the Rickenbacker over his lap, but he let the rest of the song play.

'John, I'm only dancing,
She turns me on;
But I'm only dancing,
She turns me on;
But don't get me wrong,
I'm only dancing;
Dancing,
Won't someone touch me?
Touch me…'

"Hey, Moony?"

"Yeah?"

"Reckon you'll ever write any songs of your own? Like for real?"

"Who says I'm not writing them right now?"

"Are you?"

"... No. 'Course not."

There was a short pause. "Well, if you ever did, I'd sing them."

Remus stared up at the roof of his bed. He was thankful Sirius couldn't see his face from there. The smile on his face would've only tripled his ego.

* * *

Friday 24th September 1976

Now that he was no longer waking up so stiff and sore, Remus would've thought that carrying Lily's bag would've been easier, but he was half sure she carried every textbook she owned with her everywhere she went. Either that or she had a secret brick collection she'd neglected to share before passing the satchel over.

"What's the kid's name again?" Remus asked Mary, who was walking on his left while Lily walked on his right. He was somehow carrying her bag as well as his own after the girls had swindled him into holding them when they'd disappeared into the loo and then just never taken them back. Clearly their feminist agenda was just mere performance activism.

"Georgina Irene," Mary sighed. "It's a horrid name."

"So you nicknamed her 'Gigi'?"

"Only because I thought it would piss off *Kara-Ann."*

Mary said her step-mother's name with such visceral repulsion that even Lily made a sour face. Neither of them could blame her though, Remus wasn't sure how he'd react if Lyall came home with a wife only eight years older than he was. Thankfully, his father was a frigid bastard, averse to anything apart from his work and his dogs.

“How was I supposed to know that she was going to love it? God, all summer it was ‘Gigi this’ or ‘Gigi that’. I’m never going on holiday with my family again.”

“New York was nice though?” Lily asked.

“Pete’s been to New York,” Remus said.

“I thought he went to Florida?” Mary shook her head, swinging her umbrella with it and nearly taking out Remus’ eye. “Whatever. The city was wonderful, *très éblouissante,* and the shows were amazing. I could really see myself living there—but the *crying.* I swear, I’m never having children. I told you they didn't bring the nanny along, yeah? So whenever Daddy and that witch went out I got stuck playing babysitter! Pretty sure the kid started throwing up just because she thought it was funny to see me squirm! I never thought I’d say it but I’m glad to be stuck up here in the middle of nowhere. At least I have you guys, and it also puts me I’m far, far away from ‘Kara-Ann’—I told you she insists on being called the full thing? Just ‘Kara’ is *‘completely unacceptable’. ”*

Lily glanced up at Remus like she was used to the spiel already, but there really wasn’t any stopping Mary once she started a rant. Luckily, they had James to do it for them.

“Hey guys,” James said, approaching them from across the pavement after appearing from behind the Galilei Block. He was slightly out of breath like he’d been running and both his dark hair and glasses were speckled with rain. Lily tipped her umbrella out for him to join her as he jogged to a stop in front of them and James smiled thankfully, taking it from her to hold up over the both of them.

“Black not with you?” Remus asked, adjusting Lily’s hefty school bag on his shoulder.

“Nope. Slughorn had to give him detention after he put the dry ice from today’s lesson in a water bottle and left it under Snape’s lab stool until it exploded.”

Lily gave a sharp gasp and James had to swallow an obvious smile. “I didn’t do it,” he insisted. “Made quite the boom though.”

“I knew leaving you three alone in chemistry this year would be a mistake.”

“Does that mean you’re interested in transferring in?”

“No,” Lily said haughtily, “then I’d have to drop psychology. You and Sev are just going to have to learn to get along on your own.”

“Not that this ‘finally talking to one another’ thing isn’t cute and all,” Mary said, “but I’m starving, so could we please go to dinner? Private study just about killed me.”

“You guys go ahead,” Remus said ducking out from under Mary’s umbrella (she never held it high enough to shield him from the rain anyway) and sliding the girls’ bags off his shoulder. “I’ll meet you later. I’ve got to get more strings from Buchanan. I broke one this morning.”

“It’s all the practising you and Sirius have been doing,” James said.

Mary beamed very suddenly. “Oh! Are you two writing your own songs yet? You could always write about—”

“No, we’re not,” Remus cut in mercilessly. At least he wasn’t.

“Well, say hello to Mrs. Buchanan for us,” Lily said, reaching to take her bag back. James intercepted her easily.

“I got it,” he said, taking the book bag and slinging it over his own shoulder. Lily let him, biting her lip and looking like she was fighting a blush.

“See Lily?” Mary said, taking her bag from Remus. “I told you blokes were good for something.” Grinning, she held the bag out to James.

“Cheers, Macdonald,” James sighed, obediently taking the bag. With three bags plus the umbrella he looked a lot like a human pack-animal.

“Good luck, Potter,” Remus saluted, and Mary gave him a cheeky wink as James waved him off dismissively. He didn’t appear at all displeased, though—Remus could see the puckered dimples standing out on his cheeks.

He left his friends outside the science block, turning and setting off across the campus to the Bellchant building. The rain, which had started as a regular autumn drizzle, quickly turned to a full-blown downpour and by the time he made it to the musical arts building he was soaked through to his undershirt. Sticking his head inside the classroom door, Remus found the music room empty, and the lights in Mrs. Buchanan's office off. He would’ve left all together had he not

heard a clatter and a rather colourful string of curses coming from the storage room at the very back.

“Jesus F. Chopin! Ugh.” Another clatter came, louder this time, and then a little more defeated; “Shit..."

Stepping inside, Remus approached the storage room, its door slightly ajar, and knocked on the outside. “Er… Mrs. Buchanan?”

Sheila appeared in the doorway, pushing the door open so quickly it nearly sent him toppling back against the side of the orchestra risers.

“Remus! Oh, I’m sorry!” Mrs. Buchanan rushed up to him wearing a blue dress covered in white flowers and a pair of red wellies. She had her rain hat on too but was missing a jacket, making her look quite odd indoors. "You just spooked me a bit. Here, let me help you."

"It's okay." Righting himself before Sheila could apologise too much or touch him, Remus straightened up and took a peer into the storage room to find it a mess of toppled boxes and books. His teacher seemed to pick up on the awkwardness and quickly shut the door behind herself with a short chuckle.

“Oh, ignore that, I was just trying to find something but now I’m running late. I’ll have to save tidy-up for Monday.”

Remus glanced at the clock on the music room wall. “You’re leaving this weekend?”

“Yes,” Sheila sighed, giving a small smile, “my train leaves soon, but I should make it to the station in time as long as the rain hasn’t completely ruined the roads.”

She passed him by in a hurry, crossing the classroom to her podium where a large briefcase sat, open and stuffed to the brim with books and other class marking. Her raincoat was draped on a stool behind it, just as bright a red as her boots. Some of her hair had come untucked from beneath her hat in little muddy-brown wisps that fell across her face. It should’ve made her look as tired and haggard as any other teacher at the end of a long school week, but Sheila remained as bright as a summer morning. She always looked like that; it was her eyes, which would’ve been a completely unremarkable, ordinary shade of brown if they weren’t always smiling so kindly at you.

“Is there something I can do for you, Remus?”

Snapping out of his short daze, Remus crossed the classroom after her, taking his time to skip across the risers as he'd gotten used to doing over the past year. "I broke a string again," he said reluctantly, "I know it's the second since term started but—"

"Nonsense, you just have to work on not tightening them so much," Sheila dismissed. "But it also means you've been practising, good boy." She hummed a bit before abandoning the podium and walking to the far wall of the room, where she unlocked one of her cabinets and began rifling around for the right strings for the Fender.

Remus waited patiently, grinding the tip of his trainer into the bottom riser before realising it left a smudge of mud behind. He stopped immediately, not wanting to muck-up Sheila's precious space. In it nearly every day, though usually tired through the morning, Remus had come to appreciate the music room. Like an eternal paradox, it was constantly calm and hectic all at once. You were almost always guaranteed to hear some sort of moaning, banging, or squeaking from some sort of instrument, but no matter who was making the noise or acting out, Sheila was as kind as she was indulgent. Remus could remember thinking on their first day of forms that year, that not a single other person in the entire British Isles would've been able to handle the class. Sheila was the only one who was both patient and firm enough to control the group of snobby trouble-makers. He'd heard the worst of the class—Barty Crouch included—say terrible things to her during a fit or a foul mood, but no matter how badly they deserved a good beating for it, Sheila was never cross. It was always 'one more chance' with the humble music teacher, and when that chance was up, she loved her students enough to give them another. It was almost fascinating.

"There," Sheila said, closing the cupboard doors. She returned to his side and held out the package of strings. "Here you go. Do you need any help tuning it?"

"No, I'm okay. Thanks," Remus said, taking them and tucking them into his bag.

Sheila watched him, before clicking her tongue. "Remus, you're soaked to the bone, where's your raincoat?"

"Oh. Forgot it at the dorm."

"You're going to catch a cold."

"I run warm," he said, and though it was true, he could still feel the

autumn chill licking up his spine.

Sheila chuckled before turning back to her podium, sliding her keys onto her wrist with a springy bracelet cord. “I think we’ve gotten rather lucky this year, actually. When I was a student here—about a million years ago—it used to rain all through autumn, and then you had to deal with the snow—and then the rain *and* snow. It was nearly unbearable.”

Remus was stunned. “You went to school here?”

“I did,” Sheila mused, “and somehow Professor McGonagall still managed to convince me to come back. She was my history professor back then, you know.”

“My mum went to Hawkings.” The words came out automatically, like they sometimes did when he was least expecting to say anything at all. How many months had it been since he’d thought about it? Not enough. Not when he would still catch himself lying awake at night in their dorm, wondering if she’d belonged to Rowena House like Lily and the girls, or if she’d sat in the same classroom—the same seat. The Bellchant building was over a hundred years old, it had acoustics from the turn of the century; she could have stood right there where he was standing, she could have—

Remus’ face snapped to the piano. It couldn’t be the same, but watching Sirius sit at the bench, practically drooling over the keys but never playing, it was like trying to remember his mother’s piano. So close and yet not there.

Feeling suddenly guilty though he had no reasonable reason to be, he looked back to his teacher. His jaw was clenched so tightly that he could feel the ache in his nose, which had healed weeks ago. The look Sheila was giving him was musing, not her normal, big smile, but instead something shyer.

“I know,” she said. “I knew your mum actually. Hope Lupin. ‘Course, she was Hope Howell when I knew her.”

Remus felt his mouth go dry. “You did?”

“Mhm. We were the same year even. Her family was from Cardiff, right, but both of us went to Hawkings for our entire childhood. We grew up here. Neither of us were very close with our parents because of it, but it was nice to find family in each other.”

Remus reached up and wrapped his fingers around the strap of his book bag, strangling it in his grasp. It felt like he was waiting for Sheila to burst out laughing like, *'psyche! You should've seen your face!'* but she kept smiling, her eyebrows more upturned than usual.

"Do you know a lot of students' parents?" He blurted out.

Sheila nodded a bit. "Some. It's not uncommon for alumni to send their children to a school like Hawkings. This college is known for a lot of things you know, not just being damp and cold." Sheila tried a more comforting smile, but Remus was too rattled to return it. It was ironic really, that he had to travel the length of the entire country to learn more about his mother from strangers than he had in his own home.

"I'm sorry if I've upset you, Remus," Sheila said, reading his silence expertly. "I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. I thought it might be a hard thing to talk about, given that Hope's passed on."

"So you know she died then…" Remus forced himself to swallow.

It was Sheila's turn to be quiet. Finally, she nodded. "Yes. I recieved an invitation to her funeral, but... I couldn't attend due to some personal issues. I'm sorry, Remus."

You were invited to the funeral?

The idea socked him in the gut, but was almost laughable. Before coming to Hawkings he'd never even heard of a 'Sheila Buchanan'—how many strangers had attended his mother's wake? Lyall hadn't let him go—claimed he was too young for such things. Too distraught. Bad for public image.

Sheila had been invited though. This school friend Hope had never so much as mentioned. Why? Why her?

How come you got to know her and I didn't?

He needed a cigarette. Or to punch something. Probably both. He could hit the drums at the back of the room, or that horrible gong Barty was always having a go at in morning forms, but that wouldn't do anything. His hand would just bounce back. They'd just make noise. He wanted to break something.

A teacher for almost as many years as Remus had been alive, Sheila read his distress like an open book, and seemed to opt for a distraction

rather than de-escalation.

“Remus,” she said, glancing quickly down at her watch, “will you come with me for a moment?”

Forcing himself to release his strangled bag strap, he managed a stiff nod. Sheila wasted no time. Snapping her briefcase shut and gathering her coat over one arm, she ushered him out of the music room and into the hall.

“It’s just down here,” she said reassuringly, leading him past music rooms number #3 and #4. Like the rest of the Bellchant building, the hallway’s walls were lined with photographs. Some were portraits of famous composers—Bach, Beethoven, Debussy, Schubert, even Sheila’s favourite, Chopin—and other frames contained class photos, each labelled with a year and filled with a collage of previous music students who’d come and gone from the school.

Remus realised what was happening before his and Sheila’s shoes stopped squeaking on the tile.

“This is the one,” his teacher said, looking up at a frame at least three feet across. The golden plaque beneath it read, *Mr. Derry’s year 13 Music Class, 1954-55.*

The photos encased behind the glass were scattered about one another, all elegantly framed into little boxes. Students grinned back at him around the lips of trumpets, slammed mallets down onto huge bass drums, concentrated as they were caught mid-song on their violins. Most of the photos were without colour, but none were faded. The kids could’ve been practising their instruments the day before, for all he knew. Even the uniforms remained much the same, only the faces were different.

One was familiar though.

A Sheila, twenty years younger than the one he was standing next to now, was bent over mid-laugh with a violin tucked under her chin and her bow poking into the shoulder of the girl next to her. The crest on the breast-pocket of her uniform was for Bronte House, and she had an excessively large hair bow pressed to the top of her head. Remus would’ve bet all his cigarettes for the year that the colour of the bow was similar to the bright, showy patterns Sheila wore as a teacher.

“That’s you,” he said, pointing up at a photo in the top-most corner of the frame.

“Mhm. That’s me the year I graduated from Hawkings,” she hummed. “And just there, that’s your mum.”

Remus clamped down on his bottom lip with his teeth. Sheila reached up with her long fingers and touched the bottom of her photo, right below where the girl sat in front of a grand piano. The instrument was mostly out of frame, but she was turned around on its bench, caught mid-laugh just like Sheila’s younger self. Her blonde hair was pinned back from her face in pretty curls and her fingers hovered over the keys, just barely brushing them.

The photo could’ve been staged; they looked that happy.

The last time Remus had seen Hope’s blonde hair, it had been spread out over the pillow of her hospital bed. Her blue eyes—grey and squinty with humour in the photograph—were tired, with heavy purple bags painted underneath like bruises. She’d been quiet, haunted almost, and when she did speak she hadn’t laughed, she’d cried.

He hadn’t, but that was probably just because of the chaos that was thundering through his mind. A part of him would never forgive her for what she'd told him that day, for the pressure she'd left on his shoulders, but then she'd gone and died and the anger had snowballed anyway. He sometimes wished he'd asked her more questions, but at the time they'd scared him. She'd scared him.

“Remus, are you alright?” Sheila asked softly.

“Yeah. Yeah I’m—” In realisation, Remus slapped a hand to his cheek and his fingers came away wet. Ashamed, he ran his still-damp shirt sleeve over his entire face and sucked in a sniffle, coughing to clear his throat. “I’m fine,” he said forcefully, his voice cracking slightly. “Thanks, Sh—Mrs. Buchanan. I think I’m gonna go now. Sorry if I kept you from your train.”

Sheila cupped both hands in front of her over her briefcase handle. “Don’t be sorry, love. I’m the one that’s always keeping you, after all.”

Remus nodded and turned away.

“Oh and Remus,” Sheila called, making him turn back so sharply he made her jump. “If you ever need anything,” she said, deflating in the shoulders as the surprise left her, “I’m always here to talk. I know I’m gone on some weekends, but if you ever need me, you can phone from the office. The secretarial ladies will have my number.”

He stared at her openly. “You want me to call you, while you’re not at school?”

“Only if you want to talk,” she said simply, with another warm smile. "You... well, I only mean to stay that if you ever want to talk more about Hope, I'd be glad to answer any questions I can. I know she loved you very much."

Almost bitterly, Remus touched his tongue to the inside of his cheek. “Okay. Goodbye, Mrs. Buchanan. Be… be safe on the road.”

“Goodbye, Remus. I hope you have a good weekend.”

Turning back around, he left her there in front of the photographs, the deafening echoes of his squeaking trainers chasing him all the way out of the building. The rain had stopped now, of course, and the sun was just peeking through the clouds above him. Remus stared up at it dejectedly, a hand over his eyes. He hated the rain, always had, but at least if it were still raining then there might’ve been a chance that someone else at Hawkings would’ve felt as miserable as he did.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really just posting chapters whenever I feel like it now. Sorry if that's a nuisance, lol.

The Bowie song is "John, I'm Only Dancing", 1972.

Chapter 34: Courante

Chapter Summary

> Remus gets a phone call, and then runs into someone unexpected. The boys plan a devilish prank.

Chapter Notes

> CW: References to drugs/distribution of illegal substances. Blood/gore trigger, nothing violent, just a gag. Also references to cut wrists in concurrence with the blood trigger. This is toward the very end of the chapter, so please beware if you're sensitive to it <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Surprise, surprise,
The boys are home;
My guardian angel,
Run down my telephone;
The heats on, Mister,
Can't you hear them scream,
What ever happened to the teenage dream?

- "Teenage Dream" T. Rex, 1974

Thursday 21st October 1976

"Oi, Lupin! Phone call!"

The muffled shout came with a sharp banging on their dorm room door. Hearing it, Remus launched himself up out of bed so fast he nearly tripped on the stack of books Sirius had pulled out of his hutch earlier that morning. He hadn't even taken a book, just left a mess. Remus was starting to suspect he did it on purpose just so he could watch him put them all back into order again.

"Moony, bring back tea!" Peter called as he threw the door open.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he might've slammed right into Sirius, who was making his way up to their room with a large duffle bag slung over one shoulder, had the other boy not pressed himself against

the railing as Remus sailed past.

“Where’re you going in such a rush?” Sirius demanded.

“Be right back!” He called, nearly slipping on the third-floor landing as he went.

Only one of the three Godric House phones was free, but he’d gotten lucky and it was the last phone on the left, meaning that he could pull the cord taunt and swing into the other hallway for a bit of privacy.

Remus slowed as he approached the phone and readjusted his school jumper, eyeing the receiver that had been left off its hook for him to retrieve. His heart was slamming against his rib cage and his palms were clammy, but it felt stupid to hesitate, so he forced himself to scoop up the phone as casually as he could and leaned back against the wall, tucking himself around the corner so no one could watch him slowly raise the speaker to his ear.

“Hello…?”

Please God, just this once—don’t let it be Giles.

“Hey, Lu.”

Remus let out a sigh like he’d just run a marathon but his vigour returned instantly along with a sudden surge of anger. “ ‘Hey, Lu’? Two months and all I get is ‘hey, Lu’?”

“Helloooo, Remus, my *darling.* That better?” Tomny said from the other end, making Remus scrunch his nose up with an embarrassed smile.

“Hey, Tom,” he sighed.

“Jesus, if I’d have known you’d get so up in arms I would’ve waited another month.”

“Sod off. You already took your damn time. It’s almost Halloween—my friends are already concocting some sort of plan for it.”

“Ooh, I’m sorry, am I interrupting then? Were you busy making up your costumes? I bet you’d look really good as a little cat or something.”

“Yeah, about as good as you’d look in a fairy dress.”

“I missed your snappy attitude, Lu.” His voice came out crackly as the connection faded every now and then, but it was about as good as it got so far up in the Highlands.

“Say, who was it who picked up the phone earlier?” Tomny asked.

“What? Oh, well, the phones here are sorta communal. One rings and whoever’s closest picks up and shouts out a name.”

“Like prison?”

“Yeah, like prison.”

“Jesus Christ. Maybe we do need to come save you.”

“How’s home?” Remus asked, anxiously thumbing the phone’s cord.

“Wet,” Tomny said, “but it’s not as hot anymore, thank fuck. The humidity’s killer though.”

“It’s pretty gross up here too,” Remus answered.

“I’ll bet.”

There was a bit of silence between them, just enough for Remus to wonder why they were talking about the bloody weather. They never talked about the weather, not unless—

“You tweaking, Tomny?”

“Aw shit, Lu. Can’t even look me in the eye and ya still manage to see right through me.” There was a short laugh that ended with a muffled cough, before Tomny got back on the line. “Tonya’s trying this ‘holistic healing’ thing. Between you and me it’s all bullshit, but she got rid of everythin', even the hash. Told her it didn’t make a lick ‘a sense, while doing what—well, what we do, but she won’t have it. Lee’s almost been banished from the flat twice.”

“So what, you runnin’ drugs now, Tom?” Remus asked, though he already knew the answer. He made sure to lower his voice though, just in case. “It’s drugs now?”

“Ha, it’s always been drugs, Lu. You’re smart enough to know that. S’just where you get ‘em that’s changed.”

Remus licked his lips. Over the summer he’d watched Tonya do upwards of three or four lines a day, really hardcore stuff, and even

when he'd wondered where Tomny had gotten the blow and how much his girlfriend's habit was costing him, he'd never asked. Back then it was just about keeping his head down and shutting up so Tomny wouldn't throw him out. Guess that didn't matter much anymore though. He wasn't sure quitting cold turkey was the best approach, but at least it was something.

"How is Tonya?"

"She's good—napping. I can wake her up if you'd—"

"No! I mean, I want to talk to her, yeah, but you first."

There was a bit of silence from Tomny's end, and Remus wished he really could see him, but Tomny had never been much of a chatterbox while strung-out anyway. "Okay… What do you want to talk about? You wanna tell me about school? You gettin' good grades?"

"God, you sound like Giles," Remus scoffed.

"Who's Giles?"

"Oh… dad's chauffeur."

"You mean the big bloke who's always coming to get you from Aldgate?"

"You knew he was coming to get me?"

"Sorry to break it to you, but you're not as sneaky as you think you are. You're just lucky Lee and the others are decently thick in the head."

Remus laughed. There obviously wasn't much point in lying anymore, since Tomny clearly knew everything. "Yeah well, that's him."

"He act like your mum, then? Always pestering?"

"Fuck, yes," Remus laughed, "I don't think my father would remember I existed if Giles weren't around to remind him."

"Want me to rough the old guy up? I'll meet him in Aldgate."

"Nah," Remus smiled, "Giles is good. Better than most."

"Better than us? Then your boys?"

“No. Impossible. No one better.”

Tomny gave a satisfied, “Mhm,” and Remus heard a faint voice in the background. “I should call you more often, Lu,” he said, “you make me sound so good.”

“I’m not your stooge,” Remus said.

“No, you’re not, that’s—” there was a short clatter; “Bloody hell woman, would you give me a second?”

Straightening up against the wall, Remus pressed both hands to the receiver as Tomny tussled for the phone on his end.

“Fine, fine! Lupin—the old bird wants a turn. I’ll talk to you soon, yeah?”

“Yeah!” Remus called. “Yeah, anytime, Tom.”

“It’s my turn,” a voice grumbled, and a moment later Tonya was shouting down the other end of the line; “REMUS, MY SWEET LOVE! HOW ARE YOU?”

He flinched away from the receiver and faintly heard Tomny say something crude about phone etiquette in the background.

“I know how to use the phone, Tomny. You’re the caveman,” Tonya chided. “Sorry love, just got excited. I’ve been trying to convince Tomny to call all this time, you know, but I think he just got a little nervous. Dunno why—it’s only ‘little ol’ Lu’. But you know how he is.”

“I will cut that phone line, woman!” Tomny warned in the background, making Remus smile.

“It’s nice to hear from you, Ton.”

“Oh, it’s so nice to hear from you too, darling. Have you been eating well? That school feeds you enough right? I bet you pay out the back-end for tuition, so they’d better.”

“Food’s fine. How about you?”

“Oh yeah, we’re eating fine, but these bleeders still won’t eat a fucking mushroom, can you believe that?”

“Lupin doesn’t like mushrooms either!” Tomny called, and Tonya gasped.

“Remus!”

“They’re a fungus!” He said, defensively.

“They’re good for you! Lots of fibre.”

“They grow in shit!”

“Everything grows in shit! It’s a shit-eats-shit kind of world!”

Remus clapped a hand over his eyes, even though he knew Tonya wouldn’t be able to see it, luckily she was as clever as she was erratic.

“What was that about it being nice to hear from me?” She said, cheekily.

“Well it was,” he shot back, before softening; “It *is.* Heard you emptied the flat of all the magic medicine.”

“I did,” she said indignantly, “and any and all artillery. We’re turning a new leaf over here. I’ve been trying to tell Tomny to stop shitting where he eats.”

“Tonya, so much shit-talk today.”

“Ooh, I better be careful or I’ll become a bad influence on our little angel.”

“I’m not an angel,” Remus said, dismissively, then more quietly; “I’m a messer.”

“A what?”

“Nothing. Say, listen to this, I lent one of my roommates your book, ‘The Count of Monte Cristo’—”

“Oh? Did he like it?”

“—Hasn’t finished it yet, but he’s started writing some song about it, something about how Dantès was wrongfully imprisoned without trial and how it's all just a metaphor for making our own luck or something.”

“Your friend writes songs?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Are you writing songs, Remus?”

“No—! I mean, no, definitely not.”

“I think it would be sort of brilliant if you were,” Tonya said, and Remus imagined her combing her long, black hair over one should the way she did when she got into one of her quietly excited moods.

“I’m not the musician,” he mumbled, “Sirius is.”

“Well I’m not talking about Sandy or whatever his name is—you’re taking music lessons again at school, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’re a musician.” Of course Tonya said this so matter-of-factly that there was no room for argument. “Don’t sell yourself short, sweet love. It’s such a waste of time. You’re at school, you’re young—”

“You’re young too, Tonya.”

“Hm.” There was some silence, then; “Be a musician, Remus. If that’s what makes you happy. Or be a circus clown—or a rice farmer, or—”

As Tonya rambled on, Remus had to force himself to release the phone cord before it snapped; he hadn’t realised he’d been twisting it so tightly around his wrist.

“What makes you happy, Tonya?” He asked, interrupting her. She went quiet again, then spoke more softly;

“I’ll tell you at Christmas.”

Remus perked up a bit. “Christmas?”

“Yeah. You’re coming home right?”

“Well…” Home to the estate, maybe, but Remus was pretty sure Tomny had been serious: no more East End. Still, he couldn’t help the sliver of hope that bloomed in his chest. “I hope to,” he confessed.

“Brilliant. I’ll cook, we’ll do presents. It’ll be good.”

“You don’t need to get me anything.”

“Shut up, Christmas is Christmas. You’re getting a present.”

“Fine, but I’m going to get you something too.”

“I hope so. I take a size four-carat diamond.”

“Hah.”

Tonya giggled into the other end before sighing. “I should go now, love. These toll calls are atrocious, but I’ll call again, even if Tomny wants to be a little girl about it.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you guys later then.”

“Okay. Goodbye, sweetheart.”

“Bye.”

The line clicked dead and Remus dropped the phone to his side, sagging back against the wall with his eyes closed. It was easy to replay the entire conversation in his head—he did that all the time when he couldn’t sleep—but it was harder to imagine what else he could’ve said over a phone call. Maybe things would be better by the holiday, maybe he actually could get away with visiting the flat again. His nose wouldn’t thank him and neither would Tomny, but if he already had Tonya rooting for him then at least he had a chance.

“Um, excuse me?”

Remus jolted sideways away from the sudden voice, only to be yanked back slightly by his hold on the receiver. Another boy was standing a few steps away, looking nervous as he stared up at him. Finally he pointed to the phone in Remus’ hand while shyly sucking on his lower lip.

“Are you done with the phone?”

“Oh,” Remus looked down at the stretched cord and stepped forward, dropping the receiver back down on the stand. “Yeah, s’all yours, mate.”

While the mousey boy squeezed in between him and the wall, Remus stepped away and rubbed at the back of his neck. It didn’t feel right to head directly back to his room where he’d certainly find it difficult to hide such an odd mood from his friends, so instead he walked out the front doors of the dorm, wearing only his jumper. The late October air was crisp but at least it wasn’t raining. He drifted up the pavement of House Lane, kicking rocks or pinecones that had fallen from the trees

out of his way as he went.

The phone call had left him both lighter in the chest and foggier in the head; Tomny hadn't said anything about letting him visit for the holidays, that was all Tonya, and Tonya wasn't the one who'd kicked him out. She didn't know the truth either, or at least, he thought she didn't. The realisation that Tomny might've told the others who he really was and where he'd actually grown up hit harder than those kids who'd beat him in the alley. He tried telling himself that he had no real reason to believe Tomny had told anyone else—both he and Doss had kept things so hush that even Remus had been fooled—but now that he was on the outs by default, there really was no need for them to keep lying to the other lads. It wasn't loyal and it wasn't Tomny.

It would've been a lie to say that he wasn't angry about being forced out. Lee and Doss had been in plenty of fights—Seesaw had nearly gone blind during a nasty row before Remus had even known him—but he gets cornered once and that's it; *you're out.* Do not pass go, do not collect a decent reputation in London's roughest neighbourhood.

Remus touched his hand to his nose. The nasty gash he'd gotten when bone had broken skin had healed weeks ago, and now he was just left with an angry red scar. It would fade some eventually, but every time he looked in a mirror he was met by a reflection only a mother could love. And he didn't have one of those.

The boys had been good about it mostly, never bringing up the injury again after that first day, and always quick to offer a beating to kids like Crouch or Snape when they made their snide comments. Those Remus could handle, especially after discovering how powerful a look from 'scarface' could be when he was feeling particularly venomous. Crouch had nearly pissed his pants in the second week of forms when he'd made a jab at Sirius for his colourful nails (courtesy of Mary, of course) and Remus had slammed a fist down on a symbol behind his head, making the whole class jump and stare. Besides the fact that Crouch was a git for no reason at all, Remus had come around to Sirius' painted nails. They'd been a cherry-red that week, and Remus had zoned out watching Sirius strum on his guitar until the polish was chipped and worn.

Sirius had chosen blue next. Mary offered to paint Remus' too—a matching colour of course—but he'd refused. It was enough to just watch Sirius' fingers and pretend as though he had a fraction of the talent. He was getting better though, as Sheila spent every class

assuring him, and Remus decided to give her the benefit of the doubt because it made him feel better.

It had been easy to assume that things would be awkward after the encounter with his music teacher, but Sheila remained a force to be reckoned with. The following Monday they'd all reconvened in forms as always and though Remus had done his best to avoid her gaze, she'd made no indication that anything was wrong. She called his name for registration, smiled as always and even took time out of her morning to help him and Sirius work out the bridge to "Like a Rolling Stone". It was completely and utterly normal, not like anything he'd been expecting after she'd revealed that she'd not only known Hope, but that they were close friends. Close enough to have a photograph of the pair of them hanging up for twenty years where everyone could see. He hadn't sought out the photo since Sheila had shown it to him, but he couldn't get the image out of his mind anyway; they'd looked so happy, absolutely lit up with joy. Remus wasn't sure he'd ever seen his mother look like that.

He couldn't remember deciding that his destination was going to be the Bellchant building, yet his feet had carried him there anyway. It was a Sunday and Sheila had been absent from Communion earlier that morning which likely meant she was off campus again for the weekend. It seemed that the music teacher was spending most weekends away nowadays. It made Remus kick himself for not taking the chance when they were alone to ask where it was she was always disappearing to. He'd been understandably distracted at least.

The Bellchant building was always quietest on the weekends, and he and Sirius had made good use of it to sneak away and practice toward the end of the year 11. They were rarely interrupted, and more than once he'd had to hide his cigarettes to keep Sirius from lighting up right there on the risers. He didn't think it was fair to sully the only classroom in the entire campus that he enjoyed being in with ash and smoke. It wasn't as though Sirius wanted to desecrate the hall of music and artistic expression, just that he took any and all chance to stick it to the ruling powers. Though Remus hadn't been around to see it, Sirius had once lit one of their hand-rolled cigarettes off a bunsen burner in the middle of chemistry and Slughorn gave him detention carrying all the empty propane canisters from the classroom to the school's rubbish centre. According to him, it had been worth it to see the dopey look on the professor's face though.

Remus turned around halfway to music room #2, feeling a bit stupid. Dinner was going to start soon and he'd hoped to finish his Literacy

homework beforehand. He hadn't brought the Fender or his cigarettes and it wasn't like he had the stomach to 'visit mum' either, so the walk had been a waste. But just as he was making his way back to the music hall's main doors, the faint sound of a violin drifted toward him. It was coming from one of the private lesson rooms across the hallway—a pretty melody with a quick tempo, like something you could dance to.

Shifting his weight in front of the main doors, Remus' curiosity won out and he turned back, creeping up to the doorway of one of the private rooms—the only one with any light peeking through its frosted-glass window. Leaning his ear against it to listen, he was reminded of the songs Sheila would sometimes play for them at the beginning of class. Hers were always chipper and upbeat or otherwise beautiful and calming, but as he listened, Remus felt the song grow sadder, like its composer had experienced some great loss in the middle of writing it.

Perhaps it was because he was feeling sentimental after his phone call, or maybe he was just becoming too curious for his own good; either way the door clicked open and Remus peeked inside to find Regulus Black standing with his back to the door, a violin tucked under his chin. The far side of the practice room was covered in mirrors, reflecting Regulus' gentle movements as he played. His eyes were closed and the expression on his face was serene, leaving him looking younger than he normally did while wearing his usual stoic frown. Regulus' entire body moved with the song like the violin was an extension of himself, dark Black-family waves falling down across his forehead as he swayed.

Remus watched him for a long time, utterly entranced. There was a music stand set up in front of Regulus, but his eyes never opened; it was almost like the song was flowing out of him rather than off the page. It was exactly like Sirius, he thought, when he got lost in his strumming and just let his body take over.

The song's abrupt end caught Remus by surprise. He was still watching, captivated by Regulus' movement even more than the melody, but he didn't miss it when the dark-haired boy opened his eyes and straightened up, catching sight of him in the mirror.

"What are you doing in here?" Regulus demanded.

"Sorry!" Remus balked. "Didn't mean to eavesdrop, I just heard you and—"

“I booked this as a private room.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Remus rubbed his arm awkwardly, unaware that any of the rooms could be booked by students in the first place. “I’m Remus, I know Sirius and—”

“I know who you are,” Regulus snapped, bending down to throw open the violin case. “You’re one of my brother’s roommates.”

“Yeah…”

“The one who busted his face punching a cop.”

Remus’ mouth dropped open. “What? No, I never punched any cop. Who said that?”

“He did—my brother. Barty overheard him in your forms.”

Remus let out a bark of laughter. “I’m gonna kill that numpty.”

Apparently not all that entertained by Remus’ shock, Regulus snapped his violin case shut and began gathering his music sheets up off the stand. Feeling slightly guilty for interrupting, Remus squeezed the door handle and bit his lip. “That was really good,” he said, “whatever you were playing.”

Regulus glanced up at him in the mirror with an irritated expression, but answered anyway. “Violin Partita number two in D minor. *Courante."*

“I have no idea what that means,” Remus said, automatically.

"Well that's no surprise," Regulus scoffed, snapping his music folder closed and tucking it up under one arm as he scooped the violin case up off the floor. When he rounded and approached the door, he gave Remus a haughty look with the same grey eyes as Sirius. "Are you going to move, or are you going to punch me too?"

"Wha—?"

Regulus shoved past, disinterested.

“It was just a football accident actually,” Remus called. “I never punched anyone.” That was true, at least.

Pausing a few steps away, the younger boy glanced back. “My brother isn’t as clever as he thinks he is. If he were, he’d know when to keep

his mouth shut."

Before Remus could even begin to wonder what it was that he actually meant by the remark, Regulus made his way to the front doors of the Bellchant building and pushed them open, stepping out into the sun.

* * *

When he returned to his dorm room, tea tray in hand, Remus found James and Sirius sitting on the floor, their laps covered in rope and black tarping. Along with the ominous supplies, sat the rather sorry-looking stag's head (fur now slightly matted thanks to the steam from their showers), a bucket, a box of safety matches, and a megaphone they'd surely lifted from Ms. Hooch.

"Do I even want to know?" Remus said, shutting the door behind himself with his foot.

Sirius looked up pointedly. He had a notebook open in front of him on the floor with a scribbled list of bullet points. "Where have you been, you slacker?"

Remus carefully adjusted one of the mugs of tea on his tray. "Nowhere. Now what is it I've been slacking off from?"

"You were supposed to be here helping us plan and prepare for our Halloween prank extravaganza!"

"Extravaganza? Halloween is almost two weeks away."

"That's why we gotta plan!" Sirius insisted. "Just you wait—this is gonna totally blow every other prank out of the water."

Shaking his head hopelessly, Remus crossed the room and carefully sat down across from them, setting the tea tray on the floor. "So what? No pumpkins or baseball bats this year?"

Sirius bent back over his notes. "Nope, that's kids stuff. We have matured some, Moony."

"And so naturally you resort to what appears to be a rather unorthodox murder plot."

While Sirius snickered, James continued tying knots in the bundle of

rope. “You’ll think it’s brilliant when you hear it, Lupin. We’re including the girls too.”

“Lily and Marlene agreed to be in on a prank?” Remus asked in disbelief.

“No,” Sirius snorted, “they’re going to be the ones getting pranked, a’course.”

“Lily’s going to give you detention for the rest of your sorry lives. If she doesn’t kill you first, that is.”

“Whose is whose?” James asked, disregarding the threat and glancing at the tea tray, giving each cup its own sceptical look.

“This one’s yours.”

“One sugar?”

“Yes, Mum,” Remus drawled, and James took the cup from him, smirking. “I ran into your brother today,” he said to Sirius, passing him his own cup.

“Oh, yeah? How is the dear little git?”

“Fine. Though he told me you’ve been going around telling people I punched a bloody cop.” James snorted into his tea at that, and Sirius gave a guilty grin.

“I’m just trying to add to your mystique, Moony. No one’s going to be afraid of you if they find out you broke your face on a football.”

“Who says I want people to be afraid of me?” Remus demanded.

“You do—every day when you go around brooding.”

“You’re such an ass, Black.”

“You remember what you do with asses though right? You kiss them.” Sirius stuck his lips out at him, but Remus only rolled his eyes and reached for his tea.

“So what’s this plan of yours?”

To answer him, Sirius spun his notebook around and pushed it towards him. Remus scanned the page. “Bonfire? Ghosts? James *dies?* What the hell is this?”

“It’s history in the making,” Sirius sang giddily.

“When did you even have time to come up with this?”

“During maths, mostly. Potter helped in chem though.”

Shaking his head, Remus looked at the list again. “Oh my god… they’re actually going to murder you.”

“ ‘Us’, Lupin,” Sirius smirked, “murder *us.”*

Remus scoffed and pushed the notebook back before raising his tea to his lips. “So where’s Pete?”

On cue, Peter burst out of the bathroom, his arms dripping blood up to his elbows. “I did it! It worked!” He cried, thrusting his hands out ahead of him and spattering their bedroom floor with red gore.

“Bloody hell!” Remus sputtered in alarm, upsetting his cup and spilling tea down the front of his jumper.

Peter beamed. “Good pun, Moony!”

Hissing, Remus peeled hot tea-soaked fabric away from his chest, gaping up at his friends in horror. “Pete, what the fuck did you do? Slit your own wrists for fun?”

“Calm down, Lupin,” James said, stifling a laugh, “s'only fake blood.”

“Yeah, just a bit of corn syrup and food colouring,” Peter supplied, while noticing the mess he was leaving on the floor.

“But if it’s making you react like this, then Halloween’s going to be fucking amazing,” Sirius beamed.

It was James who got up first, walking up to Peter and wiping a bit of the fake blood off of his forearm, testing its stickiness between his fingers and then tasting it. He grimaced a bit, then said; “Still better than Lupin’s tea.”

“It looks so real,” Sirius observed from his place on the ground. “The girls are going to shit themselves.”

“Please no more shit talk today,” Remus mumbled to himself.

“It’s just meant to be funny,” James warned Sirius, coming out of a bathroom with a towel for Peter; “We’re not trying to traumatise

them.”

“Speak for yourself.”

For James, Remus reached forward and took a swipe at Sirius’ shoulder. “Think of poor Prongs’ feelings. He’ll never get Lily’s hand in marriage if she drops dead of fright first.”

“It’s not like she’s actually his girlfriend,” Sirius said in his own defence, making James purse his lips sourly. “In fact until November first she’s just another target. So Moony, fancy a trip back to the Shrieking Shack?”

Chapter End Notes

'Artillery’ is slang for equipment used for shooting up/injecting drugs.
A toll call is like a long distance call, tends to cost more.
Song referenced in this chapter is “Like a Rolling Stone” by Bob Dylan, 1965.

A short but sweet chapter! I'm going on vacation for a little bit, but I'm still hoping to get some work done on new chapters so I can keep posting. Sorry if there ends up being some more time between them then usual for the next little bit! <3

Also, if you got the Dantès (“Count of Monte Cristo”) allegory to [canon] Sirius like my lovely sunflower, Asaelia, you get a gold star, hehe.

Chapter 35: Meet the Candyman

Chapter Summary

> As the boys gear up for their Hallowe'en extravaganza, Remus comes to realise that their personal stash is feeling a little dry.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Drugs, reference to hard substances, drinking, and references to sex.
>
> Lots of slang in this chapter, I'm realising. Read the 'end notes' before if it makes things easier. Cheers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Straight people don't know what you're about,
They put you down and shut you out;
You gave to me a new belief,
And soon the world will love you sweet leaf...

- "Sweet Leaf" Black Sabbath, 1971

Monday 25th October 1976

They had six days until Halloween, which meant six days to put their horrifically devious plan into action. First on the agenda was scoping out an adequate spot for the bonfire that was both far enough from school that no one would stumble across it but also not too far that the girls would question their intentions. They ended up finding just the place along the path and after that—were free to set the scene.

Returning to the Shrieking Shack was not Remus' ideal way to spend their free time, but once he'd gotten to see for himself just exactly how they were going to scare the pants off the girls, he finally began to see the appeal. The plan was genius—and hard to bungle provided none of them broke character. Remus was a little nervous about that, but after Sirius had informed him he would be playing the role of 'sleeper agent'—meaning he could be as irritated and pessimistic in front of the girls as usual—he'd been more than willing to throw his hat into the ring.

Naturally though, Halloween prep went beyond fake blood and pumpkins; any good and sane teenager knew there had to be ample drink in order for anyone to have a half-decent time. Sadly for the troupe of 4A, without Simeon to supply them their stash was running dangerously low.

“Are you sure we drank that entire bottle of vodka last week?” Remus asked, rifling through his cupboards.

“Yes,” James called, “I distinctly remember reliving the experience the next morning while hugging the toilet.”

“What about the brandy?”

“Do you mean the apricot or the cherry?”

“Either!”

“Gone.”

“Then why bother specifying?” Remus grunted as he pulled his wardrobe hutch away from the bedroom wall and reached behind it, returning with a half-litre bottle of whisky that was relatively untouched. “Found one!” He declared, waving the booze in the air for James to see.

“And look what I found!” James said, untucking himself from beneath his bed to reveal a few spliffs wrapped up in a plastic baggy.

“Please do not tell me you found that in your football kit,” Remus grimaced.

“What—it hides the smell!” James said dejectedly, tossing the weed on his bed and going back to his search.

“There’s that bit of white rum in the bathroom cupboard,” Peter supplied from his own bed where he was working on his latest art assignment.

“What’s it doing in there?” James asked.

“Don’t you remember? You and Sirius dared each other to use it as mouthwash.”

“No wonder we have a shortage,” Remus said, making James snort. Standing, he went to the bathroom to have a look for himself and found the rum tucked up between a wrinkled tube of toothpaste and a

bottle of Peter's aftershave—which had regrettably never been opened. When he returned to the room he tossed the booze onto James' bed along with his wardrobe-whisky and stood back to examine their small haul of illegal substances; one bottle of port wine courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew's wine cellar, half a litre of rum that had once been a full litre, the whisky, a few measly spliffs, and their leftover tobacco and rolling papers. All together he figured it would last them till the end of the month if they were lucky—but it wasn't nearly enough for Halloween as well as Sirius' seventeenth.

"Maybe Black'll surprise us and go cold-turkey before his birthday," James supplied, popping up next to him with one of his football trainers in hand. He dug through it a moment before pulling out another zippo and adding it to the pile with a shrug.

"A meteoroid would have a better chance of hitting the Great Hall," Remus scoffed. "It's not enough."

"I searched Sirius' side and he's fresh out too. Should we get Mary to ask around?"

"Already did. Her resources are dryer than ours after her boot went off to uni last term."

James tsked. "What about that Xeno guy? He supplied Sim a bit didn't he?"

Remus considered. From what he'd managed to gather about the reclusive drug-dealing hippy, he didn't fence for just anyone. Xeno's coterie was just as exclusive as Lily's precious Slug Club, which meant you had to know someone to get an in.

"James, isn't one of Xeno's roommates in your forms? Can you talk to him, maybe ask if Xeno would fence for us too?" He asked.

"You mean David?" James shook his head. "No, he doesn't talk to anyone."

"At all?"

"Not in forms anyway. Haven't heard him say anything since last year."

"I still don't understand why we're keeping it a secret from Sirius in the first place," Peter called.

“Because it’s his birthday,” James said with a stubborn pout. “Last year was ruined by Snape and Filch—‘least we can do is make sure we have enough booze to get him properly knackered this time around.”

Remus nodded in agreement and Peter just shrugged. “Whatever you say. But James, can you turn this way a bit? I wasn’t done with your nose.”

“Sure thing.” Obliging, James struck a pose with both arms flexed and his nose turned up to the sky. Peter snorted and kept sketching with those quick little pencil movements of his. He was always most relaxed with a pencil in his hand—the most sure of himself.

“Pete,” Remus started, having reached a conclusion on his own, “when was the last time you talked to Sim?”

Peter’s mouth pinched a bit in concentration but he didn’t take his eyes off James. “Last month—he called on me and Lot’s birthday.”

“He say how Oxford’s going?” Asked James. “Dad wants me to think about applying there for university. That or Cambridge like him and mum.”

“He’s got a new girlfriend. That’s about all I know—turn toward the light a bit?”

While James acquiesced, Remus held a hand to his mouth and stared down at their pitiful pile. No way it was enough. “Pete,” he said suddenly, “I think you need to get a hold of your brother.”

“Why…?”

“ ‘Cause we need an in—and he’s gonna give it to us.”

* * *

Three Days Later…

It was almost refreshing to keep a secret from Sirius. Not because Remus didn’t ever do *that,* but because it was finally a secret for the only three of them to share. They’d all agreed to keep the Xeno plan a surprise for his birthday but not telling Sirius also meant that they didn’t run the risk of disappointing him should they be unsuccessful. Xeno was already a hard man to track down. He rarely came out of his

smoke-included haze long enough to interact with anyone and when he did it was only to venture to whatever whimsey, philosophical class that peaked his fancy that day. They all figured he'd have been tossed out on his rear ages ago were he not the heir to one of the richest families in all of North-Eastern England.

Peter had managed to ring Simeon at school, and he was all too willing to call up his favourite candyman and put in a good word for them.

"No guarantees boys, but I promise to do what I can," Simeon said through the phone. There was a lot of noise around them and it wasn't hard to tell that he was having a party of his own, though what university parties looked like, Remus had no idea.

Afterwards it had turned into a waiting game. Wait for Simeon to get ahold of Xeno—wait for Xeno to get ahold of them. Simeon warned them against badgering him, saying 'that's not how the game is played. Play by the rules and then you get to reap the rewards'. Remus thought it was rather stupid they had to jump through so many hoops —back home in London all one needed to do was find the dealer and make sure they had enough cash on them. But the rich loved their traditions.

"Psst! PSST! Moony!"

Lifting his head off his hand, Remus glanced to his right, where Sirius was leaning across the aisle between their desks and trying to get his attention. They were in History, which normally wasn't hard to zone out in, but Professor Binns' was out on sick leave. As a result, one of the year 13 business and marketing teachers was filling in and rather than sticking to Binns' surely-riveting daily itinerary, he'd dimmed the overhead lights and put on a film. Most of the students were thrilled by the news until the title card rolled by and they realised they were watching a documentary about disillusionment among the German troops of World War I. The rattling from the projector was louder than the film itself, but their substitute had already leaned back in his desk chair and appeared to have fallen asleep.

"Moony!" Sirius hissed again, flapping an arm at him. "What rhymes with 'diatribe'?"

"What?" Remus whispered back.

"I can only think of 'bribe' but it isn't working."

Still confused, Remus took a moment to consider. “Describe…?”

Sirius’ eyes widened happily and he turned back to his notebook, scribbling in it. A few seconds later he was smiling and he turned back to him. “Now what about ‘obsolete’?”

“Concrete.”

“And ‘reputation’?”

Before Remus could answer a third time, Lily whipped around in her seat ahead of him to give Sirius a nasty glare. “You really can’t be quiet for five minutes, can you?”

Sirius pointed his pencil at the clock on the wall above the classroom door. *“Au contraire,* Evans—I’ve already been quiet for *thirty*-five minutes.”

“It’s a new record then,” Mary giggled, turning around in her seat ahead of Sirius to join in.

“You’re supposed to be paying attention to the movie,” Lily insisted quietly.

“Why? Haven’t you realised that Clank the Wank over there only put the thing on ‘cause he’s hung over? I mean look at him.”

They all turned back around to stare at the teacher, but as far as Remus could tell, he just had no interest in interacting or teaching them. He probably hated children all together, which wasn’t much different from most other business teachers.

“How do you know?” Mary asked, tilting her head a bit to get a better look.

“Call it an alcoholic’s intuition,” Sirius answered, still scribbling away. “I’ve seen my dad pissed enough times to know what a morning after looks like.”

Though Lily still appeared unconvinced, Mary shrugged and turned back around in her seat. “What are you doing anyway?” She asked, leaning forward to peek at what Sirius was writing.

“New song for me and Lupin’s band.”

“Ooh, really? Can I read it?”

“When it’s finished.”

“Aw c’mon, Black. I’ll sing it to you,” Mary hummed.

“Tempting, but no thanks, love.”

“Hmph. Stingy.”

Lily glanced back at Remus. “A band? You mean you’re actually taking this whole thing seriously now?”

“Maybe…”

“And the songs? Are they really any good?”

Remus’ lips tugged up into a smile. “They’re getting better. Yesterday Sirius managed to rhyme ‘magic’ with ‘manic’ and it actually sounded pretty decent.”

There was a sharp ripping noise that made all of them flinch as Sirius tore the page free from his notebook. “That’s right,” he bragged, “soon Moony and I are going to be halfway to a debut album.”

“You don’t even have a name,” Lily pointed out. “Unless you’re going with ‘Numpty #1 and Numpty #2’.”

“As long as I get to be number one,” Remus said.

“You’re always number one, Remus,” Mary said, “number one in our hearts.” She drew a heart in the air with her fingers for emphasis.

“Ditto,” Sirius said, folding the paper in half, “now Moony, take this and let me know what you think about the hook. I tried with that ‘sandpaper in our throats—sawdust in our lungs’ bit we talked about but I’m still not sure that—”

Suddenly the classroom lights flicked on, blinding them and making several students burst up in their seats from the naps they were surely enjoying not a moment before. The substitute, a crotchety old man named Dr. Gibbens, was standing across the room and glaring at the four of them with all the fury a tenured professor could muster.

“I thought I told everyone there was to be no talking. You, I hope that’s not a note in your hand.” Gibbens pointed a gnarled finger at Sirius as he moved to stand in front of the projector, where a team of German shoulders continued marching across the white of his dress shirt.

Sirius pulled his arm back immediately. “No. Just some rubbish.”

Dr. Gibbens considered this before strolling out from behind the film’s glare and picking up the bin next to his desk. “Ah, well in that case…” He strolled forward down their line of desks, stopping next to Sirius and holding out the bin. “Allow me to help you throw it away.”

Sirius hesitated, and a look of sympathy passed over even Lily’s face.

“Unless you’d like to read whatever it is aloud?” The professor taunted.

Setting his jaw, Sirius slowly crumpled the paper in his fist and tossed it into the bin with a sour smile. “No, thanks for the help, sir.”

Their substitute dipped his head slightly in smug victory and returned to the front of the room. “No more chatter,” he ordered, flicking off the lights once more. Just as he did, the projector started spasming, and he had to turn them back on again as it began skipping the tape and making a loud screeching noise.

“Blasted machine!”

While their teacher went to the aid of the terribly depressing war film, Mary carefully turned around in her seat again. “I’m so sorry, Sirius,” she whispered, as Sirius leaned back in his chair, looking as put out as James whenever Arsenal lost.

“Why didn’t you just read it?” Lily murmured.

“I don’t bark on command,” Sirius grumbled. “And s’fine, I remember most of it anyway.”

“Quiet!” Gibbens snapped. Sirius sharply flipped him off from behind before glancing back to his notebook and putting pen to paper once more. Remus watched him, eager to get a hold of the drafted lyrics, but when Sirius finally passed him the next note behind their teacher’s back, he couldn’t read a word of it.

“Sirius, this is in French.”

“What did I just *say?”* Whirling around, Dr. Gibbens’ eyes instantly narrowed in on the note in Remus’ hand. “You!” He barked. “Enough of this nonsense! Stand up now and read the note aloud so we all might hear what’s so important that you need to interrupt the entire class!”

“Nooo… don’t read it…” Sirius said in a small, sarcastic voice before flashing Remus a lopsided smirk.

“I’m gonna throttle you,” Remus growled.

“UP!”

Reluctantly, he stood and felt the unnerving caress of twenty-five pairs of eyes on him. “Professor, I can’t read it,” he said.

“What are you daft, boy? Read the damn note so we might move on!”

Grinding his teeth together, Remus looked down and gave it his best shot; “Chair Monsieur Gibbens, jay—I mean—jie limpression… Er—kill est dee mon devour de voo informer de tr-troys choi...ses? Premiere-ment tah so-er mapple oh telephone, duce...me-ment tah femme mapple oh lit ey towahse-ment tah mer—mare...?” He broke off, defeated. "Do I really have to keep going, sir?"

If Dr. Gibbens had told him again that he was daft, he was positively sure the rest of the class would agreed with him. Every other student staring at him with open mouths and up-turned eyebrows. Mary’s face was pinched together with an embarrassed smile and Lily looked more confused than he’d ever seen her.

“Did you just speak in Klingon, Lupin?” The kid behind him asked.

Before Remus could ask what ‘Klingon’ was, Sirius burst out laughing.

“Alright,” Gibbens growled, crossing his arms over his chest, “you, the comically long-haired pillock, since you so obviously know what the note says, why don’t you enlighten the rest of us?”

Sirius stifled his laughter and shrugged, completely unbothered, before standing and taking the note back from Remus.

“Okay,” he hummed, clearing his throat as Remus threw himself back down at his desk; “Let’s see here… the note says, *‘Cher Monsieur Gibbens, j’ai l’impression qu’il est de mon devoir de tu informer de trois choses, premièrement ta sœur m’appelle au téléphone, deuxièmement ta femme m’appelle au lit, et troisièmement, ta mère’*—and well, your mum... she just calls me ‘Daddy’.”

Before Sirius had even finished, Mary had clapped her hands over her mouth, instantly understanding his French. It took everyone else a moment longer but by the time they finally understood what *might’ve*

just come out of his mouth, Sirius was already sitting back down and propping his feet on his desk with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“YOU…!” Gibbens raged, turning nearly purple in the face; “HALLWAY NOW!”

Sirius lazily dropped his feet back down without complaint and stood up. Before moving away, he held out his fist and Remus tapped it with his own, unable to stop smiling. While the rest of the class gaped or giggled, Dr. Gibbens marched him from the room and into the hall where he promptly let loose a verbal thrashing that could be heard through the walls.

“That idiot,” Lily sighed, shaking her head.

Remus opened the note. “Idiot, yes. But also an utter ledge.”

The rest of the class cheered when Sirius returned, smugly flouncing back into the room with his hands behind his head. Dr. Gibbens had to threaten everyone with their own detentions to get the class to settle, but it was clear Sirius was the winner of the day, punishment or not.

Both Remus and Sirius spent the first half of their dinner hour regaling the tale to Peter, who listened intently, disbelief clear on his face.

“One day you’re going to sass the wrong person, Black,” he warned, as Sirius lifted a spoonful of stew to his lips.

“Honestly can’t wait for that day,” Sirius said, “it’s hard being the main character in everyone else’s story.” He grimaced and shook his head. “Still needs more salt. Be right back.”

“Smug bastard,” Peter chuckled, turning back to Remus as Sirius lifted his tray and strolled across the dining room. “Did Mary ever say what the rest of the rest of the note said—the French bits?”

“Something about Gibbens’ wife calling his name in bed?”

Before Peter could laugh, James appeared at their table with his own tray and a massive grin on his face.

“We got it, lads!” He announced. “We got the appointment!”

“What appointment?” Peter asked, sipping from his juice mug.

“With Xeno!”

Remus perked up instantly. “Oh yeah?”

James nodded and slid into the table across from them. “David passed me a note today in forms.”

“Seems like there’s a lot of note-passing going on today,” Remus said, making Peter snort. “What’d it say?”

“Xeno invited us over to his room.”

“When?”

“Soon—tonight.” James checked his watch and winced. “We gotta ditch Sirius if we want it to stay a surprise.”

“Well how’re we gonna do that?” Peter asked.

Glancing across the room, he spotted Sirius was standing next to the condiments bar and chatting up another girl from their history class. Gloating, no doubt.

“Never rests, does he?” Remus murmured, before the startings of a devious idea began to materialise in the forefront of his mind. *Notes, huh?*

Drawing his eyes from Sirius, he scanned the room for the answer to their problems. “Just gotta give him a decent distraction,” Remus went on, making James raise an eyebrow in question.

“What you thinking, Moony?”

Suddenly giddy, Remus turned back to his friends and leaned forward, drumming his fingertips on the table in anticipation. “Prongs, you got a pen?”

“A pen? Uh, yeah sure.” James fumbled for his bag and produced a pen, handing it over.

“And Pete, can I bum your napkin?”

Peter passed his unused napkin along and Remus took it, before pausing and handing it both back to James. “My handwriting’s shit, you do it.”

With a curious look, James uncapped the pen. “Okay, what am I writing?”

“Just say hello—invite him to another table, compliment his hair or something. Oh and sign it as Kimmy.”

James’ head shot up in recognition; “Kimmy? As in ‘Kim Bishop’?”

“Yeah, and put a little heart over the ‘i’.”

“You’re evil,” James snorted as he bent over the napkin.

“Yeah, yeah, hurry up.”

Once James had finished his scribbling and handed him the note, Remus took a second to read it over.

“Can you explain what it is you’re doing now?” Peter asked, and Remus slid him the napkin as he leaned back on the bench in satisfaction.

“Oh wow.”

“Mhm.” Remus looked up just in time to snatch the note back and swallow his smile, as Sirius returned, arching an eyebrow when he realised that they were all staring at him.

“What—something on my face?” He asked, setting down his dinner tray.

“Someone dropped something off for you,” Remus said, pushing the note across the table for him. With a suspicious look, Sirius unfolded the napkin and read it over. Instantly his head shot up and he glanced about the room before settling on a group of girls about four tables down. Amongst them was Kim Bishop, possibly the most popular girl in the year above them. On a regular day, a girl like Kimmy wouldn’t have looked twice at any of them, but Sirius had never been close to being ‘regular’ anyway. They watched as Kimmy twirled a chestnut curl around one finger until one of her friends noticed their staring and leaned over to whisper in her ear. Looking up, she caught Sirius’ gaze and smiled shyly before turning back to her girlfriends to share in a giggle.

“Oh,” Sirius said, looking back at the note, “Kim give this to you?”

Remus nodded eagerly. “Mhm. But it’s clearly for you.”

“Go on Sirius, go talk to her,” James hissed from the end of the table, grinning like a madman.

“Yeah Sirius, go talk to her,” Peter sniggered.

“No way, you’re totally lying,” Sirius chuckled, flopping down on the bench next to Remus and tossing the napkin away. “Kimmy’s way too hot to approach you guys in the cafeteria anyway.”

“It’ll be a missed opportunity then,” James said in delight.

“No, he’s right,” Remus shrugged, “must be another ‘devilishly handsome, raven-haired hunk around.”

“She said that?” Sirius gaped. The look he gave him made Remus pause.

“Er—yeah. S-Sure she did…”

“Just go talk to her!” Peter said. “What do you have to lose?”

Sirius’ eyes hadn’t left Remus’, making him nervous.

“Moony?”

“What?” He blanched.

“You really think I should go talk to her?”

Remus forced a chuckle. “Don’t tell me you’re feeling shy now, Black?”

Immediately Sirius’ eyes widened a bit and he raised his chin haughtily before getting up from the table. “Alright then, guess I will.”

There was a beat of silence, and Sirius still hadn’t moved. Remus looked around before indicating towards Kimmy with his head. “Okay, go on then.”

Sirius coughed out a short laugh; “Fine,” and spun around, striding away. Remus stared after him, bewildered but unsure why and they all watched as Sirius moved across the hall, quickly settling into that confident stride of his. By the time he made it to Kim’s table he was smiling handsomely, both thumbs tucked into the belt loops of his trousers.

“It worked!” James said hurriedly, scooping up his dinner tray and slinging his bag over his shoulder. “Come on, Pete!”

“Coming!” Peter chirped, shoving a few more bites of dinner into his

mouth as he tugged his jacket on.

James waved frantically at Remus, who was still sitting stunned. It took no time at all for the girls to eagerly make space at the table for Sirius, and after dropping down into the space next to Kim, he propped one elbow up onto its surface and leaned into his knuckles. Kimmy eyed him like a cat that'd just spotted a bird with a broken wing.

“Moony!”

“Yup, coming,” Remus said stiffly, snapping out of it and grabbing his bag and jacket with one hand and his dinner tray with the other. As the three of them legged it out of the dining hall, leaving their dinner plates to clatter into the dirty dish tub by the door, Remus didn’t look back.

* * *

None of them had ever been inside Dalal House, but the moment they’d crossed the threshold it became obvious that the theme throughout the dorm was distinctly more free-spirited and garish than they’d expected. In comparison to Godric or Byron House, Dalal could’ve nearly passed for a circus tent, what with all the drapes hanging from the ceiling and tapestries decorating the walls. Countless rugs and carpets lined the floor and Remus spotted more statues depicting the Buddha than he could’ve found in a second-hand shop in Soho.

“It somehow just feels kind of racist,” James said, thumbing the orange drape that decorated the archway leading into the common room. “I mean, just because they named the place after some scholar-bloke from Delhi doesn’t mean they had to go all ‘ethnic’ with the interior design, does it?”

“The fish tank’s cool though,” Peter said, staring into the huge glass tank that lined the wall opposite to phone lines.

“Good thing we don’t plan on staying for long,” Remus said, taking his friends by the shoulders and turning them toward the stairs. Other boys mulled around the halls but none really paid them much attention, and for once Remus recognised the upside of not bringing Sirius along on every jaunt. Unable to resist making a scene, Sirius would have undoubtedly had more to say about the dorm’s vibrant

colour palette and lack of real chairs, but they were on a mission and Sirius was not invited.

Following each other down the dorm's second floor hallway, Peter stopped outside a door decorated in notes and scribbles—some of which were real poetry and the rest just gibberish. Made-up languages and swirling symbols that almost looked like a failed game of hangman.

"Here goes nothing," Peter mumbled, before rapping on the door several times and practically vibrating out of nervousness. He wasted no time in knocking again, making James wince.

"Uh, Pete, I think they heard you," James said.

"Sim told me you have to keep knocking otherwise they won't let you in!"

"Why would that make any sense?"

"I dunno, he just said to do it!"

The door swung open very suddenly and Peter ripped his hand back as the thick smell of hash hit them. They all stifled coughs as their new patron leaned his head out toward them.

"Shit fellas, where's the fire?

"Huh?" Peter squeaked.

"Well there must be a fire if you're that desperate to get me to come to the door. Next time, why don't you just walk right in and save my poor ear drums."

"Told you," James murmured.

"Sorry, knew Sim was lying," Peter winced. "You're Xeno, right?"

Remus immediately knew that it was a dumb question. The boy had hair so pale it might as well have been white, with droopy stoner's eyes and a silver hoop about the size of a racquetball hanging from one ear. He couldn't have been anyone but Xenophilius Lovegood, Hawking's personal bagman.

"Yeah," Xeno answered, "I go by Xeno. Or 'Love'—'Goodie'—'Phil'—even 'Willy' if you're feeling ballsy. Are you feeling ballsy?"

“Er… maybe?”

The look Peter received was dubious.

“So what are your names—whom I talking to?” Xeno started, pulling the door slightly shut behind him. “And what do you want?”

Peter hesitated this time, and James nudged him again until words were tumbling out of his mouth. “We, uh, have an appointment? I’m Peter Pettigrew—Simeon’s my brother. This is James and Remus. Did Sim not tell you we were coming? He said you could get us some—”

“Ah!” Xeno clapped a hand down over Peter’s mouth, coming out of his doorway to get in close. “We do not discuss *business* in the hall. Nod if you understand, puny Pettigrew.”

Peter nodded, blue eyes wide, and as Xeno withdrew his hand. “One more thing before I let you inside, though,” he said, smirking a bit. “You can’t use your real names while we do business.”

“Then why bother asking in the first place?” Remus sassed.

“Shhhh…” Xeno held out a finger to silence him. “You, puny Pettigrew—you’ll be Albatross. You tall, cheeky one, you’re Lachrymose. And you—” Xeno looked James up and down from the doorway. “You’re Legs.”

“ ‘Legs’?”

“Mhm. Look very strong, them.”

James gaped and Remus could hardly resist rolling his eyes. “Fine, he’s Legs. Now are we done standing around in the hall?”

Xeno raised a blonde brow, smirking. “I’ve changed my mind. You’re not Lachrymose, you’re Giggles. Come on in, then.”

Swinging the door wide open and washing them with a fresh wave of hash, Xeno turned and strolled back into his dorm room, which was decorated in the same orange and red colours as the common room below.

“He’s a fucking lunatic,” Remus murmured to James as they stepped across the room’s threshold.

“You’re telling me, Giggles.”

“I wonder, if I break one, would you just become a singular ‘Leg’ then?”

James winked at him.

Fighting a smile, Remus shut the door behind them and went to join Xeno on the other side of the room. The dorm was the same size as theirs in Godric, but all the four-poster beds had been pushed together on one side, extending out from one another like a single long mattress with several posts at the front and back. This gave them plenty of room next to the windows to make up a sitting area, complete with almost a dozen floor cushions and bean bag chairs, though only three were occupied; the first by Xeno and the second by a boy with dark hair clipped so short he might as well have been bald.

“Hey Dave,” James said, and David nodded coolly before going back to the paper crane he seemed to be folding and unfolding in his lap. On his other side sat a girl with blonde hair to match Xeno’s. She had braids down to her waist and was holding a huge scrapbook album over her lap, humming as she glued a newspaper clipping onto one of the pages.

“Come take a load off, lads,” Xeno said, more friendly than he had been at the door. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, we’re cool,” James said, doing his best to match his chipper attitude as all three of them crossed the room and fell into a beanbag or cushion rather ungracefully. Remus ended up closest to David, who held out a hand to shake, which he took.

“Remus,” he said, before Xeno snapped his fingers at him.

“Uh-uh. We’re on business—you’re Giggles.”

“I like that one,” the girl said, without looking up. “Very funny.”

“So what should we call you then?” Peter asked the pale-haired boy. “ ‘Phil’?”

“You can call me Amphitrion today. Tomorrow—who knows—maybe Smitty?”

Jesus Christ.

“I’ll be September,” the girl said, before leaning in to whisper, “but

you can call me Pandora."

"You know Plutarch," Xeno said, clapping a hand on David's shoulder, "but I wouldn't bother getting much else out of him. He took a vow of silence in Modern Cultures class."

"So that's why you didn't say anything to me! Thought it was some sort of fear tactic, honestly," James mused, and David flashed a peace sign in response.

"Simeon told us you were his hookup all last year," Remus started, ignoring the insanity. "We wanted to know if you work your connections for us too."

"Nothing too crazy," James interjected. "We want to be able to wake up the next day. Maybe just booze and some baccy?"

"Hash, too," Peter added. "Anything fun, really."

"Couple'a men on a mission," Xeno said, "I can appreciate that. You say you want something fun? Well, lots of things are fun. Ever thought about some super C? Or PCP? I don't really deal in smack but—"

"No," Remus interjected, "nothing like that."

"How about klonopin? Diazepam?"

"They're the same thing. We want hash, baccy, and booze."

"I guess that isn't an unreasonable request," Xeno said slowly, "but how do I know I can trust you?"

All three 4A boys exchanged a look.

"I don't just fence for just anybody, you see," the hippy continued haughtily, "people gotta prove that they won't just turn around and rat—equal partners in the charade."

"Well, what's to stop us from turning you in right now?" Peter asked.

"Got anything on me, Albatross? Because you could turn this room upside down and not find a crumb. You don't cook in the office, you cook in the kitchen, and since you don't know where the kitchen is…"

"So you can't get us anything?" James frowned.

"Weeeell, this close to Hallow's eve? I'm stretched thin as it is, you see.

Demand is high around the holidays."

“Alright,” Remus cut-in, “what we gotta do then?”

Xeno took a moment to consider, glancing at David, who only stared back wordlessly. Finally he said; “Well what can you give me in exchange for letting you benefit from my little enterprise?”

“We got money,” Peter said, and Xeno shook his head.

“It’s Hawkings—everyone’s got money. I fence for friends and allies. And since we’re barely acquaintances by association, what else you got?”

“How about information?” Remus asked, and Xeno snapped his eyes to him.

“Information on what?”

Remus tongued the inside of his cheek. “How are you getting your merchandise inside? You got a mule?”

“Thought you were offering *me* information, mate.”

“I am. And I think I might have a better option for you—that is if your guy or whatever would rather not throw bags of drugs over the school walls.”

It was a bluff, but Xeno didn’t seem to notice. “Alright then, consider me hooked, Giggles. What you know?”

“There’s a hole in the wall somewhere around Hawkings, but unless you know where you’ll be looking until you graduate and still won’t find it. It’s wide enough for a single person to slip through, and more than big enough for a little bit of merchandise too.”

Xenophilius sat back, stroking his chin. “Huh,” he said in consideration. Remus spared a glance at his friends, who were open-mouthed like he’d just offered him the key to the Tower of London.

“Well, that might be something worth offering…” Xeno hummed.

“It’s good intel,” Remus said firmly, “and if you want it you’ll stop hassling us.”

Xeno burst out laughing, joined by Pandora while David cracked a smile. “This one’s good,” he told his friends, wagging a finger at

Remus. “This one’s good! Alright Giggles, you share your little secret and I promise to be the perfect fence for you lads. Deal?”

“Deal.” Remus held a hand out to shake, but Xeno put up both hands.

“No, that’s not how we seal a pact here.”

Fiddling for the inside of his jacket pocket, he withdrew a single tin meant for breath mints and popped it open, producing a very fat spliff. “Got a light?” He asked, and Remus sighed as he fiddled for his zippo. Xeno took it and held the silver up to the light to admire the engraving on its side. “Ooh, fancy.”

Clicking the lighter to life, he lit up and tossed the zippo back to him before sucking in deeply and blowing the smoke out of the corner of his mouth. Expertly, Xeno twirled the spliff around in his fingers and offered it to Remus, wiggling his eyebrows. “Deal?”

Remus didn’t hesitate. He took the spliff and sucked in deeply, before passing it to James, who did the same, and then Peter. Once David had the ciggy, Xeno leaned back in his chair, pressing his arms behind his head.

“I think this’ll be a very lucrative agreement, lads,” he grinned.

At Xeno’s insistence, they all stayed until they’d shared at least three spliffs amongst them. Pandora continued filling out her scrapbook and eventually Remus had realised that the photos weren’t of her family or anyone she knew, but famous serial murderers and conspiracy theories. She had a whole chapter dedicated to the Mansons and was particularly fond of the theory that Paul McCartney had died in a car crash in 1966 and was just replaced by a look-alike. Remus had tuned out somewhere around there.

It was near curfew when the boys began expressing interest in leaving, but Xeno urged them to stay for one last puff of a smaller spliff. As he lit it and passed it along to Peter,

Remus got his first whiff of the hash, which didn’t smell like hash at all.

“What’s that?” He asked, as Peter breathed in.

Xeno smiled lazily and shrugged; “Something ‘fun’.”

“Did you just give them a dirty fag?” He demanded, shooting upright

in his bean bag.

“Oh my god—no,” Xeno said quickly. “Do you think I’d give you heroin for free? It’s just weed and lavender, mate. Good for de-stressing, which you clearly need.”

“Oh.”

“Jesus, who you been hanging out with?”

Remus glanced at James and Peter, who exchanged looks of confusion as he let out a shallow sigh. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Well we might worry about it,” James mumbled, glancing at Peter.

Pressing his lips together into a tight line, Remus climbed out of his bean bag and reached a hand down to James, who hesitantly puffed the lavender spliff and passed it on to David before standing. Peter came with them and together they shambled to the door, distinctly slower than they’d been when they arrived.

“Remember, the stuff’ll be in the bushes under your window—gimme three days. The rest’ll be here in time for your friend’s little birthday,” Xeno called. James gave him a friendly wave goodbye as they emerged into the hall, blinking in the yellow lights hanging overhead.

“Fucking hell,” Peter said, clearing his throat, “mouth tastes like ash.”

“Ass?” James echoed.

“Ash.”

“Yum,” Remus said, leading them down and out into the chilly night air. The sidewalk was empty for the most part, but anyone who passed gave them a wide berth, and they could hardly blame them. After nearly two hours in Xeno’s room they probably smelled as though they’d spent an entire weekend at Woodstock.

Halfway back to their dorm, Peter let out a little chuckle. “Have either of you been imagining Sirius’ face when he figures out we’d ditched him? Couldn’t stop thinking about it back there.”

“So that’s what you've been sniggering about. I knew Xeno’s joke about the postman wasn’t that funny,” James teased. “I’ll bet he was pissed, too, but Kim’s probably keeping him busy enough.”

“What do you mean?” Remus asked dumbly.

“The note—it was a good idea. Should give them more than enough to talk about.”

“But we wrote that note.”

“Yeah, ‘course.” James gave him an odd look. “I thought… Didn’t you know Kimmy’s sort of got a thing for him?”

“She does?”

“Yeah, at least according to Rachel from chem. Thought that’s why you wanted me to sign her name.”

“Oh well, yeah,” Remus said casually, “but who doesn’t have a crush on the prick? Sandy Herron keeps trying to get him to tutor her in music but she plays the oboe.”

James snorted before tripping and nearly sprawling across the pavement. “Someone needs to fix those damn potholes,” he grumbled.

“Think we can play bumps while walking?” Peter asked, making Remus shake his head lightly.

“Oh yeah, and how about every time we step on a crack we sock ourselves in the face too?”

“That’s actually closer to a different game, Moony. It’s called—”

“I don’t actually want to know, Pete.”

“Well I want to know how the hell you knew what Xeno was talking about, Lupin,” James said, musingly. “He might as well have been speaking Chinese in the middle there.”

“Yeah,” Peter said, “how is it you know so much about drugs, Moony?”

“Oh, you know, they give you some pretty wild stuff when you bust your face up like I did.”

“Rubbish.” James turned around and began to walk backwards. “You’re lying, I know it. I bet you get up to some funny stuff back home in London.”

“Careful or you’ll actually eat pavement, you posh prat.”

James surged forward and wrapped an arm around Remus’ neck,

pulling him in close. “One day we’ll connect the dots, Moony. And if we can’t we’ll just bully you into telling the truth.”

“You? Bully someone? I think you’ll have to get a lot meaner first.”

“Alright, then I’ll recruit Lily—she’ll crack you. And Sirius too—he’s a wizard with crosswords.”

“Well good luck to the lot of you then, Prongs.”

“I want a nickname,” Peter sighed, and James gathered him by the neck too.

“Don’t worry, Pete, your moment of shame will come.”

At that, Remus laughed.

* * *

Upon their return they found their room empty and silent, despite the fact that they were only a few minutes shy of missing curfew.

“You owe me five quid, Moony,” James said, and Remus scoffed. He’d been sure that they’d have walked in on a grumpy Sirius, most likely blaring music at full volume to punish them. (Remus had bet on Bowie while Peter had gone for Zeppelin or T. Rex, but James had won when they found the room empty. Remus was just thankful that his second guess—finding Sirius with extra company—was also wrong.)

To make up for his loss, Remus crossed the room to Sirius’ stereo and put on an album, standing back to listen as he read the track listing off its back cover. He realised halfway through the first song that Hope had also had a copy, now tucked away in the trunk beneath his bed. It gave him a listless feeling. So far that term he’d avoided thinking much about Hope’s records and the boys hadn’t pestered him despite his promise last year that he’d play them—though Sirius had grumbled more than once about how he’d have loved to listen to the odd album or two, always ones they both knew were shut up just a few feet away.

“Is it cool if I shower first?” James asked and both Remus and Peter nodded. “Okay, cheers.”

Setting the album cover down, Remus retreated to his own bed as

Peter had done and slumped down, gathering some of his school reading to him. It was the easy kind he could do even while high, but he hadn't forgotten his promise of beating Sirius in at least one academic subject that year. He was doing good in most of his classes—better than good in others—and figured that he might actually have a decent shot of it, as long as Sod's Law didn't suddenly win out and Sirius actually dedicated himself to his work.

By the time the album finished Peter had traded James for the shower. Remus got up to change it just as the familiar sound of a key turning in a lock sounded from across the room. James finished haphazardly drying his hair with his towel and pulled it down around his neck as Sirius strode in, tie unlaced and a dopey smile on his face.

"And here he is," James drawled, "the man of the hour."

Sirius checked an invisible watch. "Is it my birthday already? Am I that late?"

"Cheeky bastard. Where have you been?"

"Better question is where have *you* been? Straight up left me in the hall didn't you?"

"Don't avoid the question," James ordered, snatching his towel and twirling it to lash Sirius in the thigh. Sirius grinned and danced away, almost straight into Remus.

"Hey Moony," he said, reeling back before pulling off his tie and tossing it onto the bed.

"Hey, Black."

"Have a fun night? You smell terrible."

"So do you," Remus said, keenly aware of the flowery scent clinging to Sirius like a personal smog. Sirius paused to sniff his arm before giving another wry smile.

"Oh yeah, that's just Kimmy's perfume."

"Duh." Without changing the record, Remus set the album down and crossed back to his side of the room. Throwing himself down on his bed, he dog-eared the page of the book he'd been reading (which Lily hated, but it was a habit) and tugged his curtains across his bed to block out the light. Unfortunately, there was no spell for blocking out

sounds.

“So…?” He heard James ask. “What happened?”

“You think I kiss and tell?”

“I don’t think you anything but, actually.”

“Well now I’m torn between calling that a fair assessment and telling you to fuck off. Also that note? Not nice.”

“You showed Kim?”

“ ‘Course. She said your handwriting is ugly.”

A moment later the bathroom door opened and Peter emerged, starting the conversation over again.

“So…” James asked eventually, “how was it? Did you totally embarrass yourself?”

“It was fine—thank you! Jeez, give me some credit.”

“You mean you…?” Peter gasped.

“It’s not that big ‘a deal! Bet you and Moira do it all the time, right?”

“Oh, yeah sure, ‘course, ha…”

“So that’s it, it was just fine?”

“No, it was great. Kim’s gorgeous—totally peng. I’m lucky, really, that an older gal as fit as her would look twice at me.”

“You gonna hang out with her again then?”

“Sure, don’t see why not. She’s fun. Good kisser too. She can do this thing with her tongue—blimey.”

Suddenly revolted, Remus reached for the pyjama bottoms he’d left discarded at the foot of his bed from the night before and tugged them on, leaving his shirt off as he turned over in his bed and forced his eyes shut. The boys weren’t loud, but he could already tell he’d have trouble sleeping anyway.

Eventually James declared that it was late and he could hear the sounds of his friends settling down for bed. His eyes were just sliding

shut when Sirius called through the curtains, making him shoot up from his pillows.

“Psst, Moony, you asleep?”

“…Yes.”

“Oh good.” Without an invitation, Sirius stuck his head inside and Remus nearly launched himself against the wall. “Just wanted to say thanks.”

He blinked in alarm. “For what?!”

“James said the note was your idea.”

“Er, yeah... Sorry."

“No, no—it was real helpful. Perfect thing to get an in with Kimmy.”

“I didn’t know you wanted an ‘in’ with *Kimmy*.” If the bitter tone surprised him Sirius made no notice. He simply considered Remus’ words with a smug look on his face.

“I suppose either way it worked, so cheers.”

Remus ground his teeth together. “Yeah. Cheers, Black…”

Sirius pulled his head back out and smacked the maroon curtains for good measure as Remus settled down into his pillow. He was wide awake now, but instead of wallowing over unplayed records, or even how badly he suddenly wanted a cigarette, all he could think about was the shard of ice that had lodged itself in the centre of his chest—and where *the fuck* it had come from.

Chapter End Notes

Slang dictionary:

'Bungle' means to mess up.
A 'pillock' is an old-fashioned term for stupid person.
A 'ledge' means "legend"; cool.
A 'bagman' is a drug dealer.
The terms 'boot' and 'fence' are used for someone who acts as the middleman between a seller and a buyer of illegal goods.
A 'dirty fag' is a marijuana cigarette laced with heroin.
'Peng' means attractive/fit.

Chapter 36: Halloween, 1976

Chapter Summary

Fat chapter. Much chaos. Enough to spill some beans.

Chapter Notes

CW: Fake gore and other spooky things?? Possible teenage alcoholism, lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don't go into the woods tonight,
'Cause underneath the sticks and stones;
Are lots of little demons enslaved by Annabella,
Waiting just to carry you home…

- "Wicked Annabella" The Kinks, 1968

Sunday 31st October 1976

As always, Halloween at Hawkings became a school-wide affair. The whole student body came together to plan various events—everything from the annual pumpkin carving contest to haunted houses set up by the drama club and organised apple bobbing outside the Great Hall. There was even a themed dance being held in one of the Agricultural barns with a costume to boot. There were so many things going on at once that Remus and his friends could hardly decide what they should do first, a fact Sirius made good use of while trying to convince the girls that it would be much more fun to do their own thing.

"It's a bonfire!" He reasoned. "Just hear us out, no screechy seventh years, no stupid ghost costumes or twee little dances playing nothing but tosspot David Cassidy LPs."

"For your information, I've already arranged to meet Mickey at that 'twee little dance'," griped Lottie. She was dressed up as the Cowardly Lion with her noise painted black and her huge blonde curls done up like a puffy mane around her head. All the girls had decided to stick with a theme that year and it had converged around Lily's Dorothy costume she'd worn the Halloween before. The part of the Good Witch was being played by Mary, done up in all pink with a little tiara and

enough sparkles in her hair that Remus had nearly sneezed when she'd done a little twirl in front of him. Marlene was her counterpart, face painted a slime green for the Wicked Witch and complete with a black pointed hat and a broomstick that she'd borrowed from her dorm cupboard.

"Mickey's gonna be there, actually. He'll be over after he's finished doing his hair—or something," Sirius said to Lottie, lying through both his actual teeth and the white choppers Mary had painted on his face that afternoon for his skeleton costume.

"We have stuff for s'mores too," James sang while reaching over to gently pluck at one of Lily's red braids. She pretended not to notice at first but then gave his hand a little smack and tucked her cheek into her other shoulder to hide a smile.

"That's all well and good," Mary started, waving her magic wand around, "but do you have alcohol?"

" 'Course," Sirius snorted, "what sort of fire would it be without the chance of falling into the pit while hammered off your arse? Moony, you got the stuff?"

From inside the dark cloak he'd been supplied with, Remus pulled out a large bottle of gin. So far he'd been relatively quiet, mostly because he was sure he was a shitty actor and didn't want to give away the prank, but also because talking around the plastic vampire teeth Lily had procured for him made him spit like a lawn sprinkler.

"Then I'm in," Mary said automatically, and Marlene gaped at her, fake warts and all. "Oh, don't look at me like that, Marls. You think they're bobbing for apples in tequila? It's Halloween, I want to be pissed."

And you will be, Remus thought sarcastically, *just not that kind of pissed.*

"That's one on board!"

"If Mickey's coming then why not?" Lottie said with a shrug. "I like s'mores."

Peter glanced at his sister through his clown mask, turning his torchlight on her. "I thought you said you were on a diet?"

"It's Halloween, you dolt, the calories don't count. Now stop shining

that thing in my face!"

Everyone looked to Marlene next, and Mary grabbed hold of her arm, giving an exaggerated pout. "Fine!" She snapped. "We'll spend the night in the woods with the midges. What fun!"

"Smashing!" Sirius said. "We almost have the full set then."

Seven pairs of eyes fell on Lily, and James nudged her with his torch. "So what d'you say, Daisy?"

"We're not supposed to have unsanctioned fires on campus," she said quietly.

"Evans, you're killing me here," Sirius groaned. "We have the day off tomorrow, and Filch isn't gonna be around to catch us. You know they force him to take the night off for everyone's peace of mind and even if they didn't—we're in the woods! Maybe try living a little?"

"I promise it'll be fun," James said, gently shouldering her with the couch pillows he'd stuffed inside his shirt sleeves for his wrestler's costume. Lily caught herself and let out a groan to match Sirius'.

"Alright fine, you win. But the fire *stays* in the *pit."*

There were several cries of victory, and as a group they all turned away from the front doors of Godric House and began trotting down the street toward the trees. The school caretaker might not be around, but that didn't mean they were going to get away with holding a bonfire right in the middle of the lawn. The woods made perfect sense really, and that was all the girls needed to know.

Remus walked alongside Lily as they made their way down the lane, taking a moment to spit out the plastic teeth and grimace at how much saliva came with them. "You're not even a little bit excited to roast marshmallows with your friends?" He asked her.

"Excited," Lily started, glancing up at him, "but suspicious." She narrowed her eyes and Remus immediately regretted sparking up the conversation, pushing the vampire teeth back into his mouth and grinning at her as they approached the tree-line. She gave him a pinched smile in return, and the next thing he knew they were batting aside tree branches, using the four torches split between them to follow along the narrow path. Mary and Lottie complained a few times about the amount of foliage they were contending with, but the boys simply ignored the griping, drawing the girls' attention with promises

of booze and fire-roasted sweets. As they went, Sirius would step every so often to mark a tree trunk with a chalk ‘x’.

“So we don’t lose our way,” he instructed boldly.

“How far in are we going anyway? We’ve been walking for forever,” Marlene said, swatting at the air as though she were being attacked by a swarm of bugs.

“It’s not much further,” he called, “it had to be far enough in that no one would see us through the trees.”

“ ‘Cause that doesn’t sound suspect at all,” Lily grumbled.

Suddenly a great moan echoed from behind. Remus saw both Mary and Lottie jump, but when they turned around they only found James a ways back on the trail, head upturned while he pinched his nose. “Aw crap,” he sighed, “I think I got a bloody nose.”

“Here,” Sirius said, producing a folded up handkerchief from his pocket. Taking it, James pressed the hankie over his face with a little wince.

Instantly Lily darted back down the path toward him, concern clear on her face. “Let me see,” she ordered, and James obediently pulled his hand away, revealing a great smudge of blood covering the lower half of his face.

“Oh fuck,” Mary winced, as Lily and the others gasped. Remus was inclined to agree—Peter had done a fine job with the fake blood.

“It’s a gusher,” Sirius observed. “You feeling alright, mate?”

“Now that you mention it, head doesn’t feel too good.”

“Do you need to lie down or something, Potter?” Lily asked.

James nodded, then; “Ohhh, I think the world’s spinning. Lord—might just pass out right here. Oh god, mum, is that you?”

“Oh-kaaay,” Sirius quipped, voice high in a badly disguised warning as he stepped up to grab one of James’ arms. “I think I’m gonna take Potter to the nurse, see if we can sort all this out.”

“I can do it,” Lily said, taking his other arm.

“Don’t worry about it, Evans, I got this."

"B-But I'm the prefect here."

"And you deserve the night off. Don't worry, you lot can go ahead with Pete and Lupin and get the fire going, it'll be very helpful. We'll catch up once Pomfrey's looked over this tosser."

To drive his point home, Sirius snatched up the torch James had been holding and pressed it into the centre of Lily's chest, forcing her to release James' arm to catch it. Before she could object any further, Sirius turned and began to drag his friend back through the trees.

"Really, Prongs," he said, loud enough for all of them to hear, "you and that big nose of yours—always ruining our plans!"

"What big nose?!" James demanded, voice slightly muffled under the handkerchief.

"They'll be okay," Peter said to the girls, who were glancing back and forth in concern. To hide his grin, he pulled his clown mask back down over his face. "Pomfrey'll have him back in tip-top shape in no time. Shall we go on then, Lupin?"

"Er—yeah." Remus cleared his throat. He suddenly felt a lot more pressure now that James and Sirius were no longer the ones carrying the scene. "It's not much further…" he said awkwardly, gesturing down the path.

Mary, thankfully, seemed to have no issue with going on ahead. After gathering her pink skirts she followed Remus and took his arm in one of hers.

"Just in case there are any monsters out lurking, looking for a midnight snack," she smirked, before gesturing for him to lead on. With the rest of his friends in tow, Remus led the way to their tiny camp, which was really just a small clearing set up with a circle of scattered logs and a fire pit they'd dug using serving spoons from the dining hall.

While the girls settled down over the logs, clutching tightly to their torches and booze, Remus got to work lighting the fire, letting Lily hold James' torch over him so he could work—or at least that had been the goal.

"Uh, Lily, maybe tilt the light down here a bit more?"

"Sorry!" Surprised by herself, Lily snapped out of her daze and took

the spotlight off the trees so that Remus could strike the match and place it in the centre of their mound of twigs. After a bit of prodding and poking and more tinder than initially thought necessary, they eventually had a decent fire going.

“Oh, this is so nice,” Mary said, stretching out her feet to warm them at the edge of the pit.

“Lupin, where’d we leave those roasting sticks?” Peter asked, fumbling around the dark clearing.

“Here,” Remus said, reaching behind Lily’s log and passing them along as Peter broke out the marshmallows. Stopping to admire his handy-work, Remus caught the dazed look with which Lily was staring into the flames.

“James is gonna be fine, you know,” he whispered, plopping down on the log next to her. Lily bit her lip and quickly tucked her hands into her armpits, unable to erase her nervous expression.

“I know, it’s just… His nose did look rather horrible.”

“Don’t worry, s’not like he’s gonna have some nasty scar.”

Lily glanced at him pointedly, the glow from the fire making her hair even redder than usual. “Unless you’re going to fess up to what happened, I don’t want to hear anything else about *your* nose.”

Raising his hands in defeat, Remus smiled guiltily and Lily returned it.

“Be right back—gotta wee,” Peter said, passing his Halloween mask to Lottie and borrowing the torch.

“Don’t get lost,” she called after him, as Peter lumbered away through the trees.

Yeah, Remus thought in agreement, *get lost and the whole plan falls apart.*

“I wish we had some music,” Mary said, uncapping the gin she’d already fished out of Remus’ pockets and tipping it back against her lips.

“BOO!” Sirius shouted, making Mary spew the alcohol over her dress while Marlene screamed bloody murder next to her. With a wicked grin on his face, Sirius launched himself over their log, stopping just

short of the fire pit. “Well?” He asked smugly, shaking a fresh bottle of alcohol. “How ‘bout it? Anyone for more *boooooo-ze?”*

“Augh! Black, you arse!” Marlene picked up a fistful of leaves from the ground and threw them at his head. Remus couldn’t help his smile as he watched Sirius dust the dried leaves off his shoulders and dance around to the other side of the pit. Snatching Lily’s torch, Sirius held it up to his chin and began contorting his painted face into several different horrific expressions, really getting the full effect out of the spooky makeup.

“Where’s James?” Asked Lily, as he finally plopped down next to Lottie and snatched a marshmallow off the end of her stick, shoving it into his mouth.

“What d’ya mean?” Sirius asked around his mouthful. It took a moment of chewing, but then he sat up a bit on the log and swallowed, glancing around in confusion. “You mean he never came back?”

Lily turned rigid. “No, he was with *you.”*

Sirius shook his head. “His nose stopped leaking halfway back to the dorms so we turned around. But then we remembered about the rest of the whisky we’d left in our room so I split off from him. He said he was going to meet me back here with you guys.” When nobody made any indication that they knew what he was walking about, Sirius straightened up. “Wait, you mean you’re not joking?”

“Of course we’re not joking!” Lily chirped.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Remus reasoned, “probably just needed to take a wee too.”

“How long ago did you leave him?” Marlene asked Sirius.

“Twenty minutes? Maybe a half-hour? I… got stuck talking to Mickey outside Godric—sorry Lot, he’s not coming.”

While Lottie scoffed, Lily stared back with big eyes. “It doesn’t take a whole half-hour to wee!”

“Maybe he got lost?” Lottie offered, and Sirius clasped his hands in front of him, rocking back and forth with an uneasy expression.

“Well… he was still complaining about that headache… I told him he

should lay down, but it's Halloween, he wanted to hang out. Could be… but nah," he laughed, nervously. "No way Potter's just gonna let himself pass out in the bloody woods." Sirius lifted his gaze to Lily's, then Marlene, who looked equally as concerned. "Should probably go check on him though. You know, just in case."

"You shouldn't go alone," Remus said, standing, "I'll come with you."

"I'll come too," Lily said eagerly, snagging a fist full of Remus' cloak and jumping to her feet as Mary gaped at them both.

"You're just going to go traipsing through the woods in the middle of the night?" She demanded.

"We 'traipsed' our way here!" Lily answered.

"But Peter's not back yet," Lottie said nervously.

"The two of you can stay here then," Sirius said eagerly, "to wait for Pete of course… and in case Potter shows up! In the meantime, the rest of us'll go look for him."

Looking less than thrilled to be volunteered for search and rescue, Marlene sighed and came around the fire, taking one of the torches as she fell in step next to Remus.

"Wait," Lily started, as they all made their way to the far side of the clearing, "you're going the wrong way—school's this way."

"No it's not—look." Proudly, Sirius held up his torch to reveal a white 'x' on the trunk of the tree nearest to him. Remus saw a look of confusion flit across Lily's face, but they'd all seen Sirius mark the trees on their way in—there was no way he could be wrong. Unable to argue with fact, Lily took a deep breath and forged ahead with Sirius next to her, taking the uneven forest terrain in stride despite the fact that she was only wearing a pair of little red Dorothy slippers.

"I can't believe you just let him go off on his own," she grumbled.

"He's lived at Hawkings for eleven years! Forgive me for thinking he knew his way around."

"Who splits up in the *woods?"*

"It's barely a crop of trees!"

"You are so full of it!"

"I-know-you-are-but-what-am-I?"

“Hold on,” Remus said after they’d walked far enough that they could no longer see the fire’s glow through the trees, “got a rock in my shoe.”

As he crouched down to pretend to fix his shoe, Lily came to a reluctant stop with Sirius next to her. “I still think we’re going the wrong way.”

“You saw the marks! Why would you think I’d be leading you astray?”

“Because it’s you! You think everything’s a joke!”

Carefully, Remus untucked the scrap of James’ t-shirt from his pocket. “Hey,” he called, before remembering he was supposed to sound scared, “Er—look at this! It was on the ground right there.”

He held out the bit of fabric, which was dyed a dark red on one end. Instantly both girls’ faces drained of all colour.

“It’s James’!” Sirius gasped.

“N-No, it can’t be,” Marlene whined.

“See for yourself!”

“If this is a joke it’s not funny!” Lily snapped, making Sirius give a rather offended look as he snatched the scrap of shirt from Remus.

“ ‘If this is a joke’? Are you fucking serious? My best mate’s lost, we found only a piece of his shirt—” Sirius threw up the blood-stained rag as evidence, “and you’re asking if this is a joke? Really, Evans, sometimes you’re just the—!”

“Fine!” She shouted, trying to maintain her composure. “But if this is just some stupid stunt, then I sw—”

“Look at the tree!” Marlene shrieked, cutting Lily off as she stepped forward and yanked Remus away from the tree closest to him, nearly tearing his black cape in two. Immediately Sirius flashed his torch on the trunk, illuminating what looked to be several long slashes in its bark.

“Holy shit.”

“It’s not the only one either,” Remus said, and Sirius let his light trail across several other trees around them, revealing each to be as brutally desecrated as the last. The slashes were meant to look like claw marks but there was only so much they could do with a kitchen knife. Luckily it was dark and Marlene was decently gullible.

“They’re everywhere!” She wept.

“Don’t think a squirrel did that,” Sirius breathed, stepping up to trail his fingers along the marks. “Maybe a badger?”

“Oh, but didn’t you once say that your mother used the trunks of trees to file her nails down, Sirius?” Remus offered.

Anyone who’d been paying close enough attention would’ve seen the way Sirius’ mask dropped just long enough for the corners of his mouth to quirk up. He swallowed the smile and shoved Remus lightly in return for the quip.

“Both of you shut up and let’s just go,” Lily stammered, just as a chilling wail cut across the forest, carrying on the wind and making all of them freeze.

“What the fuck was that?” Marlene whimpered as the scream sounded again, further away this time. To Remus, it sounded a bit like a dying goat amplified by a megaphone, but Sirius played along anyway.

“Oh my god, it’s James!”

“That didn’t sound anything like James!” Lily hissed.

Ignoring her, Sirius cupped both hands around his mouth; “James!” He barked. “James, where are you?”

Marlene shoved Sirius in her panic. “Don’t yell—what if it’s not him!”

“Who else would it be?”

“Oh shut it all of you!” Lily cried, though she had a hitch in her voice. “Let’s just find the idiot already and go back!”

As Sirius and Lily started forward again, Marlene grabbed hold of Remus’ arm so tightly he thought his bicep might bruise. He could hear each of his friends’ breathing like a nervous blanket settled around them and more than once he caught Sirius’ eye as he looked back at him with his lips pressed into a thin line to hide his smile. At

one point Sirius gave him a thumbs up and he had to look away or risk bursting into laughter right then and there.

“It’s getting colder,” Marlene whimpered.

“Is that a sign of something?” Remus asked. “Like maybe a—”

“SHH!” Lily hissed. “If I hear one word about ghosts or monsters I’ll —” She was cut off again as she ran headlong into Sirius’, who’d stopped at the very edge of another clearing, his blue eyes blown wide.

“Oh shit,” he murmured, “please don’t tell me he went in *there.”*

Standing side by side, they all gazed down the short valley at the great looming building. Remus had never seen the Shrieking Shack after dark, and even he had to agree that it looked significantly more terrifying with only the moon to illuminate it.

“There’s no way,” he scoffed lightly. “Not even Potter’s thick enough to go in there. I mean c’mon, right?”

“He might if he were scared,” Sirius reasoned; “Or… running from something.”

“You mean what did that to the trees?” Marlene asked quietly.

“Oh no,” Sirius started, “Evans, whose shoe is that?”

Lily was shaking her head adamantly. “Nope. Nope!”

“What shoe?” Marlene demanded.

“That shoe,” Remus answered, tilting Marlene’s hand for her until her torchlight fell across James’ trainer, lying abandoned just in front of the Shack’s door.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Marlene gasped. She made to release Remus, but as another blood-curdling yell echoed from inside the decrepit dorm, she buried her face in his shoulder, screaming on her own.

“Someone’s in there!” Sirius shouted, starting toward the Shack.

“Wait! Maybe we should get a teacher!” Lily cried, grabbing his arm.

“There’s no time to get a teacher! James is in there—don’t you

care?!"

"Of course I care, you insensitive bastard!"

"I'm with you, Black," Remus said, making Marlene cry harder into his cape, leaving behind streaks of green face paint.

"C'mon," Sirius said, taking Lily's hand, "we'll go get him together."

Reluctantly, Lily let Sirius guide her down the overgrown, cobbled path that led to the Shack's front door. Though Marlene dragged her feet the entire way, she came too, and the moment they'd weaved through the busted boards covering the door and into the common area, she clapped a hand over her mouth and nose.

"It's foul in here," she moaned.

"He must be upstairs," Sirius said. "James, you in here, mate?"

There was a short groan of answer and Lily shot forward. "James!" She squeaked; "James, we're here—*EEEK!"*

Just before the staircase, Lily tripped and crashed to the ground with a little shriek.

"You alright, Lily?" Remus asked, wincing slightly at her very-real fall.

"Yeah," she moaned, sitting up and reaching for her torch. "Just tripped over—" She never finished, because the moment Lily turned her light toward her feet, she realised that the thing she'd tripped over was a dead deer's head, left in the middle of the hall, fur matted with gobs of blood and missing one eye.

At the same time, both Lily and Marlene gave a scream so high-pitched that Remus had to cover his ears.

"Oh my god!" Sirius gasped. "That's disgusting! What could've possibly—" Another scream came, this one outside the Shack and further off. "It's the girls!" He cried, and before any of them could stop him, Sirius shot out of the shack and into the dark night.

"Sirius come back!" Marlene wailed as she made to follow him, but the moment she reached the door it slammed in her face and she threw her arms up, letting her torch sail across the room in terror as she fled back to Remus' side.

“Wait! Do you hear that?” He gasped.

“No,” Lily moaned, still scrambling away from the deer.

But there was no mistaking it; another scream, this one coming from directly above.

“Sirius! Remus! Help! Lily, help me!”

“It’s James!” Remus said. “He needs help!”

“We need help! What the fuck did that?” Marlene cried, pointing her torch at the deer. It was positively the most swearing Remus had ever heard her do.

“James, I’m coming!” Lily shouted. Just as impulsive as Sirius in her own panic, she threw herself up the stairs after his voice and Remus followed, eager to reach the climax of their prank.

“Don’t leave me!” Marlene shrieked, dragging herself up after them.

“Lily, you’re going to break an ankle!” Remus warned, following the light of her torch as she took the stairs two at a time. Rounding the second floor's landing, she slipped on something and fell back into him with a yelp.

“Lily!” He gasped, as she stared down in horror at the blood oozing down every stair. It’d been Peter’s idea to drop a huge bucket down them from the third floor, but now as they slipped and slid across the slick wood, Remus was starting to regret everything.

“Someone help me!” James wailed again. *“Oh god!”*

“James!” Lily shouted again. “We’re here!”

“Please help me! Aughhh!”

“Potter, please! Just shut up!” Marlene screamed.

Pushing free of Remus, Lily climbed the stairs even faster, slipping in the waterfall of fake gore a handful of times before finally emerging on the top floor. Another grisly moan echoed down the hall as Lily whipped her head around, lashing the air with her red plaits.

“Over there,” Remus pointed, half-panting; “It came from over there.”

All three of them crept down the hallway toward the last door,

reaching it with their hearts in their throats. Both girls scanned doorway leading inside with their torches until finally they converged on a single spot across the room's black abyss, where they found James lying in the dust, his wrestler's costume all torn up in the front and covered from toe to throat in blood.

It actually looks pretty damn convincing, Remus thought, as Lily burst into tears.

"What the *fuck?"* Marlene bleated.

Lily skidded across the room and sank down to her knees next to James, her trembling hands hovering over him as she cried. Her tears were so real that Remus instantly felt guilty.

"James? James Potter, talk to me!" Lily begged, reaching out to cup him around the neck and lightly pat his face. Her fingers came away red and Marlene clamped a hand over her mouth like she really was going to hurl.

"Potter, wake up!" Lily ordered again, gingerly tracing her shaking hands over his chest. *"Oh god."*

"Lily…?" James' groan was more than convincing, but the little gurgled gasp he gave after whilst also spitting up blood would've made anyone freak out.

"I'm here, we're here!"

"Oh my god," Marlene whimpered. She turned and threw herself into Remus' shoulder once more, nearly taking both of them to the ground. Lily was still half-lying over James, clearly in distress with her dress and stockings slathered in blood and grime. She'd sucked back her tears to stay calm for him, but it was obvious she was about four seconds away from a mental breakdown.

"Lily…" James breathed again, wheezing like he was dying. (He wasn't.) "Lily I…"

"It's okay!" She whimpered, hands stroking James' face gently. "We're gonna get help. We're gonna get a teacher—Sirius has gone to get a teacher! You're going to be okay, just—just keep talking!"

"Lily… I…"

"Yes, James?"

"I…"

With a great exhale, James slumped back on the floor, head lolling upward with closed eyes as blood continued to leak from the corners of his mouth. Lily gave a strangled gasp and threw herself over his body, clutching the front of James' shirt so fiercely she'd ripped another hole in it for each of her fingers.

"James, wake up!" She shouted. "Wake up!"

Marlene smacked her palms into her eyes, staggering backward and hissing, *'fuck—fuck—fuck—fuck'* over and over again.

Remus just stood there. How long did one actually pretend to be dead for? They'd never discussed it, and he certainly hadn't expected such a visceral reaction. If anything, he'd assumed Lily would've caught on by now, but seeing James so torn-up had clearly shaken her.

James must've agreed, because before Remus could even contend with kicking him in the shoulder and calling the whole thing off, he opened one eye and shot upright.

"HAH!"

Lily flew backward instantly, shrieking and scrambling across the filthy floorboards. Marlene was screaming before she'd even taken her hands away from her eyes and she dove back into Remus, knocking them both over in one big heap.

"Gotcha Evans!" James shouted gleefully. "S'all fake! I'm actually fine!"

There was a moment of stunned silence, before Lily—arms, face, and hands now covered in the syrupy blood—snapped out of her shock.

"James Potter!" She roared. "You absolute DICKHEAD!" With a great hiss she threw herself forward and began to beat James in the centre of the chest with her fists.

"Ow!" He laughed. "You'd hit an injured man?"

"I'll show you injured!" Lily screeched. "You let me think you were dead! Are you fucking *mental?"*

"Ooof! Evans!"

"I'll kill you myself, YOU TWAT!"

Having recovered from her shock, Marlene sat up and whirled on Remus, who had finally let the facade fall and was grinning with an open mouth at the sight of Lily's anger. "You guys are the worst!" She growled, hitting him fiercely with both hands.

"Ow—c'mon! It was kind of funny," he said, making her hit him again.

"It was not!" Lily whimpered, losing her anger and beginning to cry again. Instantly sobered of his laughter, James frowned and gathered her into a tight hug right there in the middle of the room.

"I'm sorry. Don't cry, Daisy, please don't cry."

"I hate you!" Lily sobbed, but she hugged back fiercely, and Marlene and Remus were left to watch on in the dark. Eventually Marlene raised an eyebrow in question and glanced up at Remus, who shrugged, completely bewildered. A moment later the pair finally broke apart and Lily gave James another sharp shove.

"Piss off." Sniffling, she stood up and snatched her torch off the floor before storming out of the room while James called after them.

"Oh c'mon, Daisy, it was just a bit of spooky fun!"

"You don't get to call me that!" Lily shouted back, her torchlight disappearing down the hall. Remus made to sit up only to be shoved by Marlene as well, who set off after her with a sharp grunt. James stared after them, sighing wistfully like a man in love.

"Ah, man, she's going to be pissed off for weeks."

"Don't stop there, how about a whole year?" Remus sniggered.

"No, she wouldn't." James' face fell a bit. "Would she?"

"Dunno. If you hadn't broken character she'd still be busy mourning you rather than hating your guts."

"Nah, she'd hate me just for dying in the first place."

"You're probably right, but perhaps next time you should magically revive yourself rather than scare the pants off her?"

"It's called comedic timing, Lupin, look it up. You got my shoe?"

"Sirius has it, I think."

“Buggar.” James looked down and wiggled his foot. His sock was stained with mud and damp. Shaking his head, he stood up and held out a hand for Remus and together they followed the girls out, eager to be out of the dingy shack.

“Oh c’mon girls, wait for us!” James called down the stairs.

“Fat fucking chance!” Marlene hollered back.

Being careful of the blood, they managed to catch up with the girls on the ground floor. James loped in front of Lily just ahead of the front door, making her slam to a stop. He dodged the torch she swung at him but not the second slap to the shoulder.

“Piss off before I give you detention until you’re balding!” She spat.

“Potter men don’t bald," James snickered.

“Ugh! I knew I should’ve trusted my gut!” Lily rounded on Remus, blinding him with her torch as he fell into step next to them. “Where’s Black? He waiting to play dead too?”

“I don’t know where he went!”

“You’re all dickheads!” She declared, using her arm to wipe some of the blood from her cheeks. Unfortunately the sugary muck only smeared more. James reached over and flicked a finger over the blood, tasting it with a cheeky grin.

“Oh get out of my way!” Lily hissed, shoving him away from the door.

“And don’t you dare follow us!” Marlene ordered.

“Where else would we go?”

“Try Hell, Potter!”

“You have the torches, though,” Remus said, and she flipped him off just as Lily reached the door and threw it open—only to come face to face with a terrified Mary and Lottie.

“WAAAAAH—!” Mary clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle her scream as Lily and Marlene fell back from the door, clutching the front of their shirts in shock.

“Enough!” Marlene wailed. “I’m so tired!”

Mary and Lottie fled into the Shack, slamming the door after themselves and bending over and heaving for air as Lily kept her light concentrated on them. “Why’d you sneak up on us?” She demanded.

“We didn’t!” Mary wheezed. “We came to look for you, and then Black, he—he—!” Mary waved a hand vigorously as though it would finish her sentence for her. In her other hand she was brandishing Marlene’s witches’ broom like a sword. Next to her, Lottie was clutching the gin bottle tightly to her chest, blonde ringlets hanging limply around her head.

“Try announcing your presence a little earlier next time then,” Marlene moaned.

“What happened to Black, Mary?” James asked smugly.

“He was dragged off! He came to find us and them something just fucking took him!”

“Ugh!” Lily growled. “He was just playing! The bloody liar—it’s all a big gag!”

“What?! How do you know? You weren’t even there!”

“Ask this tosser,” Lily snapped, reaching back to tug James forward by his torn-up shirt. Mary and Lottie took them in with gaping mouths, eyeing the blood that coated both James and the front of Lily’s previously spotless dress.

“Great!” Mary scoffed, dropping the broom and clapping her arms to her sides; “So it was just some big bloody joke to fucking scare us!”

“I wasn’t scared,” Lottie said, sipping her gin.

“Oh bullshit.”

Pushing past James, Marlene went straight to Lottie and snagged the bottle, taking a deep gulp. Lottie let her and turned back to the rest of them pointedly.

“Where’s the other two idiots then?”

“They were supposed to be back at the fire with you,” Remus said, and Lily instantly had him by the ear, tugging him down to her height with a nasty glare.

“Enough!”

“Bloody—*ow,* Evans!”

“Where *are* they?”

“Let the poor man go, Daisy,” James said, “they really were supposed to meet us.”

“Well they weren’t at the fire pit,” Mary said. “Sirius led us back here saying all of your were hurt!”

Grudgingly, Lily released Remus’ ear and let him step back to rub it with a small pout. “Well Peter was supposed to be with you,” she said to Mary, “so where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Mary shot back. “He said he needed to wee.”

“That was AGES ago!”

“And he never came back!”

“Theen why were you screaming?” Marlene asked.

“We weren’t the ones screaming, were we Lot?”

“Nope.”

“Then it was Peter!” Lily said, exasperated. “If you hadn’t let him walk off—”

“ME? You were there too! And he said he needed to piss! Figured he had that covered on his own! You guys were the ones actually screaming—we heard you in the woods!”

“Only because of the trees!”

“The TREES?”

“And the deer!”

“What DEER?”

“That deer!” Lily thrust her finger out at the spot the stag’s head had once been, but it had vanished. As she faltered over its absence, Mary fumed.

“You screamed your head off over some dead animal?”

Lily whirled back around. “Well did *you* see the dead animal? Because it was covered in blood!”

“So are you!”

“I’M AWARE!”

“Okay, okay,” Marlene sighed, stepping between them and pushing the gin into Mary’s hands and picking up her broom. “Let’s just get back to the fire and get our stuff. I think we’re all tired of being in the bloody woods.”

“Good idea,” James said, and Marlene whirled around to smack him in the shins with her broom.

“You two, we’re roasting over a spit before we leave,” she threatened.

“Fine, leave Black to the bugs. I’m done,” Mary said, hiking up her frilly skirts and throwing open the front door without a hint of fear.

With a dopey grin on his face, James nodded amicably and the six of them filed one by one out of the Shack. At the end of the cobbled path they found Peter lying there, covered in blood and playing dead just as James had.

Lottie marched right up to him, either fist clenched at her sides. “If you don’t stand up right now I’ll finally have a birthday to myself,” she snarled, before drawing back her leg and slamming it into Peter’s side.

Both James and Remus winced as Peter rolled over with a groan. “What the fuck?” He demanded, before sitting up to find all of the girls glaring at him. “James?” He hissed. “You broke character?”

“Sorry Pete,” James shrugged. “Couldn’t be helped.”

Sorely, Peter climbed to his feet and Lottie shoved him forward through the trees back the way they’d come. There was very little talking on the return trip, as most of the girls were still seething with rage, and when they’d finally made it back to their little camp they found an empty ring of logs and no Sirius.

“Fuck him,” Mary lashed. “Nice knowing you, Black.”

The fire had died down without any tending, leaving only a small huddle of burning ash with their things scattered around the clearing.

Lily and Marlene used their torches to scan the ground for any rubbish before noticing a single discarded antler abandoned in the middle of the camp. Lily bent down and scooped it up, turning to Mary and holding it out to her.

“A-HA! Look, Mary, I *told you.* I swear to god, those—”

“What are you swearing at me for?” Mary snapped.

“I’m not actually swearing at you!”

“So you’re just being dramatic again?”

“Dramatic?”

“Yeah—dramatic! Like with this supposedly dead deer and the blood and the—!”

“Oh, that’s real rich coming from you, Mary.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Guys—” Marlene tried, but Lily wasn’t done.

“You were the one too afraid to even check on your friend,” she shot and Mary drew back, offended.

“We came after you didn’t we? In the dark no less!”

“But not Potter, and he was lying dead in some creepy house in the woods!”

“How’s that my fucking fault?”

“Well what if it was real? He could be seriously injured one day and you wouldn’t even know it!”

“Then how ‘bout next time you put a damn leash on him!”

“You’re impossible!”

“And you think you’re everyone’s bloody mother! Just admit you were scared!”

“I wasn’t!”

“You were screaming!”

“You try finding your boyfriend *dead on the floor!”*

A single collective gasp went up between the entire group. Instantly Lily’s hands flew to her mouth. She whirled on James, who appeared slack-jawed and petrified, but before any of them could say anything, a body rushed at them from behind—half human and half deer.

“WHAT THE FUCK, JAMES?” It roared.

With screams that could’ve curdled milk, Lottie and Marlene flew backward over a log as Peter threw himself back into the trees for cover and Lily dove into James, knocking him to the ground. Frozen in place with her own shrill yelp, Mary instinctively pushed Remus ahead of her and he sprawled, taking their attacker down with him.

“FUCK!” The monster wailed. “My spleen!”

It was Marlene who recovered first, flashing her torch across Remus’ back and revealing Sirius—still dressed in his black skeleton costume, only with the horrid make-shift deer mask dropped over his head.

“BLACK!” Lily screeched, sitting up on James’ chest and pushing her blood and dirt-matted hair out of her face.

“What the hell?” Sirius moaned again, blinded inside the mask. “Whoever you are—get off me!”

“I think you re-broke some of my ribs,” Remus grunted.

“LUPIN?!”

“Oooh, you shut up!” Mary snarled, kneeling down beside Sirius and yanking the stag’s head away only to slap him hard on the forehead.

“AUGH! It was just a joke, Macdonald!”

“What the hell—*WHY?”* Marlene wailed.

Remus made to sit up but Mary only shoved him down again stubbornly, making both him and Sirius moan with the weight.

“Oh my god,” Sirius wheezed, then; “Potter, I’m gonna kill you…”

“Me?” James demanded, sitting up in the dirt.

“Yes! You! *God*—Lupin, get off me!” Sirius lifted his head and pointed at Lily and James furiously. “Explain yourselves now! Since when

have you two been secretly on the pull?"

Every head turned in James and Lily's direction.

"Is it true, Lils?" Mary demanded.

"No!" Lily shouted, at the same time as James said; "Kinda."

She whirled around and smacked his shoulder. "We—"

"Haven't been lying about all those trips to the library?" Marlene said, incredulously.

"And how about all that extra time on the football pitch, James?" Peter demanded, emerging from the bushes with several twigs in his hair.

"Well, we—"

"Oh, give it up already!" Sirius grunted, sitting upright and pushing Remus off. "Spit it out—how long have you been shagging behind our backs?"

Lily gasped, mortified, but Marlene and Mary just came together, shouting in unison; "HOW LONG?"

"Since summer!" She moaned.

"But James was with me all summer," Peter gasped, horrified.

"She means we've been talking on the phone," James hissed.

Sirius laughed incredulously. "Oh, so while you two were giving each other the bell all summer you just thought 'hey no need to tell my best mates anything, let them *figure it out'!"*

"You did, didn't you?"

"Actually Lily confessed just now," Remus said. "I'm just mad I didn't call it."

"You knew, Remus?" Marlene gaped.

"No, he didn't!" Lily said. "None of you did because we knew you'd react like this!"

"Well, maybe if you'd told us over breakfast rather than Halloween in

the woods we would've reacted a bit differently," Lottie added sarcastically.

"Yeah," Mary agreed, snatching up a discarded booze bottle, "but I am curious, where is it you two have been bunking off together?"

"Yeah, which dorm?" Sirius taunted. "Or does the gym storage room get more action than I thought?"

"Oh fucking hell, Black," James scoffed, while Lily covered her face and jumped up, immediately racing up the path back toward House Lane.

"Lily!" James shouted, scrambling after her. "Lily, come back! You might get lost!"

Sirius was up in a second; "Oh no you don't, Potter!"

He shot forward but unfortunately for him, Mary was faster. She stuck her foot out, tripping Sirius and leaving him sprawled in the dirt once more with a stiff grunt. "Cowards!" He coughed, as the other girls took off after Lily and James in the night.

Gingerly, Remus stepped up to look down over Sirius as Peter began to sputter with laughter behind them. His makeup was smeared with blood and dirt, but when he looked up at Remus he sighed and smiled.

"What, got something on my face?"

"Just a smug look." Remus glanced at the discarded stag. "We gonna have to start calling you 'Prongs' too?"

Before Sirius could answer, a faint wailing called out from the trees, much more distant and haunting than any of their screams had been.

"What was the hell that?" Peter squeaked. "Reckon it was the Shack?"

"Nah, Pete, don't worry," Sirius said, "s'just my mother after finding out I skipped my last chemistry test."

Remus shook his head, too stupidly happy. "Happy Halloween, you dickhead."

Chapter End Notes

'Twee' means dainty or overly cutesy.
Midges are these horrible little flies that infest the summer and

autumn of Scotland.
‘Giving the bell’ is the same as ‘giving someone a ring’ on the phone.
Being 'on the pull' means to be looking for sex.
'Bunking off' means to skip out on something for school or work, but in this case Mary's alluding to James and Lily skipping out on them to be together.

Chapter 37: Sirius Turns Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Happy birthday to Sirius, love Salazar <3

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking & drinking, but I suppose you're getting used to that, lol. Also references to sexual themes/activities.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You are the dancing queen,
Young and sweet;
Only seventeen,
Dancing queen,
Feel the beat from the tambourine, oh yeah!

- "Dancing Queen" ABBA, 1976

Wednesday 3rd November 1976

As surprising as the James and Lily relationship reveal had been, the fact that the girls remained livid over the Halloween gag did not come as a shock. None of them so much as glanced in the direction of any 4A boy in the three days that followed, which for Sirius could only mean that the prank must've been successful.

It was a bit startling for Remus to think of his friends as being 'together' together, but the more he thought about it the less weird it felt. James and Lily had both had feelings for one another for so long —even if one was more quick to admit it than the other—and regardless of how mad she was now, Remus hadn't missed the way Lily had been looking at James since the beginning of term. Really the most surprising thing was how long they'd been able to hide it, and how none of them had connected the dots. Tonya would've been killing herself over their blissful ignorance. He couldn't wait to tell her.

Utter betrayal from his best friend aside, Sirius was completely delighted with their victory and Peter didn't seem to mind all that much, but James spent the day bitter and lethargic after Lily had

rebuffed him at every meal or meeting since. She'd even gone as far as to switch seats during lessons so that not even Remus could get a word in, and now at dinner—a full 72 hours later—Lily had propped up one of her textbooks between Mary and Marlene's shoulders to ensure there wouldn't be any chance for James to make eye contact.

"They'll get over the prank," Remus told him, sharing an amused look with Peter as James solemnly pushed his potatoes around his plate. "She didn't actually dump you, and it's not like you did something stupid like kiss another—"

"I got it, Moony," James replied cuttingly, and Remus swallowed a wry smile.

Across the dining hall, Lily and Mary stood up from their table, trays in hand. James was on his feet in an instant looking like he was about to rush her from the other side of the room, but Lily shot him a glare so fierce he could only sigh and drop back down on his bench seat in defeat. Obviously amused, Mary stuck out her tongue and drew her thumb across her neck before following Lily to the dirty dish tubs.

"Oh Mary," Remus tsked. James sighed and went back to mashing his roasted potatoes with his fork.

"He still moping?" Sirius asked, sliding in next to Remus with a giddy smile across his face.

"Just worried that Lily's actually gonna dump him," Remus murmured snidely.

"Don't say that!" James wailed; "If you put it out into the universe it might happen!"

"Or she might overhear," Peter supplied. "Subliminal messaging and all that."

James rolled his eyes before looking at Sirius. "Where were you? You were supposed to meet us for study hall so we could bunk off for your birthday."

"Got a bit sidetracked with Kimmy," he answered, "she was giving me my birthday present."

"What'd she give you?" Peter asked, looking Sirius up and down. He didn't even have a dinner tray on him.

Sirius sucked his teeth over a smug smile. “You really want to tell you what she gave me? Okay, two words: blow—”

Before he could finish all three of them were groaning.

“Oh fuck off,” Remus moaned.

“And that’s one word actually!” Peter lashed.

“Wow, Pete! I’m surprised you know what word I was talking about!” Sirius gasped, making Peter flip him off while James burst into a fit of laughter. Sirius kept cackling; “You were the ones who asked!”

“In that case you’re getting shit-all from us,” quipped Remus. “We’ll take it back to the bloody store.”

“Aw, so you lads did get me a *wittle pweasent* after all? That’s so adorable.”

“Don’t see the point in it now. No way we can top a gift like *that,”* James snorted.

“You’re just jealous because your girlfriend’s an angry tease.”

“I’ll smash your face into your own birthday cake, Black.”

“There’s a cake too?”

All three of them turned their noses up and Sirius drummed his hands on the table cheekily. “Okay, okay, don’t make me beg!”

Making eye contact with Remus, James finally dropped his school bag on the table top with a sarcastic huff. The bottles within clinked against each other and Sirius’ eyebrows shot up in anticipation. “Don’t let anyone see,” James warned as he reached for the bag and peered into it.

“Holy fuck, where’d you—” Sirius dropped his voice, “where’d you get all the booze?”

“Secured ourselves a new fence recently,” James hummed. “Sim put in a good word with Xeno. We threw your name into the deal too, but sorry to say you need a guardian's signature for anything harder than spiked cider.”

Sirius stuck his tongue out at James’ teasing and Remus chuckled, pushing their next gift onto the table. “There’s more. We all went in

on a little something."

"It was James' idea," Peter offered.

"No," James corrected him, "Moony was the one who thought of it. I just talked the 'rents into picking a set up for us."

Eagerly, Sirius reached for the present—done up in a pretty box with a Godric-red bow on top, courtesy of James' mum. When he pulled it open he found a tray of sweets from Mrs. Potter, a single Cuban-leaf cigar from Mr. Potter, as well as a card congratulating him on 'growing into a fine young man'.

"You sure they've met you?" Remus prodded.

Sirius just set the card aside, smiling at it shyly. It was clear the admiration he held for James' parents was more than just surface-level.

When he finally tore the rest of the box's tissue paper away and withdrew the gleaming set of chrome-clad Pickering headphones, Sirius' eyes went from shy and humble to completely and utterly dazzled.

"They're top of the line," James said, practically bouncing in his seat. "Dad tried 'em in the store and he said the sound is like the band's playing right there in your ears!"

"Now you can finally let Peter return that dingy set to the AV room," Remus said quietly, a small smile on his face.

"And there's a few albums waiting for you back at the dorm too!" Peter added enthusiastically.

"I don't know what to say," Sirius said softly, running his hand over the cushioned vinyl of the earpieces.

"Don't say anything yet," James said, "not until you see what Andy sent for you. It might actually blow Kim right out of the water."

Sirius couldn't have smiled any wider.

After they'd cleaned up in the hall, they all legged it back to the dorm, heading up to their bedroom while James collected the gift from the hall cupboard they'd been storing it in for the last couple days. It'd been torture not to immediately tell Sirius what he'd received, but

Andy had rung James in secret and made him promise that he wouldn't give Sirius his present until his actual birthday. One thing was for sure though, this time around Andy's gift certainly hadn't been late—nor ungenerous. It was clear from the wrapping's shape alone what it was. Andy had given Sirius perhaps the one thing in the world he wanted more than anything else; his own guitar.

Or rather, she'd given him *her* guitar.

"Oh my god." Sirius ripped away the stiff postage wrappings furiously. The instrument's case was hand-painted across the top in a beautiful swirling pattern of purple, blue, and green, now cracked and chipped from time and wear, and had several stickers on it advertising different towns, bars, and bands Andy had visited or loved when she was their age. When Sirius flicked open the metal clasps and lifted the trunk's lid, his fingers were nearly trembling. Across from him, Remus watched with intense interest while James and Peter bobbed up and down on the bed.

"It's Andy's," Sirius said, "it's her guitar."

"Well go on then, take it out!" James ordered.

Biting his lip, Sirius reached into the case and withdrew an acoustic guitar, tanned in the body and a little rough around the edges, but still absolutely beautiful. Pushing aside the case, Sirius drew the guitar into his lap, settling his fingers on the strings and giving a short strum. The sound was warm and raw, that of dead strings badly in need of a good tuning, but Sirius only clapped his fingers over them to silence the sound and looked up at them in awe.

"I don't understand—she told me on the phone just yesterday that she hadn't even posted anything yet!"

"Is there a note?" Peter asked with big eyes.

Sirius looked back into the case, still in shock. "No, I'll—I'll have to call her."

"It's so bloody cool," James said. "Can't believe you have a guitar of your own now."

Sirius nodded fervently, as though that very fact had only just occurred to him. Standing up, he tossed the black strap over his shoulder and flounced to the centre of the room, turning to face their closed window as though he were examining his reflection.

“Guess you can give the Rickenbacker back to Sheila now,” Remus said, earning himself a scoff from Sirius.

“Not bloody-likely, but blimey…” He licked his lips, turning this way and that before grinning and rapping his fingers on the body of the guitar. “I can’t believe it! It’s Andy’s guitar! I’ve only ever seen the thing this one time, after she’d snuck it into one of the family parties —and now it’s… mine?”

“Only s’long as hasn’t come to her senses and jumped on a train to Scotland to get it back,” James said, standing. He crossed the room to Sirius and plucked at one of the strings, looking more interested than he ever had in anything besides football or Lily.

“It looks like a Spanish style,” Remus offered from the bed. “Are those nylon strings?”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, strumming once more. He glanced up at James and held the guitar out a bit. “Do you want to try?”

James immediately took a small step back. “Oh no, it’s your birthday present.”

“Bollocks,” Sirius said happily, drawing the guitar strap over his shoulder and holding the instrument out to his best friend. James wrapped his fingers around the neck gingerly before turning it over and holding it as Sirius had, turning back to Remus and Peter.

“It looks good,” Peter nodded. “Super cool.”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, “so cool I’m almost regretting handing it over.”

James smiled and plucked at the strings a few times before handing the guitar back to Sirius again. “Doesn’t sound like when you do it anyway.”

“I could teach you,” Sirius offered. “We all could learn.”

Remus watched as both Peter and James exchanged a hesitant look. They liked music well enough but neither had ever claimed to be as interested as he or Sirius were, though perhaps that was just because they had other hobbies.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Remus said, “you know, for the ‘band’.”

“Yes!” Sirius exclaimed.

James shook his head at first, but then gave the guitar a guilty look. “I guess as long as it’s before the start of the season. Could be fun?”

“It will be,” Sirius promised. “Look I’ve got some stuff here, we can start tonight!”

As Sirius dove for his hutch and began pulling out various folders of sheet music and James tried not to appear too overwhelmed, Peter stood up from James’ bed and crossed the room back to his own, picking up a sketchpad and flopping down onto his stomach. After a moment, Remus followed him and took a seat on the edge of the bed while he watched Sirius explain to James which note correlated with each of the guitar’s strings.

“This is totally gonna turn into a thing, innit?” He chuckled lightly, before nudging Peter. “Want us to find you a bucket so you can join in —maybe keyboard? I know Sirius wouldn’t mind if you—”

“I can drum actually,” Peter said quickly.

Remus perked up. “You can?”

Peter nodded at first before shaking his head with a sigh. “No, s'a lie. It’s just, my uncle was a tenor drummer in the Grenadier Guards and he used to give me lessons when I was a kid.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“It’s not like I can actually play. Not like you or Sirius.”

“Have you told them?”

Peter baulked. “No. It’s been years anyway. Uncle Morris died when we were twelve. Mum thought I should keep up with the lessons just for something to do while Lottie was in dance class but dad thinks music is rubbish mostly. Hard to make money without any talent.”

“Did you?”

“What—make money?”

“No—have talent?”

“I was twelve.”

“Well, who gives a shit about age anyway? Sirius started learning before he could walk. I think you should tell them.”

“So I can be third-best again? No thanks,” Peter scoffed, before lowering his voice slightly; “Besides, it’s not like we’re ever going to be an actual band, Sirius is just looking for the next thing he can throw in his parents’ faces. Did you know he’s been ignoring every single one of their calls since term started? And they always phone on his birthday—direct to the Headmistress’s office—but today he skived off.”

“Yeah,” Remus said, worrying at his lower lip, “I did know.” He’d been the one to skip out with him during study hour to share a quick fag when Sirius should’ve been getting lambasted. At the time it felt like a small victory—no one should have to feel so rotten on their own birthday, especially at the hands of their own family.

“His mum’s going to throw a fit over Christmas for sure,” Peter mumbled, rolling onto his back and holding his notepad in the air above him.

Remus looked to James and Sirius, who had moved on to the stereo and were sharing the new headphones to listen to something.

“You hear that?” Sirius shouted over the music, “that’s the break—and then there’s the guitar’s dive bomb!”

“SOUNDS SO COOL!” James answered, bobbing his head steadily.

Remus smiled to himself. “Maybe he’ll just stay. Or James can smuggle him home in his trunk.”

“Don’t think so,” Peter said. “You’d have a better chance of winning the lotto than Sirius would avoiding his parents. Once in year nine he just got off at Kings Cross with us instead of going home for Christmas.”

“He told me about that.”

“Yeah well, we made it all the way home and he got to stay a few days before his mum showed up on James’ doorstep to drag him out by the ear. James' parents were real gutted about it.”

“You mean they just let her take him away?”

“What else were they supposed to do? It’s his mum.”

Remus clicked his tongue sourly. “Well who gives a shit about—”

Before he could finish, a rapid clatter came from the window as though the dorm was suddenly hit with hail. They all looked up, but it was Remus who stood and crossed the room, leaning over Sirius' hutch to get a look at the lawn outside.

“Oh look, the cavalry's come,” he said, as James popped up next to him and reached down and slid the window open.

“Hey there!" Mary called up from below, hands cupped over her mouth. All four girls stood below smiling up at them along with Moira, though she looked slightly more nervous than the rest. "Heard you were celebrating a birthday. We've come to crash it as retribution."

“Retribution?” James answered. “You mean for Halloween?”

“No for Remus' birthday!” Lily shouted.

“In that case I think you're a few months late,” Remus said in amusement.

“Well we couldn't crash his!” Mary thrust a finger up at James. “Partying while stuck in detention might as well be hittin' rock-bottom!”

“Does this mean you're not still mad about Halloween then?” James asked, eagerly drumming his fingers on the window sill.

“Invite us up and find out!”

Shoving between his friends, Sirius appeared at the window sill, grinning. “How the tables have turned, ladies! What have you brought me?”

“Just… deserts,” Lily called sweetly, holding up a cake wrapped in clingfilm.

“And games!” Lottie added, flashing a box of cards.

“Tempting,” Sirius said, before glancing sideways at James. “What do you think, Moony, Prongs? You two missing your girlfriends?”

“Oh you should talk,” James said. “You didn't invite Kimmy?”

Remus balked. “Wait, she's actually your girlfriend now? Since when?”

Sirius shrugged. “Maybe. We don’t really do a lot of talking if you know what I mean.”

“You’re the worst,” James snorted. “How she stands to date you, I’ll never know.”

“Oh, but what’s that they call it—animal magnetism? Don’t worry, Potter, I’m pretty sure she’s just using me for my body.”

“Ugh,” Remus scoffed, drawing back from the window while James shook his head.

“You dog, you.”

“Never pretended otherwise,” Sirius bragged, before turning back to the window. “Okay, come on up, ladies, we’d love to entertain a few more pretty birds for the evening!”

“Suddenly I’m less excited,” Marlene quipped, as Mary snatched her hand and began dragging her toward the doors.

“Is Peter up there?” Moira called, lagging behind with Lottie.

“I’m here, Mor!” Peter shouted, and the next moment all the girls had gone from the lawn. No one tried to stop them as they scampered up through the boys’ dorm to the fourth floor, though Mary did apparently blow a kiss to a ninth year that had left him so stunned he’d dropped his mug of tea on the stairs with a spectacular clatter. Once the girls were inside they all worked together to push the beds together and out of the way, enough so that there was room for all of them in the centre of the floor.

“Reckon Xeno would lend us a few bean bag chairs?” James asked, earning him a tackling embrace from Sirius, who still hadn’t quite forgiven them for ditching him at dinner the day before. Though getting them enough booze and tobacco to choke a horse had softened the blow a bit—that and his new potential relationship, apparently.

Despite Xeno’s haul, they all made sure to pace themselves, not wanting a repeat of Remus’ last birthday. The girls were certainly impressed by Andy’s gift, and Mary had even taken the guitar into her lap to give a few strums before Sirius slid in behind her, showing her where to properly set her fingers for a decent fret. Mary giggled and left a great pink lip-print on the side of his cheek in thanks while Remus helped Lily cut the cake.

“What’d you guys get him?” She asked, watching as Sirius handed James the guitar next and helped him position his fingers as well. He did not get a second smooch from him, though he tried his best.

“Albums, mostly,” Remus said, passing a plate of birthday cake along to Lottie. “Headphones too.”

“Oi, what we playing then?” Peter called, interrupting their chilling conversation while expertly twisting the cards Lottie had brought around in his fingers. Moira sat beside him, feeling him bites of cake.

“Poker!” Mary announced.

Peter made a face. “Do you guys even know how to play?”

“You can teach us,” Lily said.

“Yeah, a little birdie said that you guys bet with music,” Mary said, “and by that I mean Potter told Lily and Lily told us. Sounds pretty cheap for you minted few if you ask me, but luckily we came prepared to win.”

“Oh no,” Sirius and James said together, just as she reached for the bag she’d brought with her.

“Oh yes! But don’t worry, Black, I only brought *good* music.” Grinning, Mary began pulling several records out of her bag, the very first being ABBA’s newest release, *Arrival,* which had been plaguing the radio stations ever since the band’s single, “Dancing Queen” had dropped in August.

As the girls began passing around their albums, Remus heard James lean into Sirius and whisper; “They’ve never played before, I’m sure it won’t be so bad.”

Really, they all should’ve known better. Women always played the long game.

* * *

“—Dancing queen, young and sweet, only seventeen! Dancing queen, feel the beat from the tambourine, OH YEAH!”

“Dammit, ALRIGHT!” Sirius barked, as all four boys stared down the

dark lake water from the end of the dock.

“Well get in the water and we’ll stop!” Mary called from the lake’s edge, waving Sirius’ trousers around over her head as she sang. There were very few lights anywhere close by, but the moon and its reflection off the water was more than enough to see the sly grins on each of their faces.

"Wait! Hold that pose!" Lily cried, scampering to the end of the dock and snapping a photo of their naked arses as the rest of the girls squealed in glee.

“I swear to fucking lord,” Sirius sighed, turning back around and rubbing his arms.

“When did they get so damn good at poker?” James whined.

“You’re the one who agreed to that stupid battle royale,” Peter pointed out. “I mean, who bets dares in poker?!”

“At least they don’t seem mad anymore…”

“Yeah,” Remus started, glancing back, “they seem real pleased.”

“Go on then, you jessies!” Lottie hooted from the end of the dock. She’d done a fine job of pretending like she was the weakest link among them, only to bring the game home for the girls the moment Mary had suggested they bet with dares instead of music. At that point they were so tired of disco-pop they’d have agreed to just about anything, and yet they’d been utterly played—Lake Dubh was always the colour of spilt ink and cold as a witch’s tit in January. At least the girls had permitted them to keep their underwear.

“If you wanted to see us completely starkers you should’ve just asked!” Sirius shouted, despite the fact that he was the only one of them that had kept his shirt on.

“We don’t want to see you starkers,” Marlene answered, “we want to see you squirm!”

James looked back. “It’s November, and it’s freezing!”

“I’m sure the water’s warmer than you think, Potter,” Lily called, without pity.

“Go on you big naked losers!” Moira shouted.

“Your girlfriends are monsters,” Sirius told James and Peter, who shared a guilty smile until a particular icy wind licked past all of them. Remus stiffened like he’d been hit by an electric shock. Worse were his feet, toes curled in on themselves as they stood, shivering, on the wet dock. His skin was almost burning from the cold, but as he recalled the moment Lottie unveiled her winning hand, making each of his friend’s jaws hit the floor in shock, he burst into laughter, earning himself a very incredulous look from Sirius.

“What’s so funny?” He demanded.

“Nothing! It's just—she’s right, you know.”

“She’s—how much did you smoke tonight?”

Remus only laughed harder. “Oh c’mon, she’s right! We’re all a bunch of big naked losers. Well, almost all of us.” He looked down at Sirius’ white shirt pointedly, the brightest thing for miles under the moonlight. Just beneath it he could see that silver chain he’d been wearing since the start of term peeking out along his collarbone.

“I think it’s a little funny too,” James added, despite the fact that his teeth had started chattering and he had to squint even more in the darkness without his glasses.

“Funny?” Sirius echoed, looking back to James. “How funny? This funny?”

Before Remus could peer around to catch his expression, Sirius’ arm shot out and slammed into the centre of his chest, effectively launching him off the end of the dock and backwards into the dark water.

“F-FUCK!” Remus sputtered as he emerged from the lake completely soaked and instantly frozen. “Why did you push *me?”*

“ ‘Cause I felt like it!” Sirius cackled.

Over the initial shock of the cold, Remus hauled himself up to the edge of the dock and wrapped one hand tightly around his ankle. Sirius toppled instantly and fell into the water next to him with a garish shriek.

When his head broke the surface Sirius’ eyes were as wide as saucers. *“FUCKING JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH CHRIST! That’s fucking COLD!”*

“I know!” Remus shouted, paddling to keep himself afloat in the deep water.

“Get in here you pricks so we can get out!” Sirius ordered, wiping back his soaked, black hair and splashing water up on the dock that James and Peter had to dance around to avoid.

James grinned as though he were already in pain. “No fucking way, mate.”

“Dickheads,” Remus grunted, hauling himself up once more and making a grab for James’ ankle. He avoided it, but Sirius splashed Peter at the same time and both boys crashed headlong into each other, slipping ever so gracefully on the docks’ soggy planks.

“Oh *Christ—!”* James hit the water with a smack, taking poor Peter with him. They broke the surface sputtering and moaning while Remus and Sirius crowed, nearly out of breath between their laughter and the cold.

“Nooooo…” Peter whimpered through his teeth, seizing up all over as James instantly scrambled to grab hold of the dock and haul himself up.

“Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck!” He hissed, upon realising that it was in fact colder while exposed to the night air. He rolled onto his back and Remus scrambled up after him, before turning to help haul both Peter and Sirius up.

“Give me my clothes!” Sirius shouted as he dragged himself back to his feet, then; “Those slags!”

The girls had gone, effectively ditching them on the shore of the freezing lake in nothing but wet underwear. Not even James' glasses remained. The only thing left behind were their shoes, a painful reminder that women truly were the cruelest vindicators.

The trip back to Godric was both quick and torturously long. They ran most of the way, desperate to keep themselves warm but also terrified of being caught naked under the moonlight, and by the time they were stumbling across the dorm’s threshold, their lips were blue and their fingers and toes were little more than stumps of ice.

“James, Pete, I want a divorce,” Sirius grumbled, arms tucked into his arm pits. “Your side-pieces are too much.”

“I thought you were the side-piece,” James said, making Remus snigger while he considered walking into the common room to shove his frozen hands into the fireplace. He almost did it too, until a rowdy noise emanating from the staircase caught his attention.

As the four of them stood there, still dripping onto the hallway carpet, Regulus Black, Barty Crouch, and their other two roommates Yaxley and Travers shot down onto the landing, skidding to a halt only when they all noticed they’d been caught.

“Jesus Christ,” Crouch gasped, “looks like someone beat us to it.”

The Salazar boys began laughing in unison, all except Regulus, who looked completely stunned and horrified to see his brother soaked in his underwear in the middle of the public hall.

“What are you shits doing in here?” Sirius demanded.

“Just visiting,” Yaxley preened through his cackling.

“Yeah,” Crouch said, “heard it was your birthday, Black, so we came to say hi. Didn’t realise Lupin had started a trend—you all going around flashing people as a group now?”

James stepped forward first, squinting without his glasses. “Get out of our dorm.”

“Sorry, Potter. Only meant to—”

“He said *piss off,”* Remus snarled, and Crouch pulled back sharply.

“Alright, alright. We just were leaving anyway.” Mockingly, he raised his hands and both Yaxley and Travers copied him, moving around the boys to get to the other side of the hallway. It took Regulus a little longer, but finally he stepped down from the stairs and passed, moving stiffly and not making eye contact.

“And you?” Sirius snapped suddenly, just as Regulus passed him. “What, don’t have anything to say for yourself?”

Regulus froze and glanced up at his brother. “It’s your birthday," he answered dryly; "We wanted to surprise you.”

“Then colour me surprised, Reggie.”

The air grew heavy with unsaid words between the two brothers, and finally Regulus turned and moved past, joining Crouch and the others

as they pushed open the dorm's front doors and skipped out into the night, sniggering back and forth.

"That was nice," Peter said bitterly.

"Let's just go to bed." Taking Sirius' shoulder, James guided him to the stairs, which they all took slowly, tired from the lake and the surprise interaction. Once inside their room, each of them scrambled for warm clothes and once dressed, began sighing with relief. The air was warm at least thanks to the radiator, but the room did still smell of hash so James opened the window to air it out some. The stereo's radio was going, which Remus thought as odd since Sirius barely ever used the radio feature; there was only one local station and it only ever played church ditties and Scottish folk music.

"We'll clean tomorrow, don't worry about the mess, Potter," Sirius was saying to James, who'd already begun clearing away the dishes from Lily and Marlene's cake, when suddenly Peter gave a yelp from the far side of his bed;

"Oh shit!"

"Step on a tack or something, Pete?" Asked James.

"I think someone spilled something over here."

"It sticky?"

"Nah, just looks like water."

"I'll get a towel," James said, as Remus leaned over Peter's bed to get a look. The puddle was much bigger than he imagined, and stretched the entire far side of the room, all the way to the bathroom.

"Oh damn, that's cold," James hissed as he stepped in it, hand closing around the doorknob. Remus watched him, and noticed how the water was flowing, turning the puddle into a lake.

"James, wait—"

But he was too late. The moment James opened the bathroom door, water burst free and sailed across the room beneath their beds, instantly soaking the floor, carpet, and anything the boys had neglected to pick up off the floor.

"Oh SHIT!" Sirius gasped, diving for his piled up records while Remus

sorely tried to save the books he'd left on the floor—most of which didn't even belong to him. James and Peter did their best too, scrambling around and scooping up everything from homework to comics to laundry. They danced around like that for a while, throwing curses while the clogged drains of their sink and tub leaked icy water until finally Sirius threw his things down onto his bed and streaked out of the room.

"I'm gonna murder them!" He shouted as he went, and James flashed Remus a look of brief concern before following him out.

"Sirius!" James shouted. "Sirius, stop!"

"They did it! Those pissheads did it!"

"You're going to wake up the whole dorm!"

"You both are!" Peter added, as he and Remus chased after them, back down four floors and out onto the front lawn, where Sirius finally stopped, breathing through his nose like a raging bull. Despite his desire to commit vicious homicide, none of the Salazar boys were stupid enough to hang around and risk getting throttled, and they were met with only silence and a few buzzing street lamps.

"Son of a bitch!" Sirius growled, as James caught up and set a hand on his back.

"Sirius, it's fine—"

"It's not fine! They tried to prank us, except it wasn't *funny*—they just ruined our room!"

"I bet they'd find it funny anyway," Peter huffed.

"But it's not," James agreed. "And we can get them back another time. You're just angry because you're pissed and knackered, we all are. So let's think about it in the morning, okay?"

Sirius' shoulders deflated slightly and he held his forehead. It was the second birthday in a row for him that had started pleasantly enough but ended in less than ideal circumstances. Perhaps November 3rd was just cursed.

"Could be worse," Remus offered, "the prank could've actually been clever. Think of what it would do to our reputations."

Sirius’ lips puckered into a smile, and he shook his head. “Anyone remember to turn off the water?”

They all exchanged a daft look and Sirius’ hands turned into fists at his side.

“Brilliant.”

Chapter End Notes

About time they got pranked in return, even if Sirius didn't find it as funny. Excited to carry forward with the term, sorry in advance for any incoming angst, LOL.

'Starkers' just means naked.

Chapter 38: November (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

> November proves as a test of endurance.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Smoking/drinking, gas-lighting, and references to sexual content. Also a light self-harm trigger for pinching/bruising/ elastic snapping used as a deterrent for certain thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Boys, boys, it's a sweet thing,
Boys, boys, it's a sweet thing, sweet thing;
If you want it, boys, get it here thing,
'Cause hope, boys, is a cheap thing,
Cheap thing…

- "Sweet Thing" David Bowie, 1974

He remembered it like a flash—a jab of what felt like pain but somehow wasn't, just behind the eyes. They'd been so busy mopping up the rest of the prank, teeth still chittering from the frosty waters of the Dubh, that he'd forgotten. James and Peter's side had taken the brunt of the mess, and afterwards they'd all fallen into bed like zombies. The same.

Before it all came back Remus thought he must have been dreaming, which he didn't do very often. He was flying maybe, or weightless somewhere, just floating along. It wasn't like being in water; in water you were still able to feel the weight of your arms and legs as they fought to keep you upright. Instead he felt like air—complete nothingness. He'd come apart at the seams, breaking up into little bits of matter until he was nothingness itself. He'd think later how that should've scared him—the thought of becoming nothing—but when you were so used to being everything at once, being nothing didn't seem all that bad.

He remembered his mother's trunk during that dreaded hour of night that was too unreasonably late to be up, but too horrifyingly early to be awake. Remus called this time of night the 'shit hour', because you

could do shit-all during it and shit-all about it. Couldn't talk, couldn't play music, couldn't turn on a light, could only sit and think; mostly about things you could do shit-all about. It was all-around shit. You could always worry though, since worrying was shit too.

His heart had leapt into his throat as he threw off his covers, dropping to his knees and reaching beneath the bed to find it. For the first few seconds his fingers fell upon only empty air, and he briefly wondered if the trunk had also disappeared into nothingness, but then his palm collided with the familiar leather surface of one of its corners and he fought to reach the handle. Dragging it out as quietly as he could so as to not disturb his roommates, Remus smoothed trembling fingers along the outside. The leather was damp, moisture already seeping into the cracks along its seams where it would eventually break it apart from the inside-out like a cancer.

Not entirely a masochist, Remus didn't stop to wonder if the water had made its way inside. Using the tiny luggage key, he popped the trunk's top and breathed out as he stared down at its contents.

They were fine.

The trunk's exterior had held the test of time and prank. There was no hint of damp or mistreatment, not even along the delicate silk lining. The records were still pristine, albeit slightly dusty from six years of neglect. Perhaps it would've been better if they were ruined—the covers left soggy so he'd have no choice to throw them out or risk mold. It'd be half the hurdle, gone. But Remus had never been very lucky.

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
And where have you been, my darling young one?

"Shit," he mumbled. Told himself.

He shut the trunk.

* * *

Friday 5th November 1976

The Hawkings rumour mill could've rivalled the BBC with how well it collected and carried news. It took all of one day for word of their 'late-night dip in the Dubh' to spread across the entire campus, though

at the behest of Regulus and his cronies or Mary and her beautifully big mouth, no one could be sure. Up until that moment Remus had been certain there wasn't a single thing about the school that could surprise him anymore, but the prestige that running around freezing and naked in nothing but their knickers brought really threw him for a loop.

" 'Course we did it," Sirius had boasted to a crowd of kids in their next forms, "cold water's supposed to be good for you. Tightens everything up and all that. Lupin would know, he's got abs."

"Oh shut up, you dickhead," Remus snapped, making everyone laugh. He could have lived in the weight training room and would still never pass for more than a bulky noodle, but he'd already resigned himself to suffer the cheeky questions and prodding until Sirius inevitably gave everyone something else to talk about.

Too bad not everyone was under the same impression.

"You need to stop telling everyone you ran around school naked, it's not funny," Kimmy lashed as she clutched tightly to Sirius' arm on the common room couch. It was almost rare to see them sitting so solitary. Kimmy usually preferred to have an audience, parading Sirius around like he was an expensive broach on her shirt.

"We weren't actually naked," Sirius reasoned, "I told you we—"

"It doesn't matter what actually happened if everyone thinks something else. Presence matters—public image matters! Really Sirius, I thought you'd understand that."

Sirius said nothing, just turned away with a stubborn look as though he were pretending to count the books that lined the common room's walls. Finally Kimmy reached for his chin and gently drew his gaze back to her as she traced a line around his perfect cupid's bow.

"I don't mean to be harsh, darling. You know I can't stand the embarrassment—not after what Daddy did to Mummy, leaving us like he did. You understand, don't you?"

Sirius nodded coolly and Kimmy's face split into a smile as she began brushing her fingers through his hair. A moment later and they were made-up; kissing and sinking into the sofa with the fireplace blazing at their backs. Sirius' hand slid up to cup Kimmy's neck but she tugged it down across her collarbone and then even lower, right out there in the open for all to see. Still kissing her, Sirius' eyes opened and flitted

across the room. It took Remus a split-second to realise he was looking at him—that he'd noticed him staring.

Horrified, Remus ripped his eyes away, heart thrumming in his ears with embarrassment.

"Moony, it's your turn," Peter said.

Swallowing the lump in throat, Remus straightened up in his seat and turned back to their game of chess. He couldn't stop thinking about Kimmy and her sickly-sweet voice—she never spoke quietly, not even while fighting with her boyfriend—and Sirius with those stormy eyes of his. Remus moved a pawn just to do something, and instantly Peter was grinning in delight.

"That's checkmate, Lupin."

"Fuck." Remus flopped back in his seat. He should've known; he could've been in the best form he'd ever been in and still wouldn't be able to beat Peter in chess.

"Do you want to have another round?"

Remus glanced at the clock. "No, sorry, I should really get that assignment done for Flitwick. I haven't even started."

"I thought you finished it yesterday," Peter said, gathering up the game pieces.

Remus pursed his lips. He'd *meant* to finish the homework yesterday, but Sirius had inexplicably showed up in the library with a gang of Kimmy's friends and he'd fled before he could be tortured by any more of his girlfriend's unbearable giggling. It was getting ridiculous really—everywhere he went, there they were. As though Sirius were determined to make him into their own personal voyeur. Hawkings College existed on over five hectares of land—it was bigger than Windsor Castle for Christ's sakes—and still there was no relief. Remus figured that he'd have to start sleeping in a tree soon just to avoid Sirius and James' late-night conversations about how it felt to touch Kimmy's boobs.

Peter eventually left him to find Moira and after collecting his things, Remus made his way out of the common room and toward the stairs. As went he allowed himself one final glance back, but this time Sirius wasn't looking at him. Instead his eyes were trained on the fire while Kimmy snuggled into his chest and traced circles across his chest.

Remus returned upstairs.

* * *

Wednesday 10th November 1976

According to the Hawkings student handbook, students were to be responsible for their own laundry to 'help reinforce proper etiquette and value in the small chores of life'. Remus didn't mind much, though the amount of teenagers who were too posh to know how much laundry detergent to put in with their bed sheets really stupefied him. He tended to wait until late in the evenings to do his laundry, that way he could sit and relax with a cigarette and a book and not have to worry about a prefect strolling along and giving him detention for smoking out of bounds. Too bad he had his own personal prefect to contend with.

Lily checked the remaining time on her washer and came to join him on the laundrette's bench as they waited. Mary had also joined them, propped up on top of one of the dryers and musing over her current fascination, which also happened to be Sirius' relationship status. Remus had no escape from it.

"I heard she hooked up with a student teacher in her tenth year," Mary said, sipping the hot chocolate she'd brought with her from the dorms.

"Mary! I thought we agreed that we weren't going to badmouth other women anymore," Lily huffed; "There's enough ingrained societal misogyny without us adding to it! Men are constantly tearing us down —there's literally no use in us doing it to one another when we have them to do it for us. No offence, Remus."

He waved her off, indifferent.

"What about the fact that you're always whinging about Chastity?" Mary pointed out snidely.

"You mean Chastity Bell from history?" Remus asked, interest suddenly peeked.

"You gossips, that's different," Lily shot. "I don't dislike her because she's a woman, I dislike her because she's an air-bag."

Remus snorted as Mary gave Lily a 'whatever you say' sort of look.

"Hey Remus," Mary started, "is Buchanan a good teacher?"

"Uh—yeah. She's great actually, why?"

"I thought I might consider taking voice lessons with her next year. I've been doing the math and I'll have a free period so I figured I might as well do something that'll be fun before we leave school and start preparing to work until we die."

"I thought your life goal was to move to Paris and become a rich widower," Lily teased.

"Well, that too. But imagine how many attractive Parisian men will be knocking down my door when they discover I'm rich, with a dead husband, *and* the voice of an angel."

"I didn't know you could sing," Remus said.

"Oh yes," Lily giggled. "The shower's her opera."

Mary just pressed her hands to her cheeks and smiled humbly. "It was just a thought. My mum had a beautiful voice. Daddy used to say it was one of the reasons he fell in love with her."

Remus looked down at the ground. He appreciated the fond way Mary could talk about her mother. It was clear she loved her a lot.

"Petunia expects her boyfriend'll propose soon," Lily blurted suddenly. "I've never even met the guy, but she told me yesterday on the phone."

"Isn't she still in school?" Mary asked, scandalised.

"Yeah, but she wants to get married the second she's done. Says she doesn't want to wait like Mummy did, but our mum wasn't even old when she and dad got married. She just wanted a career first."

"So she's not going to university then?" Remus asked.

"Our parents want her to consider a polytechnic or a vocational program but she's pretty stubborn."

"God," Mary scoffed; "I couldn't imagine getting married at our age. There's too many things I want to do first and having a man hanging around that often would be awful. No offence, Remus."

“Isn’t this ‘no offence’ stuff getting a bit old?”

“Nope,” Lily grinned.

“Could you imagine if one of us got married?” Mary said, lifting her hot chocolate back to her lips before gasping. “I wouldn’t put it past Kimmy. Think she could convince Sirius to propose before Christmas? Bet she’d demand some tacky ring that’s been passed down through his family for ages and then complain that it’s ugly.”

“They’ve barely been dating for two weeks,” Remus said.

“Like that means anything. She’s got claws like a saber-toothed tiger, and Sirius has money.”

“His family has money—he doesn’t want any of it.”

“Well, that’ll change if Kimmy’s got anything to say about it. And she seems very fond of him. I heard her call him ‘Loveykins’ the other day.”

“I think I’m gonna hurl.”

A ding sounded, Lily’s washing machine, and she popped up to begin pulling her sheets out and transferring them to the dryer Mary was currently sitting on. “Stop teasing poor Remus, Mary, his sensitive heart can’t take it.”

“I’m not sensitive,” Remus objected.

“Sure you are. You’ve been moping ever since Black started dating the girl.”

“I have *not.*”

“Are you lonely, Remus?” Mary asked. “I’m still seeing Ken Thomas but if you’re really hurting I can put that on hold and take you out myself.”

“Thanks for the offer, Mary, but I’d rather be single and lonely than dating and pitiful.”

“Then you’re the only one.”

Lily shut the dryer and reached past Mary, hitting the start button. It jarred her so fantastically that she split hot chocolate across her skirt and slid off the dryer to scowl down at the fresh stain.

“Boo, you hag,” she huffed at Lily, who only smiled.

“We are in the laundry room—want to throw your skirt in with Remus’ stuff?”

Mary glanced playfully at Remus before reaching for her zipper.

“Oh, you guys are ridiculous,” he wailed, covering his eyes as both girls giggled at him.

Eventually Lily got Mary a towel to wear around her waist and they all moved on to the next topic of business, but Remus’ mind couldn’t avoid veering back into Sirius-territory.

No! Stop it, you bloody idiot. Stop thinking about it!

He pinched himself, squeezing until the dull ache turned into a throbbing and the pain had occupied at least some of his thoughts of Sirius Black.

That’s it. Every time you think of it, you can just pinch yourself.

Remus sighed. He’d definitely gone mental. But maybe it would just work. It could work. After all, no one else was telling him to make Sirius a priority, it was all in his head. If he could just turn it off then everything would be alright again. They were just friends—Remus shouldn’t care so much.

And so he wouldn’t. That was that.

“Remus, did Sirius ever say if he had my Runaways tape still? I couldn’t find it yesterday,” Mary said.

“Uh, yeah he and Kimmy were listening to it… yesterday.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll get it back from him later then.”

In the cover of his lap, Remus pinched the inside of his wrist.

This was going to take some getting used to.

* * *

Remus Lupin was a weak, weak man.

Sirius’ problems are not your problems, he told himself over and over

again like a mantra. *I bet if you asked Sirius he wouldn't even call them problems in the first place!*

The voice taunted him, as did the faint bruises decorating the inside of his arm. He'd given the habit up only a few days into it after realising that both the act of pinching and the bruises it left only made him think of Sirius more. He'd tried snapping an elastic around his wrist instead, but that wasn't any better. And so there they were, nearly halfway into November, and it was still impossible to put Sirius or Kimmy from his mind. Perhaps it was because they liked to fight so much—publicly too, to the point where daily relationship updates might as well have been posted on the school's main noticeboard.

THIS JUST IN: Sirius Black only loves Kim Bishop's purple miniskirt this *much, rather than* THIS *much.*

HOT OFF THE PRESSES: Kim Bishop's boyfriend thinks she should really get a sense of humour! One joke about bowel movements every other blue moon shouldn't be such a world-ending event!

TALK OF THE DAY: Year 12 students should be able to accompany their year 13 girlfriends off campus during free-days and if the faculty says they can't, well then it must be the boyfriend's fault! HA!

Really, he should've been grateful. Early on Sirius had discovered he wasn't likely to get the same sort of ego-boosting reaction out of Remus as he did with James or Peter. Apparently it was supposed to be quite thrilling to be regaled with how it felt to snog Kimmy between the shelves of the library where they could be drawn and quartered by Ms. Pince at any moment, but thankfully Sirius had quickly learned to stop trying where Remus was concerned. That didn't mean however, that he wasn't going to complain to him.

"Sometimes it's like talking to a bird—like an actual bird, Moony—just *chirp-chirp-chirp-chirp-chirp.* It never ends. And the whining—ugh."

"Then break up with her," Remus suggested for the tenth time, trying hard to concentrate on his geography text. He had a free period and was trying to study in one of the empty halls, but Sirius had tracked him down after bunking off from Modern Languages.

"Ah," Sirius smirked, "but see where's the fun in that?"

Fun? How about relief? Relief and a bit of repose for the rest of us!

"I don't get the upside," Remus grumbled. "All you do is fight."

“But she’s hot.”

Oh my god.

Sirius sighed wistfully, doodling stars on Remus’ open notebook. “Kimmy's pretty fun too, you know. She’s always willing to try new things—did I tell you she went with me to the Shrieking Shack?”

“Did I tell *you* that Lily went to the library and found out that it was actually where they housed tuberculosis patients in the thirties?”

“So you mean to say that people have actually died there? Cool.”

Remus resisted a groan. “You’re so thick sometimes.”

“Maybe, but Kimmy’s not. She’s actually really smart. In that sort of untrying way. And she’s very loyal to her friends—you should come and hang out with them sometime! Bet we’d all have a party.”

Fat chance.

“—And she likes my music too! She lets me put on whatever I want and always has a good opinion on it.”

“So she’s you.” *And yet somehow so much worse.*

“Oh damn,” Sirius laughed; “You might be onto something, Moons. Potter’s always saying I’m likely to fall in love with my own reflection. Ha, Kimmy’s gonna love that.”

Fall in love?!

“Well, why don’t you just marry her then!” Remus snapped, making Sirius shift uncomfortably in his seat.

“Woah, marry her? Where’s this coming from?”

“Nowhere,” he huffed, glancing away quickly. “Just something Mary said… It was a stupid joke.”

Sirius leaned in. “You’re not jealous by any chance, are you Moons?”

Remus looked back, fully ready to explode on him—*No, I’m not jealous, your girlfriend’s just the worst thing since The Beatles breaking up!* —but the expression on Sirius’ face was not his usual teasing. It was open and honest, seeking the truth. If Remus wanted to, he could’ve made his feelings clear right then and there. But even he didn’t know

what those were and a part of him was afraid Sirius would try to ask.

So, because he was young and stupid just like Sirius, and because he wanted to punish them both, Remus said;

“No, I’m not jealous. *You’re* just an idiot.”

Sirius’ honest look was instantly replaced with bitter anger, which no one could’ve really blamed him for. “Fine,” he lashed, pushing up to his feet and letting his chair skid backwards. “Call me when you’re done having your little fit or whatever.”

“Call me you’re done being a selfish twat!” Remus shouted back, as Sirius stormed from the room, flipping him off over his shoulder.

After that they started avoiding each other at all costs. Remus was determined to never be alone in the same room with Sirius, or else risk having to *talk about it.* It drew any musical practice of theirs to an immediate halt, but it was a sacrifice Remus had to make for his sanity. As long as someone else was around then the subject of Kimmy could be avoided and Sirius couldn’t ask why Remus was acting so nasty about everything all of a sudden.

It isn’t all of sudden, he would tell the imaginary Sirius in his head, *it’s always been like this with you!*

And yet he had no explanation. The realisation that Sirius had always ignited this jealous part of him hurt a little bit—no one liked thinking of themselves as a complete cad—but even the green-eyed monster within him didn’t prevent the buzzing couple from showing up wherever he went.

“What are they even doing here?” He ground out, turning around on the bench at the edge of the football field to scowl at Sirius and Kimmy. They were sitting amongst the sports stands along with a handful of Kimmy’s friends, all of them drinking warm hot chocolate from the dining hall and sharing cigarettes between themselves. Remus thought haughtily that they didn’t look nearly as fun or thrilling as Simeon and his friends. At least their hot chocolate would’ve been likely spiked with Amaretto.

James lowered his water bottle and pulled the hem of his sports jacket away from his body to fan himself. It was the team’s last practice outdoors before they all moved into the indoor pitch for the winter and Remus was more chilled sitting on the bench than he’d hoped he’d be. Despite James’ eagerness when he’d asked to accompany him

to the field that morning, Remus was only there because *Sirius* had told them that morning that he was planning on bringing Kimmy back to the dorm. Guess he'd changed his mind. *Bloody prick.*

"They always hang out here," James advised with indifference. "They're friends with Keith and he's on the team. Dunno why Kimmy still stays to watch though."

"What do you mean?"

"Keith's her ex. He's just like Kim so naturally the whole team heard about their break-up. I just sorta figured they wouldn't want to be around one another so much since it was apparently pretty messy, but I guess that's what happens if you share a friend group."

As James loped away to join the team's practice match, Remus couldn't help but look back. Kimmy and Sirius were bundled up next to each other on the stands, laughing and passing a spliff back and forth.

I rolled that, he wanted to shout, *I know him better than you.*

But it didn't make any sense, so he just turned back around on the bench and read his book.

Remus knew he could only avoid Sirius for so long. Whether it be because of his inability to remain consistent in his emotions or Sirius' general lack of commitment, he could already feel them softening toward each other. In the beginning it'd been snide quips that left James and Peter to look between them awkwardly, but eventually their energy was spent and it took everything Remus had just to ignore the problem that shouldn't have even been a problem in the first place.

The day he was confronted about it came on a particularly cold Friday in late November, after everyone had spent the school day complaining about the drafty conditions of the classrooms and quickly retired to the warmth of the dorms. The girls had joined them in camping out around their common room fireplace and they were all watching some game show on the telly. Remus was only half-paying attention, draped back against one of the sofas and trying not to fall asleep. On one side of him was Lily and James, curled up next to one another under a knitted blanket, and on the other was Marlene, her toes tucked under his thigh for warmth. Sirius sat sprawled ahead of them on a bed of cushions Mary had made up, no Kimmy in sight. None of them asked where she was of course, and Remus was grateful.

It felt like just saying her name would will her into existence.

'Next category: Name that Tune! Remember, there are no lyrics, just that funky beat! Here's the first ten seconds,' the host rattled. A moment later the soul-beat music spilled from the television speakers and Mary shot upright.

"Ooh! Oh! 'Shining Star' by Earth Wind and Fire!" She declared. "Or—or it's The Temptations!"

"No, it's gotta be like James Brown or something," Sirius said. "I say 'Sex Machine'."

"You really think they'd put a song called 'Sex Machine' on television?" Marlene gaped.

"If they can put 'You Sexy Thing' and 'My Ding-A-Ling' on 'Top of the Pops' then these game show hosts can do whatever they want."

"You're all wrong anyway," Remus murmured. "It's 'I Want to Take You Higher'. Sly and the Family Stone."

'And that was "I Want to Take You Higher" by Sly and the Family Stone!'

"Wow Remus," Lily smiled, "good job."

He shrugged, cheeks burning as he tried to avoid the look Sirius was giving him. It didn't work. "Something on my face?" He drawled finally.

"Just surprised is all."

"Me too. Thought you were supposed to have a perfect memory?"

Sirius gave him a little smile. "Guess it's more subjective than I thought."

Breathing in, Remus busied himself by picking at the fuzz on Lily's blanket. He knew the next song too but didn't bother showing off and Mary got it, grinning at Sirius smugly.

"Lucky guess," he grumbled, shouldering her good-naturedly.

"Do you want a cuppa?" Remus asked Marlene as the show went to commercial break.

"Sure," she nodded.

After taking stock of the rest of his friends' tea orders, Remus pulled himself free from the couch and turned to make his way into the kitchenette across the hall.

"Hold on, I'll come help you," Sirius said, popping to his feet and immediately coming after him. Remus stubbornly didn't bother waiting but Sirius paid no mind, padding in after him and leaning against the countertop as Remus gathered everything for tea.

"So James and I were going to have a little practice sesh tomorrow if you were interested," Sirius said, passing him the kettle without being asked.

Remus lit the burner on the hob and shook out the match. "Sorry, got homework," he mumbled.

"Oh, how about something the next day then? Kimmy's having a little get-together."

"You're inviting me to one of Kimmy's parties?"

"Yeah, don't worry, It's totally casual. You should come, really."

Remus squeezed his eyes shut. *Why, oh why, do you insist on having me around?*

"That's the day before Bilshin's next test," he said eventually, "I think I should probably study."

"You don't need to study anymore," Sirius scoffed. "You have that test in the bag already."

"Easy for you to say, Mr. 'I threw my final exams and still got better marks than ninety-percent of the school'."

"You're still hung up on that?"

Remus glared at him.

"Okay, how 'bout we study together first! Thennnn… we hang out?"

"Sirius, I'm not really interested in hanging out."

"Why not?" He whined. "It's like you've become a ghost or something —can't nail you down anywhere!"

The metaphor only made Remus more unnerved. "I—I don't need you

to ‘nail me down’!”

“Well I didn’t mean it like that,” he snorted. “But please, Moons. I’m tired of fighting—not that we were fighting, of course. Everyone has spats, just—I miss you.”

Oh fucking hell. Fuck you and everything you stand for you stupid fucking supermodel of a tosser!

Remus rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck. It would’ve felt better to hit something, but then he’d be the loon. He just wished the water would boil faster. “I wouldn’t fit in.”

“I wouldn’t want you to,” Sirius said, honestly. “I just want to hang out with my mate.”

“And your girlfriend.”

“Well, yeah duh? But Kimmy’s got friends. Yvonne mentioned she might have a thing for you actually.”

“Which one’s Yvonne?”

“Short—blonde—got all those freckles. Cute enough, I suppose,” Sirius shrugged. “You should come! It’s been a while since it’s just been you and me.”

“But it won’t just be you and me.”

“I know, but—please?”

Remus knew he wasn’t interested, but as Sirius stood there and begged him, he could feel his weakness creep back into his bones like a cancer.

“Fine, but I’m not gonna be nice.”

“Oh no, that would be asking far too much,” Sirius snickered, lifting himself up on the edge of the countertop and casually resting his hands on his thighs. From that angle he was finally taller than him, and as Remus looked up he felt a tug just behind his navel. It scared him and so he stepped back, accidentally brushing his hand across the side of the hot kettle.

“Shit!” He hissed, bringing his finger to his mouth to suck on.

“You okay, Moons?” Sirius asked, leaning forward.

Oh how I hate you sometimes. Wish I knew why.

“Pretty prick,” Remus mumbled around his wound.

Sirius smirked. “What was that?”

“I said you still owe me for the last two rounds of baccy from Xeno.”

“Oh.” Sirius’ face split into another grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you. Promise.”

You’d better.

* * *

Sunday 21st November 1976

When James and Peter asked where they were going, Sirius said ‘a party’. He invited them too, but they both had club activities. Apparently Professor Slughorn was planning on letting students start construction on their own homemade rockets.

“Wouldn’t that mean you also have Slug Club stuff?” Remus asked, surprised Sirius wasn't more interested in the idea of shooting off his own personal explosion.

“Nah,” Sirius shrugged, “I only go when I feel like it.”

“And how often do you feel like it?”

Sirius just winked at him.

After bundling up to ward-off the cold, they met Kimmy and her friends camped out in a small crop of trees by the lakeside, surrounding an illegal bonfire of their own.

“I would’ve asked the girls to come too, but I think they’d be suspicious of another fire,” Sirius said to him, arm wrapped around his neck as they approached the clearing.

Kimmy stood up when she spotted them coming, eagerly racing over and combing her sandy waves to one side so as to show off her long neck.

“Hi Loveykins,” she beamed, kissing Sirius and making Remus pull

away immediately. “Where’s your friend—James?”

“James isn’t coming,” Sirius said. Remus noted with a bit of satisfaction that he’d winced at the nickname too.

“But you said he was gonna be here,” Kimmy frowned; “I told Yvonne and everything.”

“I said I’d bring a friend,” Sirius said, eyeing Remus pointedly.

“Oh.” Kimmy looked him up and down appraisingly. “That’s fine then. I’ll go let Yvonne know.”

She scuttled back to the group and Sirius gently bumped his fist against Remus’ shoulder. “Sorry,” he winced, “she really only said to bring my ‘friend’.”

“Believe it or not, Black, I did not have the time to fall head-over-heels for ‘Yvonne’ in the last day and a half. I think I’ll be alright.”

“Oh good,” Sirius wrapped his arm around his neck again as he dragged him toward the fire; “not sure I could handle a broken-hearted Moony.”

Someone had brought a wireless radio at least, and as they settled in on a log next to Kimmy, Remus found himself drifting with the quiet music. It was a Showaddywaddy song, one that had been hogging the radio waves since its release and probably would until everyone hated it enough to change the channel whenever it came on.

‘Let’s go for a little walk,
Under the moon of love;
Let’s sit down and talk,
Under the moon of love;
I want to tell ya,
That I love ya,
And I want you to be my girl;
Little darling let’s walk,
Let’s talk,
Under the moon of love!’

“Guys, this is my best mate, Remus,” Sirius said, introducing him to the circle of about a dozen kids, all of them huddled close to the fire and each other. Remus waved back shyly and turned to Sirius.

“Who’s wireless is that?”

“Keith’s,” Sirius answered, cracking the tab of a beer and passing it to him. “Isn’t it cool? He just got it so it can reach stations even further away than anything Pete’s got in that AV club of his. We finally have more to listen to than just church hymns and disco!”

Suddenly it made a lot more sense as to why Sirius liked hanging out with them so much. “So you like Keith then?"

"Sure, he's an alright bloke."

"But isn’t he Kimmy's—?”

He never got to finish his sentence. Kimmy leaned over and pat Remus on the knee while pulling her puffer coat up tightly around her neck. “Remus take this end of the blanket!” She said. “That way we can all snuggle.”

He might’ve objected, but Sirius was already passing the fuzzy pink monstrosity over his shoulders and he’d forgotten to double-up on jumpers.

“Sirius,” Kimmy said suddenly, her bubbly-tone replaced with that of disappointment; “I thought we talked about this?”

Remus glanced over to see Kimmy staring at Sirius’ painted nails.

“It’s black though,” Sirius reasoned, examining his fingers.

“It’s still nail polish—not very manly.”

“So what, you’re not going to hold my hand if my nails have a bit of colour on ‘em?”

Kimmy gave him a sour look but Sirius just leaned in and whispered something in her ear that made her smile and she finally took his hand. “Alright, as long as you take it off by tomorrow.”

Remus had to bite his tongue to keep from saying anything, and Sirius just shrugged indifferently. As Remus sipped his beer, waiting desperately for the buzz to set in and dull his irritated nerves, Sirius went around the circle of teens and rattled off their names like racehorses on a track.

“And that’s Stanford and Jaz, they’re together but Jaz was with David before. Now David’s casually seeing Kiki but Kiki’s also on-again, off-again with Anwar who dated Erica before that but is now basically

with Stacy. And then that there's Yvonne and she's sitting next to Monica and Luke—they're step-siblings—and next to them is Keith who dated—"

"Let me guess, Kimmy?"

"Yeah!"

"We're all very comfortable with one another," Kimmy said, leaning in again and sliding one hand up Sirius' thigh. From an objective point, Remus knew she was pretty, but even her current friendliness made him want to tear his hair out.

"So have you dated David, Kiki, and Anwar too, Kim?" He asked.

"Oh don't be silly, David's like my brother."

Remus downed the rest of his beer.

Watching Kimmy's friends play around the fire was a lot like how it felt to see politicians and bureaucrats play nice at Lyall's dinner parties. Remus had never really been to very many of them beyond the few his father made him squeeze into an uncomfortable monkey-suit for, but he'd spied on more than one of the galas held at the Lupin Estate. He'd been younger then, but he could still remember how the officials would weave their way through the crowds, and stopping to talk to people less important than they were but never daring to interrupt a conversation of someone above their station. The upper class had never really changed that way, and it occurred to him as he watched the kids interact, that they were those same future elites. One day they would be feigning laughter with an American congressman or some heir to a booming investment firm, rather than just pretending to ignore one another over a fire.

It made Remus miss Audrey with her unsolicited socio-economical commentary, and Renata and Deacon with their almost grandparent-like way of asking how your day was. They could always find something to be glad about. He wished Cass were there with his guitar —he'd have been a 'beginner' on it for three years now. He craved the floaty, nonsensical feeling of Alice's drugs and most of all, he wished Simeon were there to call everyone on their bullshit. At least Sirius would've listened to him.

"Moony," Sirius said, nudging him with a half-smoked spliff. Remus took it and nearly brought it to his lips before passing it onto the kid on the log next to them. Stanford or Stanley or something.

“You okay?” Sirius asked, eyeing him. “You don’t seem like you’re having much fun.”

Because Kimmy had moved away to join Keith and another girl on the other side of the fire, Remus answered honestly. “I’m not.”

“Why? Are you cold?”

“Yes, but it’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

He sighed. “They’re like a commune.”

“I know right?” Sirius beamed. “Isn’t it great?”

“No, it’s not great. They aren’t actually about ‘peace and love’, they’re just glorifying everything. You really think Kimmy with her thousand pound-sterling, mink-lined coat would be caught dead sharing beans and alfalfa in some dingy co-op with a bunch of hippies? All this is, is some weird incestuous friend group who doesn’t actually like being friends with one another.”

“It’s not incestuous.”

“Are you sure about that? Because those step-siblings are sitting mighty close to one another.”

Sirius scoffed. “You think you can see through everyone, don’t you?”

“I see enough. Are you really going to stop wearing things like nail polish just because Kimmy says she doesn’t like it?”

“She doesn’t mean anything by it, she’s just got a strict family. They wouldn’t think it’s proper for a bloke to show up with nancy nails and all that.”

“When were you planning on meeting her bloody family?”

“I wasn’t!”

“Then I don’t get it.”

“Well, that’s a first.” Sirius opened another beer. It was his third or fourth. Remus tried hard to rein-in his temper.

“I don’t mean to insult your new friends. I’m just happy with ours.”

“I am too, nothing could replace you guys. It’s just… nothing wrong with branching out a bit right? Unless you… have something else to say about it?”

Remus drew back. “Like what?”

Sirius gave him a long look. “Nevermind, I was just kidding. Go on then, how is it these guys are any different from us?”

“Well for one thing we don’t all sleep with each other.”

“We could.” Sirius wiggled his eyebrows.

“Don’t be gross. At least we all actually *like* each other.”

“Fine, so we *like* each other. Anything else?”

“I just don’t get how this couldn’t bother you. Look at your girlfriend —” Remus threw out a hand before remembering other people were around. Setting his jaw, he lowered his voice; “She’s practically sitting in her ex-boyfriend’s lap, doesn’t that bother you?”

“No, why should it? I dated Mary and we’re still friends.”

“Oh, right. Glad to know that a three-week relationship didn’t totally decimate your friendship.” Remus sighed. “I just don’t want you to be upset if this doesn’t turn out how you want.”

“Aw, are you worried for me?”

“Don’t make me drown you in the lake.”

Sirius smiled, setting his head on Remus’ shoulder playfully. “Don’t worry, Moons, nothing can break my heart.”

Remus wanted to push him away, but he found he was frozen in place. Chalking it up to the cold, he kept still until finally Sirius pulled away and untucked himself from the blanket. “Be right back,” he said, “gotta wiz.”

Watching him go, Remus picked up Sirius’ fresh beer and took a swig for himself. “Tosser,” he grumbled, as Kimmy picked up the edge of the blanket and sat down in Sirius’ spot herself.

“Uh—sorry Kim, Sirius just went to the toilet.”

“That’s okay,” she said, snuggling into his side, “I don’t mind waiting.”

Remus tried to ease away, but Kimmy just slid closer, a dozy smile on her face. “I wanted to say I wasn’t actually disappointed when he brought you along,” she said.

“Oh yeah…?”

“It was just Yvonne. She has a thing for athletes.”

“James has a girlfriend anyway.”

“Mhm, Sirius told me, but Deedee’s good at getting what she wants. I still think she’s crazy though. Athletes are all wrong—learned that the hard way with Keith. We never saw eye-to-eye on things. He’s much too tame. Who you should want are the ones you really shouldn’t. The wild ones.”

On ‘shouldn’t’ a shiver ran up Remus’ spine.

“It’s why I go for the artists,” Kimmy said. “Sirius said you play music with him.”

“Sometimes.”

“Bass, right?”

“Yeah…”

“Well, I think that’s very hot.”

The gall of a woman with a drink in her hand.

“I think I’m gonna go have a smoke,” Remus said, attempting to untangle himself from the blanket.

“Oh no, have it here. In fact, have one of mine.”

Kimmy produced a box of menthol cigarettes and pulled one free, offering it to him between two fingers. “I got them from in town. They taste great compared to those ugly rolled ones Sirius is always smoking.”

“No, I think I’m okay.”

“Oh c’mon, here.” She took the non-filter end between her teeth and cheekily tried to pass it to him that way, but when he didn’t take it, she just plucked it from her lips and turned it around, lighting and blowing smoke up into the night air. The minty smell hit Remus’ eyes

and made them twinge, but Kimmy didn't seem to notice.

Across the fire, the wireless continued to play, this song more unwelcome than the last;

' —at a church,
Were people saying, My God, that's tough;
She stood him up,
No point in us remaining;
We may as well go home,
As I did on my own;
Alone again, naturally…'

Remus was about to get up and ask Keith to flip the channel himself when Kimmy turned to him, lips pursed quizzically.

"Has Sirius talked about me much?" She asked.

It felt like a trick question. "Well yeah, of course."

"Oh good. That makes me happy to hear. What sort of things has he said?"

"Kim, I don't think I should—"

"I don't care if it was dirty, in fact that might be more fun. At least in regards to what I wanted to ask you."

"Ask me?"

She turned to him suddenly and got even closer, holding the burning menthol between them. "Look, I'm no slag, but I thought it might be fun if the three of us… you know."

"Hooked up?" The words came out before he could stop them, and instant regret surged as Kimmy's face lit up.

"Yeah. I was talking to Sirius about it and neither of us have ever—"

"You talked to Sirius about this?"

"No," Kimmy said fondly, setting her hand on his thigh and stroking it gently, "but I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"Actually I think he would."

"Why? Was he lying when he said he'd never done it before?"

Remus' face felt hot. *"No,* I just—maybe I mind!"

"Oh, don't worry about that." Kimmy laughed and pinched his thigh lightly, making Remus straighten up on the log. "It'll be fun," she told him in an alluring voice, before moving her hand up and taking his. She raised it toward herself—toward her chest.

"No," Remus chirped, pulling his hand back sharply. It knocked the cigarette from Kimmy's hand and she stared down at it sorely before snapping her face back to his as he stood up. "I don't think this is a good idea," he said.

"Remus, sit down back down," Kimmy hissed, "the others are looking."

"Oh I forgot, you only like people watching when *you* want them to, right?"

A nerve jumped in her jaw. "Sit down and I'll forget you said that."

It felt like an ultimatum, and instantly Remus was that same hoodlum kid again, who was always running away from school to chase his friends around dodgy alleys and throw beer bottles at cars. Posh public school prats like Kimmy didn't know what it was to really be intimidating.

"No," he snarled viciously. "In fact, I was right. I'm *not* interested. You're like a leech hanging on to my best friend. Someday someone's gonna burn you off."

Kimmy's mouth dropped open in disbelief but Remus held his ground. "You can tell Sirius that I went back to our room," he growled. "Oh and by the way, your menthols smell cheap."

Turning, he marched away from the circle of kids, almost trembling to his very core and not because of the cold. Kimmy had more than surprised him, but it wasn't the idea of sleeping with her that had thrown him. It was the fact that she might've brought it up to Sirius first.

"Fuck," Remus hissed, hugging himself as the sound of Keith's radio fell away.

'And when she passed away,
I cried and cried all day;
Alone again, naturally,

Alone again, naturally…'

Chapter End Notes

The two songs that were playing around the fire were "Under the Moon of Love" by Showaddywaddy (1976) and "Alone Again" by Gilbert O'Sullivan (1972).

Chapter 39: November (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

Remus wonders what it is that's missing.

Chapter Notes

CW: Remus has a bit of a melt-down here. Just in case that's triggering for anyone <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm singing this note 'cause it fits in well,
With the chords I'm playing;
I can't pretend there's any meaning here,
Or in the things I'm saying;
But I'm in tune,
Right in tune;
I'm in tune,
And I'm gonna tune,
Right in on you…

- "Getting in Tune" The Who, 1971

Remus could not, under any circumstances, ever look Sirius in the eye again.

And that pissed him off, because it wasn't even his fault!

Sirius had demanded to know of course, what it was that had made him flee so quickly from the bonfire. Apparently Kimmy had done just as he'd asked and told Sirius that he'd gone back to his room, but the aloof attitude with which she'd spent the rest of the night in had been more than cause for alarm.

"I just started feeling bad," Remus said the next morning, trying to rush into the toilet while Sirius got in his way.

"Did Kimmy say something to you?"

"God, no! Can I just piss, please?"

“Sorry, Lupin!” Peter said, slipping into the bathroom behind Sirius.

Remus swerved around Sirius in anger and pounded a fist on the door. “Ugh—Pete, get your sorry arse out here now!”

“You’ve been moodier than a girl on the blob—if you want me to break up with her just say so!” Sirius said from behind him.

“I don’t care what you do, Sirius! Just leave me out of it!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

“Smashing,” James declared, walking into the room with four cups of tea. “Now can you two numpties stop yelling? It’s seven in the morning.”

They didn’t exactly make up after that, but there wasn’t any need to. Remus had already resolved for perhaps the millionth time to put Sirius and Kimmy as far from his mind as possible, and now that they were both suitably pissed off at him, it was easier. While Sirius threw himself into his relationship, Remus threw himself into the books, spending every moment he could out of their dorm and in the library. He still missed practising with Sirius, and his music marks were suffering slightly as a result, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask him. Every time Sirius so much as glanced at him he assumed that that was it; that he knew what Kimmy had asked him and they’d finally have to talk about it, and Remus couldn't have that.

But he *did* want to talk about it—just not with Sirius. But who could he go to? Peter and Lottie couldn’t keep a secret to save their lives, and Mary would’ve been just as unable to keep something so juicy to herself. Lily wouldn’t tell anyone—except for maybe James, and James knowing felt about as world-ending as Sirius knowing. It left Marlene, who could certainly be trusted but he didn’t want her judgement either.

It was all such a mess.

Then it hit him; *Tomny and Tonya.*

Of course! They knew him, they’d believe him when he said he wanted nothing to do with the girl—that she’d come on to him.

When he finally got the nerve to phone the flat, only Tonya was

around. It was almost a relief actually, not to have to explain to Tomny why he was so pissed over another bloke's girlfriend. He wasn't mad because Sirius *had* a girlfriend, he was mad because that girlfriend was *Kimmy*. At least, that's what he hoped.

"She sounds like a right bitch," Tonya said.

"God, yes. Finally someone gets it."

"So what are you gonna do?"

"Huh?"

"You turned down her offer. Would you have accepted it if your friend had been the one to ask?"

"N-no! I—I don't have any interest in other guys' girlfriends."

"Oh, I know," Tonya laughed, "couldn't get you to make a real move on me if I tried."

"Not funny, Ton."

"It's a little funny."

Remus sighed into the phone. "I don't know what I'm gonna do. I'm tired of fighting with him."

"Then maybe you should be honest, tell him you think his girlfriend's a miserable cow."

"Can you do it for me?"

"Yes."

"… That was a rhetorical question, but thanks anyway."

"Always here to help, love."

Talking with Tonya had made him feel better, but it did little in the long run. Remus still couldn't bring himself to admit that what he needed wasn't more distractions, but an honest answer.

That he still did not have.

The fact of the matter was that Sirius Black was a rare enigma he didn't know what to do with, and that meant less time spent at his

side, and more time spent at the library.

“Hey Scarface,” Barty hollered down the library’s centre aisle, “take any more naked trips to the lake? How's those pale cheeks of yours?” Before he could so much as begin to laugh though, Ms. Pince appeared and hauled him out by the ear.

“Didn’t think Barty even knew this school had a library,” Remus grumbled, grinding his pencil down to the nub in the middle of his notebook.

“I don’t know why you don’t just tell people it never happened,” Lily said, innocently flipping through her history text.

“Because it did—or were you suddenly not there?”

“Oh I was there alright. And you do have pale cheeks, you know.”

“That’s a blatant lie—you never *saw* them!”

She looked away with a smug expression but neither confirmed nor denied. At least being with Lily was easy. She never brought up Kimmy and any griping about James usually came about because it was impossible *to* grip with him. Lily had said more than once that if their relationship failed it would be because James was too nice to point out when she was being an absolute nutcase.

Clearing her throat, Lily flipped a flash card, quizzing him to pass the time. “On what Mediterranean island was Napoleon Bonaparte born?”

What ever happened to the #1 pencil? Remus wondered, zoning out.

“Remus?"

“Huh? Oh… longitude?”

“We’re studying history.”

“What,” he paused to yawn, “they didn’t use longitude in the old days?”

With a sigh, Lily finally set the flashcards down and glanced at the wall clock. “Where is she? We agreed to meet at four-thirty.”

“Maybe you scared her off by suggesting we do the project on the 'decline of feudalism during the French Revolution'.”

“I'm trying to be nice,” she huffed impatiently, “but between this and prefect stuff, I’m about ready to snap.”

“Does this mean Snape’s still ditching you to be Slughorn’s hound?”

Lily nodded grimly. “Yesterday was the fourth time this month that he’s left me alone to prefect work with Chastity. Figures I would get grouped with her in class too.”

“Does he know about you and James yet?”

“No! God, I don’t even want to know how he’d react. They hate each other.”

“For good reason.”

“You’re not going to say anything are you?”

Remus shook his head adamantly. He didn’t need to go around spilling other people’s secrets, he had enough of his own. “No, never. You and James already made all of us promise to keep it hush.” A thought suddenly occurred to him, and he squinted at her. “Wait, don’t tell me this is all because of Snape?”

“I just don’t want there to be any arguments,” Lily reasoned.

“But you’re dating! How does James feel about all of this?”

“He’s fine with it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, ask him yourself if you don’t believe me.”

Remus sat back in his chair. It wasn’t hard to believe that James wouldn't do just about anything to make Lily happy, but resisting rubbing his successful relationship in Snape’s face every time they crossed paths? That was a feat.

“Remus,” Lily started again, drawing his gaze, “is there something else you’d rather be doing? Because you’ve spent half the morning daydreaming and the other half making it snow inside.”

She was right of course. Since they arrived he’d successfully shredded the first several pages of his study guide into tiny pieces. “No, sorry,” he mumbled, scooping the scraps into a pile with his palms.

“Are you feeling okay? You look really tired.”

“Well it is a Saturday morning, Lils.”

“So you’re tired because it’s early, not because you barely slept last night?”

Remus just grunted in response and Lily frowned.

“Have you gone to see Ms. Pomfrey? She might be able to give you something that’ll help.”

“The nurse can’t do anything. I’m not a restless baby you can give opium to, Lily.”

“And she’s not going to give you opium, *Remus,* but maybe she’s got a tea or something.”

“Blimey, you’re right, how could I have never thought of chamomile before?”

Lily scowled, unimpressed, and closed her history text. “Will you tell me why it’s so bad then? Why you can’t sleep?”

To avoid her gaze, Remus began patting at his mountain of paper bits. “No reason. Always been a shit sleeper.”

“So it’s chronic?”

“Guess so.”

“Insomnia’s supposed to be triggered by stress, you know.”

“Is it really? Fascinating.”

She threw a flashcard at him.

“Sorry,” he said over a light laugh, “it’s nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing,” she pressed. “Is it exams that have you so distressed? Because you know those aren’t for a few weeks.”

“I’m not distressed.”

“And you’re going to pass all of them with flying colours so—”

“Lily, it’s not exams!”

“Okay…” Lily bit her lip. “Is it something else then? Like maybe… someone else?”

“Oh my god,” Remus moaned, pressing his fingers into his eye sockets, instantly mortified that she had somehow been able to read his mind. “Please stop.”

“I know, I know. But Peter’s got Moira and Lottie’s with Mickey and Mary just started seeing that Bryan guy from the year above—”

“I thought his name was Ken?”

“Different guy—but I know we’ve been busy and Sirius has been spending a lot of time with *other* people, so I figured if you’re feeling a little neglected—”

“I have you and James.”

Lily raised her eyebrows pointedly. “Not that I’m not flattered, Remus —truly—but… my point? Me and James?”

“Oh…”

“It’s not like I want you to feel as though you can’t—”

“No, I get it,” Remus said, raising a hand to stop her.

“Yes, well,” Lily cleared her throat a bit, “I’ve been thinking…”

“Shocker.”

“Oh so snide—I meant I’ve been thinking about *you.* You and… other people…”

That got his attention. “What are you on about now, Evans?”

“Nothing! Just that Marlene really clung to you on Halloween, so I thought that maybe…”

“Here’s the pot calling the kettle black if I’ve ever seen it! What about you and Potter? You were hugging and kissing and—”

“We did not kiss!”

“Only because you were too busy trying not to knock his head off.”

“Yours too, actually. And you both would’ve deserved it.”

Remus smirked. “Bet you liked tricking him out of his clothes on Sirius’ birthday.”

“Oh shut it, you.”

Remus sat back, satisfied. But he couldn’t deny the odd feeling that came over him when Lily brought up Marlene. They were friends, right?

“I swear to god…” Lily sighed, looking to the clock again. “She must think this all some joke. If our marks suffer because we had to drag her along—”

“Well I think we should consider ourselves lucky. Sirius and Lottie got stuck with Snape.”

“Or Sev got stuck with Sirius.”

Remus groaned. “How much does that git pay you to buy such loyalty?”

Lily stuck her tongue out at him and he reached over to poke the back of her hand with his pen in retaliation. She gasped before doing the same to him, leaving a mark on his wrist and igniting a pen-war that only ended when Chastity Bell finally dropped her book bag down onto the table across from them.

“Hi-ya,” Chastity said coolly, pulling her long brown hair over her shoulder. She raised an eyebrow when she noticed the ink, now decorating them up to their elbows.

“Hi, Chastity,” Lily said, straightening up and reaching for her books. “Glad you could make it. I don’t know if you got the chance to look over my notes but we—”

“Look I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but is there any way we can make this quick?” Chastity started, untucking her chair from the table and sitting down. “I’ve just got some things to do today.”

Lily gave a vinegary smile. “Yeah, that’s fine. How about we go over the project’s rubric to assign roles, that way we can do them separately.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Stiffly, Lily set about organising her notes as Remus stretched and

draped one arm over the back of his chair. Chastity hadn't bothered to unpack any of her things, and instead was simply staring at him like he was a puzzle she'd yet to work out. It made him slightly nervous and he licked his lips, keeping his eyes focused on Lily's papers as well.

"There, that one," Remus said, pointing at the rubric. Lily slid it out of her paper stack and tapped them straight again before clearing her throat.

"Right, so, I figured—"

"You're from London, Remus, yeah?" Chastity interrupted.

"Er, yeah."

"What part?"

"Greenwich," he answered, suddenly aware of how moist his palms had become. Some girls just did that to you—it had been the same way with Tonya until he'd gotten to know her better. Kimmy, thankfully, did not have the same effect.

"Oh really?" Chastity began twirling a lock of hair around her finger. "Someone told me it was Chelsea. I'm from Kensington. Where'd you go to school?"

"Just some boys' school."

"Well why'd you switch to Hawkings? It's terribly dreary up here. Not that we don't appreciate having you, of course." Chastity propped her chin on her hand and batted her eyelashes.

"Doesn't rain anymore than it does in London," he murmured.

"Was it because of the school's reputation then?"

"Not exactly."

"I bet it must've been terribly lonely at an all boys school."

"Er…" Remus glanced to his right where Lily was sitting and quietly fuming under the guise of a tight-lipped smile. "Chastity, I really don't think—"

"Oh, call me Chas. Everyone does." Chastity smiled broadly and leaned in a bit. "Say, would you be willing to tell me how you got—"

She tapped her nose over the spot where Remus had his scar. Before he could react, Lily reached across the table to slap the project rubric down in front of her along with a list of books.

"Chas," she said sweetly, "would you mind asking Ms. Pince which of these books are available? I know they'll be useful for the project."

Chastity picked up the list with two fingers as though Lily had just handed her a dead rat. "We'll need all of these?"

"Don't worry, if you can check them out for us, Remus and I will compile whichever ones seem most useful for your half of the work."

"So you want me to—"

"If you mind terribly, Remus can always go look and you and I can stay here and start sorting through Professor Binns' *extended* reading list."

Chastity's eyes became narrow like a cat's, but rather than begin hissing, she proudly got up from her seat and began stalking toward the librarian's desk, her school skirt swishing behind her and the reading list clutched tightly in her fist.

"I thought you already checked out the books we needed," Remus said, nudging Lily's elbow with his own.

"I did. I just needed her to go away. I can't believe what she said to you."

Remus looked up again, watching Chastity at the librarian's desk. She caught him staring and waved and he swallowed thickly. "She isn't any worse than Kimmy. In fact I'd rather Black date her. At least she didn't ask anything anybody else hasn't already wondered."

"Ugh, boys," Lily scoffed, scribbling in her day-timer. "You just think she's hot."

"I do not!"

"No?"

"No!"

Lily just smirked, making Remus roll his eyes. "Want to work on this Tuesday night after English?" He asked, attempting to change the subject. "We don't need to invite Chastity."

“Can’t, I have a Slug Club meeting.”

“Oh. You’re still in that? Sirius never goes.”

“Mhm. Black only comes to about every second or third meeting, but Professor Slughorn still thinks he’s some unfulfilled genius and won’t bother kicking him out. Potter goes, though. How about tomorrow?”

“No, sorry, I told Marlene I’d help her with something.”

“With what?”

“Dunno, I only half heard her when she was running to class this morning. More homework, I guess. ”

Lily clicked her tongue and gave a sly smile. “You guess?”

“Yeah, I mean what else?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Remus narrowed his eyes. “What are you smirking at?”

“Come on, Remus. I know you’re not that thick—*Marlene?”*

“What about her?”

Lily dropped her head back and gave a great groan. “Fine, what… *colour* would you say her hair is?”

“… Is this a trick question?”

“No, you dimbo! What colour?!”

“Blonde...?"

Lily held out her hands as though she were presenting him with an idea. “I think it’s more like this beautiful golden colour. Like daisies or sunshine. See, now it’s your turn. You read, try for something more romantic than just ‘blonde’.”

Remus looked around like an explanation for his friend’s sudden insanity would appear out of thin air. “What does romance have to do with a hair colour?”

“Now you’re asking me the trick question!”

He snorted and Lily smiled back at him wistfully. A moment passed, then she asked; “Have you ever been on a date, Remus?”

He blinked. “What? No.”

“Would you like to—if we weren’t at school?”

Remus looked up briefly, eyeing Chastity, before pushing the thought away and giving a short chuckle. “Wow, Evans, I’m almost inclined to accept your proposal if I didn’t worry about James sucker-punching me for it.”

“Actually I think you’re about the only one he wouldn’t sucker punch,” Lily replied gleefully, “but nice try. You know I meant Marlene.”

“Well that’s all right and good, but I’m not dating Marlene.”

“But would you?”

“If we weren’t at school?”

“No—*anywhere.* Like right now?”

“You’re trying to set us up, aren’t you?”

“And apparently I’m failing miserably at it, since both of you are about as observant as Professor Binns.”

Remus balked. “You mean you’ve talked to Marlene about this?”

Lily just looked at him. “Duh.”

“And what did she say?”

“I’m not going to tell you unless you’re interested.”

“So that means she’s interested?”

Lily rolled her eyes and flipped open her textbook, letting Remus slump back into a bout of thoughtful silence. Marlene was a good friend, but a *girlfriend?* That was news. Marlene was pretty enough of course, and her taste in music wasn’t all that bad—almost pleasant if you took away the amount of church hymns she had committed to memory.

He thought of his friends, Peter who’d been in what could only be

considered a long-term relationship in teenage years, and James who'd been pining after the same girl for most of his waking memory. Sirius was nowhere close to their level, but seemed to have enough fun on his own if his and James' late-night conversations were anything to go by. And of course there was Tomny and Tonya, who both seemed to exist in the same way that the ocean met the shore, separate but moving together as though one couldn't exist without the other. They were all happy in their own way and he'd never felt jealous over it until recently. Perhaps getting a girlfriend would mean he could finally start worrying about his own relationship status and not Sirius'.

As Lily continued writing and rewriting her study notes, Remus bit his lip, strumming his fingers on the table as though he were playing his bass. It was the first few chords to "You're My Best Friend".

He sighed, pausing his fingers. "Marlene likes the Bee Gees right?"

Lily looked up and beamed at him just as Chastity returned to the table in a huff, slapping the book list back down on its surface.

"This is the suggested reading list for *psychology."*

"Ooh, sorry Chas," Lily frowned, "my mistake."

* * *

Later that night…

Remus winced as he hit the wrong cord and his flow was instantly obliterated, ruining his run-through of "In the Hall of the Mountain King". He might've felt less disappointed, had Sheila not been sitting right in front of him on the piano bench. Asking his teacher for a bit of extra help practising had seemed like a good idea before, but now he was just embarrassed.

"You're going for speed, but what we really want is accuracy," Sheila told him. "Try keeping your hand locked on those four frets that way you can use your third finger rather than tripping over everything with your first and second."

He nodded and tried again. This time the flourish sounded better, but he still messed up the rests.

“Here.” Sheila turned back to the piano and played each note staccato so he could hear them clearly. “You hear that?” She teased, hitting a high G several times; *ding-ding-ding-ding!* “That’s where you rest and begin the reprise.”

Taking a deep breath, Remus tried once more, but again he hit the wrong cord and immediately froze. “Shit. I sound terrible.”

Sheila turned around on the piano bench, her hands folded neatly in her lap. “Remus, you sound wonderful.”

“But I still can’t get it,” he huffed.

“You’re learning. It’s alright to make mistakes. Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“And yet Sirius gets to be born a Mozart.”

Sheila smiled like she knew exactly what was going on, and he immediately regretted the snide remark.

“I’ve noticed you and Sirius have been sitting apart these last few weeks,” she said, casually smoothing out her skirt. “Do you want to talk about it?” Remus went to open his mouth but she cut him off; “Let me guess—no.”

He scowled at her and looked down at the Fender stubbornly.

“Well,” Sheila started, “I may be your teacher, but I’m certainly not a counsellor. I can’t tell you what you should or shouldn’t do to magically solve all your problems, but I can assure you that taking it out on that bass guitar isn’t going to make you feel any better.”

Remus plucked a harsh fret pointedly. “I disagree.”

Sheila laughed at him and turned back to the piano. “That’s right, not a counsellor, just a music teacher,” she said, loudly, as though she were talking to the room itself. “I wonder though, if I were to play *really* loudly, you wouldn’t be able to hear much, would you? Not even if someone were to shout out all of their problems. They wouldn’t even have to be talking to me, they could just be saying words. Like, how they’re feeling or how they wish they were feeling. Hmm, I wonder.”

Without letting him object, Sheila immediately started up a piece with a brisk tempo, starting as vivace and quickly transforming into

vivacissimo. As promised, she played each note with such fervent vigour that the piano drowned out even the incessant noise of the room's radiator as it blared down at them from the ceiling.

"Nope!" She hollered. "Can't hear a thing! Anyone could be saying anything and no one would know!"

This is stupid, Remus thought. *She's insane.*

"Did you say something, Remus?" Sheila called.

"N—"

"Sorry, can't hear you!"

He growled in the back of his throat. "This is stupid!"

Sheila kept on, her back to him and swaying with every excited note.

"I said it's STUPID!" He yelled again, with no reaction. "It's stupid and I want to *smack him!"*

Remus had blurted the words out so suddenly that it surprised him, but their meaning was instantly lost in the noise of Sheila's music anyway, leaving him stunned and almost overwhelmed.

"I want to tell him he's being an idiot and hear it when he says the same thing to me!" He picked up, clutching tightly to the neck of his bass while Sheila practically danced to the rhythm of the piece. "I want to stop being jealous of everything! But what isn't there to be jealous about?! He's talented and popular and good-looking and—and people like him better and I do too so I don't understand what the *PROBLEM IS!"*

"That's it, Remus!"

He could've choked on the music. It was diving down his throat and pulling out his words as though it could throw them to the wind. If he were in a movie, he'd be whipping around in a tornado, waiting to be dropped in the Land of Oz to squish his own Wicked Witch.

"I want to understand but it's impossible," he wailed. "I want to be there and not there at the same time and I want him to just *understand* without me saying it! I want to be here and I want to be home and I want to pass my exams but I also want to be able to say *'FUCK IT'* like I used to! I want to play guitar with James and watch stupid movies

with Peter and read wonderful books with Lily and listen to amazing music with *him!* I want to throw bottles at walls with Lee and wrestle with Doss and see Flaky again but I can't! And I want to be with Tomny! I want to *see* Tonya—I want to do all of it right NOW! And I'm so tired of caring—I just don't want to care anymore but I do! *AND THAT MAKES ME TIRED!"*

As he finished his breathless rant, Sheila's song slowly came to a filtered end, dropping in tempo and volume until she was just tapping her fingers against the keys.

Any way the wind blows…

"I'm very proud of you, Remus," Sheila said, slowly turning around on the piano bench as he heaved in his chair. Remus sniffed, wiping his face, but her eyes were kind. Without judgement. It nearly killed him.

"But remember," she told him; "you're only sixteen, dear. It's okay to be upset, to be unsure. And it's certainly okay to be tired."

Remus bit down hard on his bottom lip to keep it from trembling. Maybe that was just it. Maybe he needed someone to say it was okay.

Something across the room drew Sheila's attention and she turned toward it with a brighter smile on her face. "You're late for your detention, Mr. Black."

Remus shot upright in his chair and spun around to find Sirius standing there, arms pressed up behind his head awkwardly.

"I didn't want to interrupt your song," Sirius murmured, not meeting either of their gazes.

Sheila popped up from the piano bench and began smoothing out her skirts, completely nonchalant. "Well, I was going to make us some tea before I set you to work, but I'm afraid I just ran out of sugar this morning. I've been meaning to make a run to the faculty office to pick some up, but I haven't had the time. Perhaps I'll go now. Provided you can promise you'll still be here when I return?"

Sirius nodded slowly and Sheila let her eyes pass over him to Remus. "Alright then," she hummed. "I'll be right back. Just in case anyone needs anything."

She left the room in the same brisk manner with which she played, stopping only to put a comforting hand on Sirius' shoulder. Remus

tried not to pay attention, wiping his reddened cheeks as he turned back to the Fender and attempted to recall what Sheila had said about his fretting. Impossible.

“How do you do it?” Sirius asked, crossing the room and taking a spot back up on the piano bench. He didn’t so much as glance at the piano, just clasped his slender hands in his lap.

“Don’t ask vague questions, they only waste time,” Remus mumbled.

“But it’s like our thing. I ask ‘how do you do it’ and you say ‘do what’ and I say ‘make everyone like you’.”

“Not everyone likes me.”

“I like you.”

“Stop that.”

“See, it is our thing—stop what?”

“Stop throwing words around! You’re like a walking sudoku puzzle.”

“That’s funny, except sudoku uses numbers,” Sirius snorted. “D’you mean words like ‘I like you’ then? ‘Cause I’m not throwing it around, I do like you.”

“Fine. Do you also like Kimmy?”

“Well I should, shouldn’t I? She’s my girlfriend, and she says she likes me.”

Remus bit down hard on his bottom lip. “Is that why you date her then? Because she *says* she likes you?”

“You say that like it’s odd or something.”

“Well, maybe I’m just odd.”

Sirius raised his chin. “Alright, so you’re odd. Would it be so bad if I were odd too? I wouldn’t like you if you weren’t.”

“You always know just what to say,” Remus said with sarcasm.

“I know, it’s a gift.” Smiling, Sirius spun around on the bench and faced the piano. He just stared down at it as though it were stone rather than a tool for excellence. “You’re odd, Lupin… sort of like a

cuckoo clock."

"… What?"

"You are! You exist in this sort of shell that only ever venture out of at certain times of the day. And when you do, no one ever ignores you. You make yourself heard, but then you're quick to snap yourself back up again. You're consistent at least, I'll give you that. But you know, every time you pop up, I sort of get this little thrill, like 'oh there he is again'—there's that Moony! God, he sure is surprising!"

"You're insane," Remus mumbled, pressing his chin to his shoulder out of embarrassment.

"Insane, odd—they're all just synonyms for one another. As far as I'm concerned, that makes us the same." He looked at him. "And I want to be the same. I do."

Remus licked his lips. *I wish I could make you understand.*

"Sirius… did you hear what I was saying when… when Sheila was playing the piano?"

"No. Would it have been better or worse if I did?"

"I don't know." He took a deep breath. "But I don't want to fight anymore."

Sirius' shoulders sagged with relief. "Me neither. Does this mean… that you're not mad anymore?"

"No—or yeah, I'm not mad. Lily—she… she gave me some stuff to think about."

"Oh…" Sirius looked down at his hands. "That's good then."

"Yeah, so… friends again?"

With a tight smile, Sirius nodded. "Always."

It felt like a weight had been lifted off Remus' shoulders. He still wasn't sure what it was about Sirius that cut him so deeply, but if he could at least learn to not be so jealous then just maybe things would go back to the way they were.

"Do you want to practice something?" He asked, making Sirius nod enthusiastically.

“I thought you’d never ask! My god, you should *hear* James, he’s brilliant! Might be a prodigy himself! C’mon, I left my guitar back at the dorm.”

As Sirius bounded away from the piano and to the door, Remus began to scramble to pack up his things. “I thought you had detention? Sheila told you to be here when she got back,” he said, setting the Fender back into its case and shoving his music sheets back into his bag.

“Eh,” Sirius shrugged, “I’ll give her an I-owe-you or bribe Evans to make her a batch of cookies or something.”

Remus sighed happily as he came to join Sirius by the door. “You think the world bends to you.”

“Au contraire, Lupin, I make the world bend to me. It’s an exhausting task really, perhaps you should try it sometime—give me a break.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

Sirius bounced up and down in place in excitement. “Can’t wait to see it.”

He turned to lead them away, but Remus reached out and grabbed his wrist at the last second, making his own heart jump in surprise.

“Sirius,” he tried as the dark-haired boy whipped back around to look at him; “Are we… Are we missing each other? Like… messing something up? I just feel like maybe something’s been… lost.”

Sirius laughed gently. “How can you have lost me? I’m right here.”

Oh.

Nodding, Remus dropped his arm. “You’re right. I was being odd again. Sorry.”

“S’okay. Now c’mon, let’s go make James and Pete be odd with us.”

“Okay.”

Together they shot out of the Bellchant building, narrowly avoiding Sheila as she made her way back up the street. Remus tried hard to reassure himself; Sirius had said they weren’t missing, so that must’ve meant they were whole.

He wanted to trust him in that, at least.

Chapter End Notes

A 'girl on the blob’ is a girl on her period.
'Vivace' is the musical direction for a fast-paced piece and 'vivacissimo' is just faster than that.

We go through a lot of emotions in this fic, don't we?

Chapter 40: Marlene

Chapter Summary

Remus gets to see a new side of Marlene. Revenge is plotted.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking, pining, and organised sports (though that might only be a trigger for Remus, lol)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunshine, lollipops and rainbows,
Everything that's wonderful is what I feel when we're together;
Brighter than a lucky penny,
When you're near the rain goes, disappears, dear;
And I feel so fine,
Just to know that you are mine!

- "Sunshine, Lollipops and Rainbows" Lesley Gore, 1963

Wednesday 1st December 1976

With the spat with Sirius behind him, Remus could finally move forward. There was still Kimmy to contend with of course, but it was at least clear now thanks to her general disdain for him that she'd told Sirius nothing of her proposition. Remus didn't mind, let her pride save him from further embarrassment. He was just happy to have his friend back, even if it came with a few unsavoury conditions.

On Wednesdays the ninth years had free-rein of the library for study hour, and so Remus met his friends in one of the large private study halls in the Flamel Block. He'd expected they'd all sit and study together as usual, but apparently Lily had other plans. A cheeky smile on her face, she'd secluded him and Marlene at their own table and made it clear to everyone else that he was 'helping' Marlene with homework and they 'were *not* to be disturbed'.

"She's just being silly," Marlene said, "we're only studying—we always do it together."

"Mm."

“Did you hear her going on about how I asked for help with the English homework—what English homework? Professor Flitwick agreed not to assign anything while we read the next novel. She’s just having us on. I only asked for your help to—Remus, are you listening?”

“Mm?”

Marlene followed his gaze and rolled her eyes. “Really, do they have to be so public about it? We actually do have exams to prepare for.”

“ ‘If life’s a stage…’,” Remus murmured, before blinking as he forced himself to look away. Of course he agreed with Marlene; the one time Sirius shows up for private study and all he can do is sit back with Kimmy practically in his lap, their faces stuck together in the middle. Every time a teacher came by James reached over and thumped him in the shoulder, and the pair would separate long enough for the threat to pass before sniggering and returning to their revolting show of public affection.

But, as he was getting better at reminding himself, Sirius’ relationship wasn’t any of his business.

“Honestly, I’m a bit surprised they’ve made it this long,” Marlene went on. “I didn’t think Sirius was Kim’s type. He wears more makeup than she does.”

“He’s not wearing it anymore,” he said simply, reaching for his pen as it rolled away from him across the table.

“He’s not?”

Remus shook his head. It probably would’ve taken a world-ending event for him to admit it aloud, but he secretly missed zoning out on Sirius’ colourful nails as he strummed his Rickenbacker during class or practice. But it didn’t matter, they were talking again, even if Kimmy was now making it plain that she hated him. Not that that mattered—the feeling was mutual, but he was at least thankful that she was subtle about it. Dinner the night before had been one of the first meals they’d shared together since the bonfire, and after another failed project-meeting with Chastity, he and Lily had arrived together at the dining hall to find their table already crowded with friends. While Lily immediately began sharing her woes of Chastity with James, who already had a cup of tea prepared for her which he pushed across the table with a smile, Remus took a seat between her and Moira. It had been almost startling to see their table so full, but as he’d dug into

dinner, Remus found he didn't mind all that much. In fact, he'd missed it.

"You should've seen Miss Pince's face when Remus returned the books and said he'd re-shelve them himself," Lily started over her chicken and rice.

"I know the cataloging system! Only because of detention…"

"But I've never even seen her *smile.* It was like you'd cast a spell on her or something."

"A regular casanova," James chuckled. "Next you'll have the teachers swooning for you, Lupin."

"He already does!" Sirius exclaimed, appearing behind Remus and throwing his arms around his shoulders in a great bear-hug. "Pretty sure Sheila's in love with the handsome prick."

"Get off," Remus moaned, and Sirius obeyed, turning to Moira and Peter.

"Oi guys, budge up a bit?" They did so and Sirius slid in next to him along with Kimmy.

"Thanks," she told Moira lightly, who nodded at the popular sixth former with slightly widened eyes.

"So what'd you decide to play?" Sirius asked, meaning their upcoming performance test in music. He leaned in a bit to hear over the dining hall's chatter, blocking Remus' view of Kimmy.

"Sheila suggested I adapt a cello étude to show off technique, but I think I'm just going to find something simpler."

"Not that that isn't terribly boring, but why would you want to do something simpler? You're so good, Moony."

"Easy for you to say," Remus shot tamely.

"Well I agree with Remus," Kimmy started, her voice tight and snooty. "I mean, you'll be there, Sirius, and who would want to play piano in front of Mozart? Honestly I'd be embarrassed."

Remus had bitterly thought that it was a stupid analogy—Sirius didn't even like playing the piano—but Sirius only smiled.

“You give me way too much credit, Kimmy,” he’d said, and then he kissed her and Remus turned to James sharply, interrupting his and Lily’s conversation. As he finished his dinner he felt Sirius’ thigh continuously brush his on the bench and grew even antsier. Being conscious of Sirius Black was a lot like realising your body needed to breathe to survive. Most of the time it was so automatic that there was no reason to question it, but then there were those dreadful moments of self-awareness that you found yourself overthinking—nervous and short of breath as you counted every inhale and exhale and longed to rewind time to thirty seconds before, when you were so blissfully ignorant to it all.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Remus?”

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Remus are you listening?”

Inhale—

“Remus!”

He straightened up in his chair, fumbling his pen and sending it skittering across the table. “Yeah, I’m listening,” he murmured, fetching it from the floor as he came back to reality.

“Then what did I just say?” Marlene asked.

“You yelled at me for no reason.”

“Ha.” Shaking her head, Marlene went back to her books and Remus watched her. That was one of the things he liked best about Marlene, she never pestered for more. She took exactly what was given and accepted it as fact—there was no digging for extra evidence or emotions. She didn’t pry. It made her the perfect person to tell a secret to, really.

“Hey Marls, if I tell you something, you promise to keep it to yourself?”

Marlene’s head popped up. “Sure, unless you’re asking me to help you

hide a body, which in that case I'll have to at least tell my therapist about it."

He smiled, before wincing uncomfortably. How did one say 'my best friend's girlfriend tried to come onto me'?

"Kimmy… sort of asked me to hook up."

Well, like that I guess.

Marlene's jaw dropped. "Oh my god, really? Holy crap, I-I mean—Jesus…"

"Halloween really changed you, didn't it?" Remus snorted.

"Shut up. I can take the Lord's name in vain sometimes too. And this, well this bloody deserves it. What did you even *say?"*

"I said no, obviously! I'm not that insane…"

"Okay, but like, she actually asked you to cheat on Sirius?"

"Well I think in this situation she'd be the cheater not me, but I get your point. And no, not exactly. She sort of suggested that we… all do it."

He didn't think Marlene's eyes could get any bigger. "Woah. I knew Kimmy was like *that* but damn, that's ruthless. What'd Sirius have to say?"

"I don't know!" He squirmed. "She said she hadn't brought it up to him yet, and I didn't exactly turn her down lightly, so… I doubt she'd ever admit it now."

"Well, that's good then. Problem solved."

"Just like that...?"

"You said no, right? And Sirius doesn't know so there's no weirdness there, unless you think there is…?"

Remus began tapping his pen against his notebook awkwardly. "No, I don't think so. We had a few spats but I think it's over with now."

"Then I guess the only thing left to do is wait for them to break up."

Marlene's startling nonchalance might've once made him want to

crawl inside his own skin with worry, but as he glanced back across the study hall, he found himself more relaxed.

“You’re pretty good at this,” he told her. “But you still can’t tell anybody.”

Marlene smirked. “Give me your dessert at supper and my lips are sealed.”

“Ha, deal.”

Suddenly the low ding of the school bell chimed above their heads, signalling the end of study period. Marlene was out of her chair in an instant, bag swung over one shoulder. “I asked earlier if you brought your stuff with you for today—did you?”

Reaching down, she began to help him gather his books and things, as Remus blinked in confusion. “Er, what stuff?”

“It’s fine if you didn’t, we can just swing by your dorm and get it,” she said, checking her watch.

“Marlene, what stuff?”

“For football. You promised to help me with the team today.”

“I did *what?* WHEN?”

“The other day—I passed you in the hall and you said, ‘yeah sure’. I figured that meant yes.” Snapping her fingers, Marlene gestured for him to stand and practically pushed him into his winter coat, roughly shoving his knit cap on his head and dropping his bag over his arm. “C’mon,” she said as he dragged his hat up over his eyes, “we only get the pitch before dinner, then we lose it to the boys.”

Grinning, she slapped him on the shoulder playfully and turned, letting her long legs carry her out of the room.

“Marlene, hold on a second!” Remus called, streaking after her. Just as he left, Lily flashed him a beaming smile and a thumbs up.

Marlene was tall and a fast walker, and despite his long stride Remus had to half-jog just to keep up with her. By the time they were marching back up House Lane he’d already passed the initial stages of shock and denial and went straight for bargaining. Marlene, it seemed, would have none of it.

“I know you don’t like football,” she started reasonably, passing Finch House and waving at another girl, “but I couldn’t ask James, he’s already so busy with his own team, and he helps out enough as is. Plus, half of the other boys are just as likely to laugh in my face if I'd asked them to play with us.”

“Why not Sirius then? He's loads better than me at sports.”

“I think he’s also a little tied up sticking his tongue down Kim Bishop’s throat.”

“And Peter?”

“Are you serious?”

“C’mon Marls, anyone but me! You have a whole school to choose from.”

“But you promised.”

“And you tricked me! Stopping someone to ask for a favour and then rushing off to class before you tell them what it is they’re agreeing to isn’t fair.”

“Life’s not fair, Remus. If it were, I’d have been born with looks like Mary, brains like Lily, and confidence like Lottie’s.”

“You’ve already got all those things and then some.”

“Ha, you’re sweet,” Marlene said, marching away. As she did, it struck Remus that her quip was more than just sarcasm—she really didn’t believe he thought she was just as good as the rest of their friends. Without letting himself think, he reached forward and grasped Marlene’s wrist, pulling her to a stop in the middle of the path. She whipped around, nearly lashing him in the face with her ponytail.

“I meant it,” he said firmly, before quickly releasing her wrist. Marlene glanced down before smiling reluctantly.

“Sure, Remus.”

“I did.”

“Okay.”

“I did!”

“Alright, I believe you!”

Remus shoved his hands in his pockets awkwardly, embarrassed by his outburst. “Well… good. You’re smart and pretty and tough—people should envy you, really. I do, when you're not dragging me to football practice, that is.”

Marlene began gnawing on her bottom lip before a smile finally peeked through. “Thanks, Remus.”

“Mhm,” he nodded gently, before noticing a small leaf had gotten caught in her hair. Reaching up, he plucked it out and twirled it in between his fingers in front of her nose. Marlene’s smile widened and for a moment it was contagious, until they were interrupted.

“I know chavs are generally too stupid to remember where they are half the time, but some of us actually have places to be.”

Remus turned to find Snape standing behind them, rucksack over one shoulder, rumpled sneer on his face. Unfortunately the dorm he’d chosen to stop and reinforce Marlene’s self-esteem in front of was not neutral ground. Just behind Snape, the great grey stone of Salazar House loomed, its serpentine insignia highlighting every surface.

Remus sighed, instantly irritated as he stepped back from Marlene. “Snape, has anyone ever told you that you have a special talent for magic? You make smiles disappear.”

“I’d almost believe that were clever if it weren’t coming from you, Scarface,” Snape said, standing comfortably on the end of his House’s stone walkway. He was clearly enjoying what he thought was a home-field advantage.

“Oh shove off, Snape,” Marlene hissed. “No one asked for your opinion anyway.”

Snape curled his lip, unfazed. “That’s right, don’t mind me, I’m just on my way to dinner. I really hope passing this much rubbish on the way doesn't ruin my appetite.”

Remus crossed his arms over his chest. “I would’ve thought you’d have an iron stomach, what with all the foul crap you regurgitate on a daily basis.”

“You’re right, I’m being completely unrealistic. You’re not rubbish, you’re scum.”

“Stop talking to us like that!” Marlene shouted.

“You were barely tolerable before, McKinnon, and now you’re hanging around with low-rents like *him.* Kill any more cops lately, Lupin?”

Remus scowled but it was Marlene who stepped forward first. “As if your family comes from royalty!” She shot.

“Better than the gutter.”

“Which is where, Severus? In Liverpool? Where your father is no doubt having to lay off dock workers left and right? Where they’re considering a strike that would leave your family with nothing? Tell me, how lucrative is a shipping dock no one can use?”

Snape turned a deep shade of red, a blood vessel threatening to burst in his forehead. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then enlighten me! You’re the one who picked the fight, so how is it you’re so much better than us when your position at this school is more precarious than anyone’s? Remus is miles better than you, and you’re just jealous.”

“Fuck off.” Going around them, Snape began to march off, but Marlene wasn’t finished, shouting after him;

“You’re a coward Snape! You have nothing better to do than rag on anyone who dares have a good day in your presence because you wouldn’t know goodness if it smacked you upside the head! You’re just bitter because people like Remus are smarter, richer, kinder, more handsome, and better in every way—while you’re just pathetic.”

Slamming to a halt, Snape spun back around and advanced on them, lip lifted in a snarl. But Remus was *also* bigger, and he stepped between them before Snape even got close, armed with a deadly look of his own. “Just try it,” he dared him, and Snape’s nostrils flared as he pulled back.

“You’ll get yours eventually, you skiver. I know people who could make that scar look like a paper cut.”

Remus casually rubbed his nose to mock him. “If you reckon you can do any better, you’re welcome to try.”

Straightening up, Snape clutched at his bag strap and glared at them both, finally muttering another quick; *‘fuck off,’* before retreated back

up the path away from them.

“He’s the most wretched thing I’ve ever laid eyes on,” Marlene swore. “Just imagine if he knew about Lily and James. It might be better even—then they could have it out and we’d never have to speak to him again.”

“Lily made us promise not to tell,” Remus pointed out.

“I know…” Letting out a huff, Marlene pressed her fingers to her temples. The tension left Remus too and he rubbed the back of his neck before smiling wryly.

“That was a lot of compliments you gave me just then.”

“I said people *like* you.”

He chuckled a bit. “Still, good for you. Snape deserved to hear all that and then some.”

Marlene nodded and spoke in a low voice; “I’m tired of letting pricks like him knock me around. I’m not just going to cry about it anymore. No one is any better than anyone else just because of money or politics or family. We all get eaten by the same worms when we die, it should be about what you do for others that counts.”

“You’re entirely right, Marls. Now how about *you* let *me* walk you to dinner?”

“And follow the git? No way. Besides, you’re not getting out of your promise that easily.”

“It was barely a promise!”

“Buck up, soldier,” Marlene said, before giving him a friendly tap on the arse like a true football captain and stepping past him down the path.

Only slightly flustered, Remus called after her. “We’re not on the field yet so I’m pretty sure that counts as sexual assault.”

“You can add it to my list of charges along with ‘low-rent’ and ‘gutter rat’! And keep up, we’re already late!”

“Athletes,” he sighed, reluctantly following, and praying to God that he didn’t have another horrible nickname by the end of the night.

* * *

“So…” Nicole started, “are you and Marlene, like, a thing?”

“Huh?”

“Because us and the other girls—we’ve known her a long time, and Marlene’s never brought a bloke to practice before.”

Remus fiddled with his pen and clipboard. “She just said she needed some extra help timing your drills,” he mumbled.

“We know,” Anna said, “but she *never* talks about guys so we figured that maybe—”

“—That maybe you’re her boyfriend?”

“No, we’re just friends,” Remus said quickly.

Both girls pushed their bottom lips out into a pout. They were younger than him and Marlene, just tenth years, but they both seemed to have about as much confidence as a middle-aged divorcee on her third martini.

“Marlene has talked a bit about *you,* you know,” Nicole started again, making Remus’ cheeks flush instantly. “I mean we never knew your name but now that you’re here I’m sure we’ve connected the dots.”

“W-What has she said?”

“That you’re the only guy she knows who reads for fun,” Anna said, before Nicole gently elbowed her in the stomach.

“She said she likes your eyes.”

“Uh-huh…” Shyly, Remus took a swig from his water bottle.

“And that you’ve got a cute butt.”

Instantly he was coughing, turning away from the girls so they couldn't see his eyes water in mortification.

“So what about you?” Nicole egged. “You like blondes then? I'm pretty partial to them myself, and Marlene’s got this way about her—so hot. Have you ever noticed her nose? She’s always saying how she hates it, how it’s too long and sort of higher in the bridge—” she illustrated by

drawing her finger down the middle of her own nose, “but I’ve always thought it was really handsome, don’t you, Remus?”

He cleared his throat again. “It’s—It’s a nose…”

“So what’s your type then? Because we could totally arrange—”

Before Nicole could dig for more, a football came flying through the air at head level, cutting right between them as both girls gave a little shriek of surprise.

“Water break’s over,” Marlene ordered, “back to drills!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Anna answered, saluting her team captain and grabbing Nicole by the arm as she turned back to Remus.

“You never said you weren’t interested!” She announced, before the pair took off across the field, giggling.

“Not interested in what?” Marlene asked, as she fell into step next to Remus and took back the clipboard she’d given him to keep track of the girls’ times.

“Nothing—fashion. They hate my shorts.”

Marlene looked down at his track shorts and shrugged. “They aren’t that bad. A little short for December maybe, but decent.”

“Well don’t look!” Remus moaned, snatching back the clipboard and using it to cover his pasty thighs. "You're the one that wouldn't wait for me to find my track pants."

“Oh, *I’m* sorry, didn’t mean to infringe upon your modesty.”

“Yeah you did. You’re actually very cheeky that way, McKinnon.”

“Have me clocked, huh?”

“I have a few guesses.”

“So do I.”

They gave each other a measuring sideways glance before splitting into a pair of smiles. In truth Marlene remained as much of an enigma as she always had been. When he’d first met her Remus had thought her quiet and shy, which was true, but only to those who didn’t know her well enough. He was fully and completely convinced after

witnessing her verbally thrash Snape that she, like most of her friends, was also a force to be reckoned with. Unfortunately that merciless force also extended to those same friends as well.

“C’mon,” Marlene said, nudging him gently in the shoulder, “I want you to help me with the next drill.”

Walking with her, they crossed the field to the group of secondary girls, each of them dressed up in their maroon and grey uniforms. Really the team was just a formality to appease those girls who could keep up with the boys but were decidedly not boys, as they rarely got to hold official games of their own. The girls had never been permitted to play in the mens league—a bit of blatant sexism Marlene had been contending with since she joined in her eighth year.

“We’re gonna do the three goal drill,” Marlene instructed, “set it up.”

As the girls went about dragging nets into place, Marlene turned to him and plucked the clipboard from his hands, tossing it aside and replacing it with a football. “Don’t worry,” she told him, “all you have to do is stand in the middle there and gently kick them the ball when they reach your station. It’s like a rotation.”

“It’s like speed dating,” Nicole added, skipping up behind Remus.

Marlene scoffed. “It is not.”

“It is when we have a bloke around! Say, next week can I bring someone too?”

“Stay cheeky and I’ll have Michelle make you run laps again.”

Nicole bowed out humbly and Marlene led Remus into his place.

“What if I miss?” He asked, staring down the large pile of footballs ahead of him.

“Then they chase it. It’s part of the drill actually so miss on purpose if you want—just keep the ball on the field.”

He supposed he could do that much.

When Michelle, the team’s vice-captain, blew her whistle two girls shot forward at a time, kicking a ball into the two smaller nets before racing toward Remus. He fumbled a bit in the beginning, but eventually it was a streamlined operation; he kicked the footballs

wayward so they could put them in the net and the goalkeeper behind him tossed them back to replenish the pile. Some of the girls were just as awkward as he was, but they were all happy enough to be there. Nicole and Anna were among those that had actual skill so Marlene pushed them harder, clapping her hands and barking various orders every time they slacked. They both pushed back by grinning and blowing kisses at her, despite the obvious sweat of exertion on their foreheads.

“Okay,” Marlene called, after several rounds, “reset and switch net positions—except you, Remus, you stay there.”

The girls quickly set about collecting any stray footballs and switching out goalkeepers as Marlene approached him, handing him his water bottle. “Thanks,” Remus said, taking a deep swig.

“So are you interested in joining the boys team yet?” Marlene asked.

“Not a chance. You and James can keep your football religion. Also, you’re a little scary as a captain.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Does Mary know how you are on the field? She might be impressed, you know.”

Marlene crossed her arms, a bemused smile on her face. “Because she’s not already impressed by me?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said, capping the water bottle, “just that she might not drag you around as much if she knew.”

“And is that why you’re so anti-football? Because you *like* being dragged around by Black and Potter?”

“Low blow, McKinnon.”

Marlene smirked and uncrossed her arms, snatching back the water bottle as she turned away from him. “Michelle, I’ve changed my mind. We’re doing the three net drill again, but this time we’re doing offence.”

“What does that mean?” Remus asked suspiciously, and Marlene peeked back at him, already jogging away and leaving him in his circle of footballs.

“Means they’re gonna fight you for the ball,” she answered. “Try to keep it from them, and do stay strong, Lupin.”

“Oi,” he started, “Marlene—!”

“Her middle name's Grace if that helps!” Nicole called innocently.

“Er—Marlene Grace McKinnon—!”

“Remus—” Marlene returned, *“John* Lupin, stop shouting before I make you run laps!”

Defeated, he shut his mouth and the entire team giggled. A moment later Michelle’s whistle blew and the first of them raced forward.

“C’mon, Remus,” Michelle shouted encouragingly, “don’t make it too easy on them.”

Remus threw his arms out, “I still don’t understand—” suddenly Anna was there, hooking his left leg to knock the ball from between his feet, racing off with it to score her goal.

“Now that’s just sad!” Marlene sighed dramatically, making everyone snigger again.

“You can do it, Remus!” Nicole added kindly, just before high-fiving Anna as she returned to the drill line-up.

The next girl also had no trouble snatching the ball from him, but by the third Remus at least sort of understood the point of the drill. He did his best to keep the ball between his heels, awkwardly dancing around each player until they inevitably took it from him. Thankfully, the longer they went at it the easier it got and eventually he was able to keep the ball away from them for a considerable length of time, creating a clog in the drill’s line-up.

“You’re getting cocky, Remus,” Nicole laughed, just as she used the side of her foot to knock it from between his legs.

“Keep your eye on the ball, kid,” he teased, but when he turned around next it wasn’t another tenth year he was facing, but the team captain herself, standing arms crossed until she took off toward him. He instantly balked, but he reached the other football before Marlene got to him and kicked it out of her reach. Chasing after it, Remus looked back and smiled smugly.

“So he can run?” Marlene shouted tauntingly.

“He can!” Remus declared. “He can also—”

Marlene never got to hear what it was that Remus could *also* do, as the moment he reached the ball again she was there, sliding—*actually* sliding, on her side and everything—beneath him to knock the football away. Remus tripped over her and turned mid-air, slamming onto his side on the green turf and rolling onto his back with a low moan to stare up at the gym roof. As he laid there, coughing out air, Marlene bent down over him and smiled widely, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

“You okay, Rem?” She asked. “I didn’t damage you too badly, did I?” Her ponytail slipped over her head to dangle down above him and he stared at her, slightly transfixed, although that might’ve just been a repercussion of being knocked on his arse.

“You do have a nice nose,” he observed, stupidly, and instantly Marlene’s eyes widened.

“I guess you hit your head after all.”

“Nah. I’m fine.” Reaching out, Remus took her outstretched hand and climbed to his feet next to her, dusting off his shorts. “Thanks.”

Marlene nodded, sheepishly pressing her knuckles to her cheeks and muttering; “Don’t mention it.”

Instantly the rest of the team, who had abandoned their other drills to watch, began erupting into ‘oohs’ and whistles that had her looking up, redder than before. “Okay, cut that out!” She ordered, but the girls only grinned guiltily.

“You’re blushing, Marlene!”

“Nicole!”

“You are!”

Marlene began marching toward her and Nicole jumped away, dancing around the crowd of girls to keep the distance between herself and the team captain. It was amusing to note that he wasn’t the only person at Hawkings who had their own ‘Sirius Black’ to contend with.

“Look, it’s the boys!” One of the girls called suddenly, and the entire team turned as a single unit, crowding into one another as the Hawkings’ boys team emerged on the field in their pads and football boots, dispersing to the benches to drop down their bags and towels. With an irritated sigh, Marlene gave up chasing Nicole and walked up to the boys, who were of course led by their own captain, James. They knocked knuckles, a gesture Remus had never seen Marlene reciprocate off the field, and Marlene began flapping the front of her uniform for air.

“Sorry Potter, didn’t mean to run long. We’ll clean up now.”

“S’fine McKinnon. You can stay if you want even, we’re just running drills today too.” James looked up and casually tossed Remus a wave when he noticed him. “Hey, Lupin.”

“Hey, Potter. Thought you had Slug Club stuff tonight?”

“Nah, that's tomorrow,” James said with a friendly nod. Casually, he looked back to Marlene before his smile abruptly fell and he snapped back to Remus. *“Lupin?! On the football field?* YOU TRAITOR!”

* * *

It was rather hard to detach himself from James, who didn’t seem to believe that he’d been forced onto the field against his will, but Remus managed to duck out before he could call him a ‘seditious Judas’ and ended up joining the girls for a late dinner in the dining hall. They were as rowdy as any boys team, tossing napkins this way and that, but off the field Marlene easily relinquished her hold as captain overseer and let Michelle turn into the mother hen, making sure that each girl had drunk enough water to drown a small mammal.

“We’re going to watch a movie together in the theatre room after if you’re interested,” Marlene said, polishing off Remus' chocolate pudding.

Both Anna and Nicole had overheard and stared at him with expectant eyes until he’d finally given in.

“What movie?” He asked, defeated. Marlene shrugged, but Anna intercepted easily.

“Penny got a hold of a copy of ‘Rosemary’s Baby’ from her older sister.

We can set it up on the projector."

"That sounds nice," Marlene said. "What is it, like a romantic comedy?"

The American 'R' rated film was certainly *not* a romantic comedy. Marlene spent most of it hiding behind her hands or with her face pressed into his or Nicole's shoulder, squirming at the more gruesome parts as the other girls shrieked with terror or delight.

"You're *never* picking the movie again," Marlene told Penny when it was over.

Remus waited until her back was turned to shuffle over to Penny and nudge her. "I thought it was great," he whispered, giving her a sly high-five.

He said his goodbyes to the girls outside his own dorm. On his way inside he was stopped by another boy who told him he'd missed a call and when Remus checked the hallway board where they took messages and posted school notices he found not Giles' name but Tomny's (well—'Tommy', but still). Elated, Remus fumbled for one of the phones and eagerly dialled the flat's number, biting his lip as the call went long-distance and began to ring. Since their first call in October Tomny had reached out a small handful of times, but the conversations were unpredictable and often shorter than he would've liked. They didn't talk about the weather again though, and Tomny seemed generally upbeat (Tonya was always upbeat) which probably meant that the 'holistic healing' thing was now old hat.

It was Doss who picked up the phone, which made Remus a bit uneasy, mostly because he hadn't spoken to the older boy since Tomny had told him Doss was the only other person that knew he'd been lying about his family. But of course Doss was as friendly as ever, asking him "How's tricks?" and filling him in on every stupid and ingenious thing Lee had done since they'd seen each other.

Eventually Doss passed the phone along and he got his familiar "hey Lu" and "hello, sweet love". Tomny and Tonya seemed alright, though all the flowers that Tonya had been cultivating on their balcony had died as soon as the winter air had rolled in and she was disappointed over it. As per usual the call became a three-way conversation, with both Tonya and Tomny speaking over each other but never getting irritated by it. Remus pictured them cuddled together on the couch or Tomny's patchwork recliner with the receiver tucked between their

heads. They laughed when he told them about Marlene and her team ("Thought you hated football, Lu?") and Tonya talked music for a bit, excited by the new album Queen was supposed to drop later that month.

Through it all they did not talk about Christmas, as they hadn't since Tonya had planted the seed in Remus' head just before Halloween. Their silence on the matter seemed so loud that Remus found himself unable to even bridge the topic, just as he had every other phone call since, and after they'd said goodbye to one another he set the receiver down and snatched Tomny's name off the message board, crumpling the note in the palm of his hand.

The following evening while Peter entertained Moira in their dorm room *("Oh, piss off Black, we're only playing cards. And even if we weren't it's none of your business!")* and the rest of his friends attended Slughorn's club to let him lecture on about the fascinations of chemical reactions or otherwise, Remus took it upon himself to retire to the astronomy building for a bit of alone time. He'd only visited his favourite spot a few times since the start of the term, and it remained the only portion of his map he had yet to share with his friends. It was peaceful, and he took his bass and a bit of the weed they'd procured from Xeno and sat with the door cracked just enough for the smoke to escape. The telescope's vast, empty room felt like the perfect place to write songs—not that Remus was, but he imagined that Sirius would find it utterly inspirational to listen to the way every note seemed to reverberate off the domed walls.

Since returning to school Sirius' songwriting had taken a strong up-turn. No longer was he obsessing over angry metaphors or bitter wishes, and instead he wrote whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. Remus' favourite so far was this short composition Sirius was calling "Backtrack Children". It only had a chorus, but it reminded him of his boys back home—especially the line *'Skid Row's regular Romeo'.* It felt romantic in a heavy way, like the dirty sort of rock 'n' roll Sirius so desperately wanted to embody, despite growing up a proper, high-class English boy.

"It's like writing a letter," Sirius had told him one evening, chin pressed to the side of Andy's acoustic guitar. "You just gotta decide who you're writing to."

"Yeah well, not all of us can speak in lyrics, Black."

Sirius had said nothing to that, only bit his lip and scribbled

something in his notebook.

It felt good to inspire him at least. They may have only been playing at starting a band—a joke which James had encouraged since he'd agreed to let Sirius teach him the guitar—but Sirius was the only one of them that was actually interested in pursuing music, and if Remus could contribute at all to any of it, even just a single note or lyric, that would be enough.

Just before curfew, he gathered his things and made his way back to the dorm. Unlocking the door he walked in to find his roommates surrounding James' bed and staring down at the same textbook.

"Not sure that's what they mean when they call it 'group study'," Remus said, as his friends glanced up.

"Moony! You gotta—" Peter started, before Sirius reached over him and snatched the book up from the covers.

"Moony! Moony! Moony! Moony! Come look at this!"

Setting down his instrument case, Remus crossed the room and Sirius shoved the textbook into his hands. "Chemistry? Uh, hate to break it to you, but I don't take chem."

"It's Snape's," James sniggered. "Sirius lifted it out of his bag during tonight's club meeting."

"No way." One by one Remus began flipping through the pages, finding scribbles in every other margin of different equations or notes on chemical properties and the like.

"He carries the thing around like a bible," Peter grinned, "ten quid he notices it missing immediately and throws a historic fit."

"Well, that would be something," Remus said, snapping the book closed and handing it back.

"You're missing the best part though," Sirius insisted, taking the book and flipping it back open. "I only thought it would inconvenience him, but I think the slimy git just handed us the key to our revenge against my darling baby brother."

"What do you mean?"

Turning the book around for Remus to see, he pointed to a single

scribble Snape had left in a margin next to a list of chemical reactions and stood back, locking his arms behind him like an innocent bystander.

“Moony, my dear, have you ever heard of a thiol?”

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: This chapter has been edited to remove the plot point of the 'Half-blood Prince'. If you are doing a reread, you will no longer find it, thank you.

(also Lesley Gore is a lesbian icon, though she didn't come out until the 2000's. We love her, and Marlene absolutely would too. Do what that with you will~)

Chapter 41: A Rather Rancid Revenge

Chapter Summary

Ah, the classic stink bomb. Yes, good.

Chapter Notes

CW: Light homophobic language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

See the years roll on by,
Such a senseless waste of time;
What a way to reform,
Call out your number;
Who's a non-conformer,
Not me baby, oh yeah!

- "Borstal Boys" Faces, 1973

Friday 3rd December 1976

It had taken a few days of study but eventually they'd worked out how they were going to return Sirius' birthday favour to Reg and his friends. Of course though, it hadn't been enough to consider only pranking the four of them. After some eager propaganda from Sirius, it was now looking like all of Salazar House was to bear the brunt of their rancid revenge. That was if Professor Slughorn ever stopped talking.

"So you see Lumby, every hydrogen atom in your body is likely over thirteen billion years old because every hydrogen atom was created at the very beginning of the universe."

"Uh-huh."

"And even that had to wait another three hundred and eighty years for the universe to cool after the Big Bang."

"Cool…"

"Yes, very cool! Cool enough for hydrogen and helium to form. The

very first elements!"

Professor Slughorn beamed at him, and Remus just blinked back. He thought agreeing to keep watch would mean he'd have to think less about the prank, which involved several chemicals and accelerants (of the non-poisonous kind—they checked) that he could barely pronounce, but he hadn't counted on Hawkings' chemistry teacher paying a evening visit to his classroom when everyone was supposed to be at dinner. The others had had just enough time to throw themselves into a classroom storage closet as Remus had scrambled to pull his lock-picks from the supply cupboard when Slughorn had strode in. He'd been initially surprised to find him there alone, but after some quick excuses on Remus' part, was all too willing to launch into a lecture on the differences between hydrogen *sulphate* and hydrogen *sulphide*.

"I'm sorry, Lumby," Professor Slughorn started, dropping his deep-set brow, "was there something you wanted to ask? I don't believe I have you in any of my classes, do I?"

"Oh no," Remus tried, wetting his lips, "I was just trying to come up with an interesting research topic for my end of term history paper, but after our chat I'm confident that I wouldn't be able to do the universe much justice."

"Nonsense, you seem to be a good listener. How are those notes going?"

Remus snapped down to the notepad he'd been pretending to scribble on. "Oh I…"

Slughorn checked his watch. "Great snakes, is that the time? Best be getting on now, else you'll miss curfew."

Remus nodded and let himself be guided out of the classroom, down the hallway, and into the chilly night. After saying goodbye to Slughorn, he walked down the pavement a bit and hid in the bushes until his friends spilled out after them into the dark, all of them giggling like school girls.

"Now where was that acting on Halloween?" Sirius demanded, spotting Remus as he stepped into the light of a street lamp with his hands in his pockets.

"Up your arse."

“You tell him, Lumby,” James grinned.

Remus scowled. “You get everything?”

“Oh yeah,” James said, as he and Peter showed off the boxes they were carrying. Inside were dozens of empty glass or plastic bottles gathered from the kitchen’s rubbish bins, balloons, duct tape, bicarb soda—everything they would need for the prank, at least according to the Snape’s notes.

“Think we should test it?” Peter asked, looking down into the box.

James nodded. “Yeah, but not in our bedroom. As long as Snivellus hasn’t led us astray then the smell is going to stick around for a while.”

“Only if we do it right,” Sirius said. “But really, how bad could it stink?”

The answer was fucking *bad.*

Together they had made their way back inside the Galilei Block, up to the third floor and down the furthest hallway to a girls toilet. The bathroom was always empty thanks to a rumour that it was haunted—one Sirius was all too willing to embellish.

“Apparently some year ten girl *literally* gave up the ghost in here,” he sniggered. “A snake crawled up the toilet pipes and bit her right on the arse.”

“We’re on the third floor,” Remus scoffed.

“Snakes can climb.”

After James had reassured Peter that Sirius was full of shit and there were no snakes hiding in the pipes waiting to bite his nob off, they got to work on a bit of trouble-shooting and were able to come up with a device that appeared as little more than a plastic water bottle with a balloon duct taped to its top. The ammonium sulphide that would make the bomb stink had been put in the bottle’s base along with the other liquid ingredients, while the bicarb soda—effectively the ignition to the prank—was stuffed into the top of the balloon and left to hang down over the rim to keep the two separated.

They tested it three times, escaping out into the hall to avoid the stench as each balloon burst with a sharp bang that echoed

throughout the building. They were eyeballing the ingredients for the most part, which meant every bomb had a varying time limit before the gas build-up would cause the balloon to burst. Each one smelled absolutely horrid and by round three Remus was convinced he'd never be able to smell anything pleasant again. Naturally, they were all thrilled.

With several dozen of the bombs in hand, they packed up the rest of their supplies and loped back to the dorms, sticking the shadows to avoid getting caught out after hours. They had to move agonisingly slow so as to not risk upsetting any of their monstrous concoctions early and by the time they were making their way down House Lane it was getting mighty close to midnight.

"Lucky Kenny isn't as much of a curfew stickler as Benjy was," Peter said, checking his watch for the dozenth time.

Sirius gasped; "Imagine if one of us became dorm monitor next year—think of the pranking opportunities! You should do it, Potter."

"Why me? I'm already spending all my free time with you and that bloody guitar, where would I possibly fit in looking after a whole dorm of nobs?"

"Maybe you'd be able to do it if you weren't putting so many extra hours in at the library. Who'd have known dating Evans would come with a lifetime subscription of *'shhh'."*

James puckered. "Mind your business."

"Hmph."

"Are we doing this or do you girls need more time to have it out?" Remus asked. They'd made it to Salazar House, where most of the lights were dim and quiet.

"No, we're doing this," Sirius said. "Everyone remember the plan?"

They all nodded; Sirius and James would take the upper hallways, starting at the second floor and working their way up to the fourth while Remus and Peter filled the kitchenette and common room with enough bombs to fumigate Australia. Fifteen minutes later, at exactly midnight, they'd start tipping the bicarb soda filled balloons into each bottle and leg it out of the dorm. No one was to escape unscathed; if any of them were caught before then they'd hoot twice like a barn owl (according to James this sounded a lot like a *'HOOOOOHHH-*

HOOOOOHHH') and once like a screech owl *('REEAAAAHHH')* and trigger any bomb within reach. James did admit afterwards that he had no idea what sound either animal actually sounded like but his impressions had them in stitches anyway.

Once they'd stopped killing themselves with laughter, it was time to go to work. Carefully they carried the boxes up Salazar's front steps and slipped inside, checking that the coast was clear before they crossed the main hallway and split off at the staircase, eager to exact their revenge.

"You cover the kitchen," Remus said, "I've got the common."

"Hope the boys in green enjoy the smell of rotten eggs and arse," Peter murmured giddily before slipping away into the dark with his stink bombs in hand while Remus carried the rest of the box into the common room. The space felt distinctly un-cozy compared to Godric, decorated with cold wooden flooring, dark leather couches, and emerald-green curtains that reminded him of the window coverings in his bedroom back in London. He set a bomb behind each, knowing that the horrible smell would cling to the heavy fabric for ages and left more under the couches and tables, as well as tucked in behind plant pots (sulphur didn't kill plants right?), and even one inside the chest cavity of a tacky suit of armour. By the time he was finished there were more than a dozen bottles scattered throughout the Salazar common room. They'd be airing the place out for weeks.

"Pete?" Remus called quietly into the hall. He found Peter setting up a row of bombs just outside the entryway to the kitchenette, barely a shape in the darkness.

"Almost done," Peter said. "You set it all up?"

"Yeah. What time is it?"

Peter checked his watch. "Oh shit, it's midnight now."

"Already? Damn it, okay, just start—"

Before he could finish Peter was already tipping the first balloon's worth of bicarb soda into the bottle ahead of him. There was a fizzing sound, and the balloon slowly started to inflate. Remus turned and dashed back into the common room, doing his best to remember where he'd left each of the bombs. He ended up accidentally punting one across the room when he missed it in the darkness and flinched at the sharp sound of the glass bottle shattering somewhere, but

managed to get to the rest. As he carefully skirted back into the hallway to meet Peter, his heart was hammering so loudly in his ears it sounded like a bass beat.

“Where are they?” Peter demanded, practically dancing in place as he eyed the filling balloons in the hallway around them. The bombs looked incredibly stupid, like tiny hot-air balloons made by toddlers, but they already knew better than to underestimate their power.

“They should be making their way down by now,” Remus said, equally as antsy.

“Maybe they got caught?”

“Didn’t hear James’ hoot. Let’s go get them and get out of here.”

Peter flashed another anxious look around before they both set off up the stairs. Both the second and third floor landings were quiet and they didn’t hear any noise at all until they made it to the fourth floor, where quiet sniggering drifted down through the dark.

“Oi!” Remus hissed, and both James and Sirius spun around, clutching the fronts of their shirts when they realised it was only them.

“Bloody fuck, Moony, thought you were the monitor or something.”

“What is taking so long?” Remus demanded, starting down the hallway. He had to step carefully or else risk upsetting one of the stink bombs they’d already placed.

“What do you mean?” Sirius asked.

Peter caught up; “We agreed midnight!”

“Yeah, it’s midnight *now,"* James said, holding up his watch. “We were just about to start setting ‘em off.”

Peter snatched his wrist and yanked James forward, squinting down at the time before glancing up at Remus, open-mouthed. “Guess we should’ve checked to see if our watches were synced.”

Remus deflated. “Oh no.”

BANG!

The sound of the first balloon bursting echoed distantly behind them making each of them jump a foot in the air.

“You idiots!” Sirius hissed.

“How do you know it’s our fault?” Peter demanded. “Maybe James’ watch is off!”

BANG!

“It’s time to go,” James said, tossing the last stink bomb he’d been holding straight over his shoulder. Remus and Peter nodded quickly and the three of them started toward the stairs, but Sirius was not as quick to give up.

“We can’t just leave them! What about the prank?”

“People are going to hear the noise, Black,” James started. “Bombs are *literally* going off under our feet.”

“The third floor then!” Sirius pleaded. “It’s their floor! We have to do that one.”

BANG!

“Yes, okay, fine!” Remus answered for them, racing forward to grab Sirius by the arm, knocking over several bottles as he went. “Let’s just go!”

Together they rushed down the staircase and into the hallway, where James and Sirius had set up a small shrine of stink bombs outside room 3A, presumably the dorm where Regulus and his roommates were currently sitting up in bed, wondering what the noise was. Two doors down, 3C also had its own little army of bottles, which James went to first, aided by Remus.

“It’s Snape’s room,” he said, skipping the part where he was to carefully tip the bicarb soda into the bomb’s wet ingredients and just shaking each bottle vigorously before setting it back down. Remus did the same, grinning at the idea of Snape with not only his regularly greasy self, but with a pheromone to match.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The bombs on the ground floor were now going off more rapidly, each one like a shot straight to the heart.

“Okay *now* it’s time to go,” James said, scrambling away toward the staircase. Remus shook the last bottle and stood up, just as the door

ahead of him flew open and a light flicked on, momentarily blinding him.

“What are you doing here?!” Snape snarled, before looking down at his feet and the filling balloons, and back up to Remus, who’s stomach had been launched into his throat.

“Moony, c’mon!” Sirius hissed from the stairs. Without answering Snape, Remus turned and fled toward the stairs, joining a half-cackling Sirius as they took the steps two at a time.

Before either of them could say anything about getting caught, the stench hit them. It’d risen from the ground floor to the second and only a few stairs below them, James let out a horrible moan; *“AUGH! GOD!”*

“MY EYES!” Peter cried.

The smell was so powerful that they all had to pull their shirts and jackets up over their noses and sprint through the stench, eyes watering even as they tugged open the dorm’s front doors and threw themselves out into the freezing night air.

“That was so bad,” Sirius gasped, bent over on the frosty lawn.

“What was Snape thinking, writing a recipe like that down where anyone could find it,” Peter said, making them all burst into staggered laughter.

“He saw me,” Remus panted, “opened his door and I was right there.”

“What kind of pyjamas was he wearing?” Sirius asked. “Or does he sleep starkers—did you enjoy the view?”

“Oh shut up, you absolute spanner.” Remus shoved him and Sirius collapsed on the lawn, still laughing.

“Hate to be the voice of reason,” James started, pointing up at the dorm, which had come alive with not only the sound of their bombs going off, but light as well, “but I think we better split.”

“Moony already got caught,” Peter said, helping Sirius to his feet, “what’s the point?”

“Only Snape saw him,” Sirius said, “and this morning I happened to trade Kenny some of Xeno’s weed to act as an alibi in case we needed

one. I'm sure his word'll count for something."

"So you bet on our failure?" Remus asked. "What ever happened to blind faith?"

"I'm an atheist."

James reached over and grabbed Sirius by the collar, tugging him toward the road. "You're also the only one who can afford to spend the rest of term in detention so let's go before someone else catches us."

There was a short clatter from behind them; someone was fumbling with the common room windows, trying to get them open. Before they could be spotted or doused with another wave of stench, the Godric boys took off across the lawn into the November darkness, grinning ear to frozen ear.

* * *

All four of them had slept well—even Remus—knowing that no one in Salazar would be, but the real satisfaction of the prank didn't come until the following morning when they were sitting at their usual table in the dining hall, watching as every boy in a green jumper piled in looking haggard and sour. The stench radiating off of them cleared the far corner of the dining hall in a matter of minutes, and each time one of them got up to collect so much as a napkin, every other student fled in the opposite direction.

"There he is!" Sirius hissed, and they all strained their necks to watch as Regulus stalked into the dining hall. He paused in the doorway and looked directly at them with a bitter scowl, making Sirius practically vibrate with glee.

"He totally knows we did it. Think they'll retaliate?" Asked James.

"Who cares?" Sirius sniggered. "If they try we'll smell 'em coming."

Remus snorted and they all began laughing until Mary slid in beside Peter at the table, picking up her fork. "Oh my god, have you guys *smelt—"*

Suddenly Mary straightened up. "Jesus Christ," she started, grabbing her breakfast tray, "not you too." Without any more explanation,

Mary fled the table.

“What was that about?” Sirius frowned.

“Dunno,” James said, “but we’ve got incoming.” Nudging Sirius’ elbow, he gestured with his chin and Remus turned around on his bench to spot Snape as he stalked across the room. A girl in Dorset House-yellow spun away desperately when he passed her, clutching her nose and fanning her eyes.

“Hold on, Snape!” Sirius shouted as he got close. “Gotta prepare myself for your arrival!” Quickly Sirius began stuffing bits of napkin up his nose and Snape stopped just shy of arm’s reach from their table.

“I know it was you! I saw you!” He pointed a long finger at Remus. “You’re all ruined after this! You’ll be expelled!”

“Not sure ‘he did it’ is quite enough proof to properly convict us, Snape,” James said. “Especially considering we were held up all night. What is it we were doing again, Pete?”

“We were playing chess with our dorm monitor until real late.”

“That’s right,” Sirius agreed, his voice nasally thanks to the napkin. “Kenny’s actually a world-class chess champion, I’ll have you know, Snivelly. We were helping him prepare for his competitions this Christmas.”

“If you think anyone will believe that you’re absolutely insane. You’re already out of the Slug Club—Professor Slughorn said so this morning.”

“Oh bollocks,” James gasped, “I was enjoying those meetings of ours. Oh well. Guess we don’t need that book we found anymore, Sirius.”

“You mean this book?” From inside his bag, Sirius produced the textbook. “In that case, I suppose we can just toss it then.”

He shrugged, but before Sirius could do anything else Snape shot forward and snatched the text out of his hand.

“YOU! You mangy dickheads—I knew it, this is proof!”

“Proof?” James echoed. “How could it be proof? The book's got *your* name in it, don’t it?”

For a moment it appeared as though Snape might also explode into a

cloud of poisonous gas.

“One day!" He howled. "One day you’ll get what’s coming to you, Potter! Soon enough Lily’ll realise what a gormless idiot you are, and we’ll see who’s left laughing then.”

"If I were you, Snivelly, I'd take a nice long shower before I even went near Evans," Sirius teased. "Otherwise she might pass out from the smell."

"You'll get yours too, Black. Mark my words." Still clutching his text like he might beat someone with it, Snape shot them all a vicious glare and stalked away.

“Ta, Scouser! Feel free to drop in for another casual chinwag sometime,” James waved before turning to the rest of them. “You hear that? He called me gormless.”

“You should’ve told him Lily likes her blokes without gorm," Peter said. "That'd wipe the sour look off his face."

James shook his head lightly. “No way. She’s my girlfriend, not fodder to throw at foul gits like Snivellus. Snape’s pathetic enough on his own, she’s too good for him.”

“But not too good for a mangy dickhead?” Remus asked.

“Guess she likes ‘em mangy too,” Sirius sniggered. They all broke down with laughter again, bent over their breakfast trays until another voice—this one more high-pitched and screechy—called out over their noise.

“Sirius!”

Cup of tea halfway to his smiling lips, Remus glanced up over Sirius’ shoulder to find Kimmy standing a ways away from their table, arms crossed over her chest and looking as though she’d just swallowed the sourest lemon known to man.

“Hey darling,” Sirius said, turning around in his seat. “Lovely morning, isn't it?”

“I have to talk to you,” Kimmy said sharply.

With a hesitant look at James, Sirius slowly began to stand up. “Alright—”

Before he could leave the table, Kimmy's hand shot out to stop him and she used the other to cover her mouth. "No, you just stay there, I can't bear it and I don't want my mascara to run if my eyes begin to water."

"Is everything alright, love?"

"No, how could everything be alright? Haven't you *noticed?"*

Sirius glanced back at his friends but both James and Peter shrugged. "Er… no, but if you tell me what it is I'm supposed to be noticing, I'm sure that I can compliment it or something—"

"No one is sitting within twenty feet of you, Sirius!"

They all looked around, and Remus realised that she was right; their table was currently being given the biggest berth to date. He'd thought earlier that it was because everyone already knew what they'd done and were too stunned to get close, but kids were still staring, and it wasn't in awe.

"You *stink,* Sirius," Kimmy said.

Gaping, Sirius immediately lifted an arm to his nose before looking at James, who did the same and shrugged; "Well I can't smell anything."

Sirius shoved his nose into his other sleeve. "Are you sure?"

"I'm bloody sure. This is the last straw, you hear me? I can't be seen breathing out of my mouth around my *boyfriend* and I won't date a child either! So that's it—it's time to grow up!"

"Grow up?" Sirius echoed, his expression already pinched with irritation.

"Yes—*grow up!* That means no more stupid pranks, no more stupid jokes, and no more *stupid* friends!"

"I told you already not to talk about my mates like that," Sirius said, standing. Kimmy immediately took a few steps back, covering her mouth and nose again with a little moan. Sensing a spat, every kid in the vicinity turned to watch as the school's most infamous couple had it out right there in front of their porridge.

"You say 'mates' but all I see is a group of immature kids," Kimmy said in a shrill voice.

“Yeah, and I’m the most immature out of all of them, so why do you bother with me in the first place, *Kimberly?”*

“I’ve told you I don’t like being called that!”

“Sorry, I must be too ‘immature’ to remember.”

Kimmy scoffed horribly. “I don’t want to hear it. It’s bad enough it looks like I’m dating the rank kid in class, I don’t need a boyfriend with chavs clinging to him like flies, too.”

“Fine, go then.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You really think I’d actually choose you over my friends? Not in this lifetime.”

Kimmy gasped and threw her hands down. “Fine! Stay with your weird friends—see if I care! You can just sit around and wank each other off every night like the bunch of sorry poofs you are!”

“And you can go back to Keith and beg him to suck on your saggy tits for the rest of eternity! God knows no one else wants to do it.”

“Ooh! Get bent, Sirius Black! You are *so* dumped!” Turning, Kimmy stormed off across the hall with her ponytail swishing behind her. There was a bit of stunned silence before someone whistled and James finally grabbed Sirius by the shirt sleeve and pulled him back toward his seat.

“Alright, alright,” he told the room, “that’s enough staring—shut your gobs. The show’s over now so go back to your breakfasts, please.”

As everyone turned away, whispering with fervent amusement, Sirius dropped back down onto the bench next to James with a huff.

“Well mate, I think you just got dumped,” James said matter-of-factly.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Yeah well, I was gonna break up with her anyway. Crazy bird must've read my mind."

“You *were?”* Remus demanded.

“Yeah, and I did, right? I broke up with her! She didn’t break up with me.”

“I dunno,” Peter said, bringing a forkful of eggs to his nose to sniff, “she’s the one who said the word ‘dumped’.”

“But that doesn’t mean anything! Prongs?”

“What, you want me to take a poll? That shit was public, mate.”

Sirius groaned, bitterly stabbing his fork into the middle of his toast. He might’ve been crushed, but it seemed as though the sun had come out on Remus.

“I guess the early *bird* gets the worm, huh Black?” He grinned supremely.

“Oh so smug,” Sirius drawled. “The great lady-killer, Remus Lupin, laughing at me for breaking up with my girlfriend.”

“Is that what that was? You breaking up with her?”

“Up yours, Moony.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt your flirting,” Peter started, halting Remus mid-laugh, “but I can’t actually smell anything?” Dropping his fork with a clatter, he buried his nose in his eggs. “Like *anything.”*

Sceptically, Remus raised his tea and inhaled before his eyes widened in surprise. “Me neither.”

James and Sirius exchanged a slow look before furiously scrambling to get a whiff of anything they could; a cup of orange juice, the ketchup bottle, the pepper shaker—Sirius didn’t even sneeze. James went as far as to take off his trainer and stick it to his face, making all of them grimace—but even that wasn’t enough, and he dropped the shoe completely as realisation dawned on his face.

“Oh god, Pete’s right.”

“We broke our noses,” Remus said. *I’ll never smell anything pleasant again.*

Sirius, despite his mixed expression of astonishment and horror, coughed out a laugh; “Fucking hell, our own prank Frankensteined us!”

“So that means…” Peter sniffed his arm again.

“I’m going to shower!” James announced, shooting up from his seat.

“But you showered last night!”

“Well I’m showering again!”

“So am I,” Sirius started, grabbing his things.

“Why bother, it’s not like you have a girlfriend to impress anymore!”

“You won’t either if I tell Evans you thought babies came from space until you were fourteen!”

“That’s a vicious lie,” James said, shoving Sirius back down on the bench. “I was *thirteen.”*

“Shit, James, that reminds me,” Remus started, pulling a random piece of folded paper from his bag, “Lily told me to give you this note.”

He tossed the note through the air and it floated away from James, who immediately chased it and scrambled to turn it over. “All this says is ‘Sluggy thinks hydrogen and helium are cool’,” he shouted; *“Moony!”*

But Remus was already gone, streaking across the dining hall toward the front entrance. “Have fun in the gym showers, lads!”

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: This chapter has been edited to remove the plot point of the 'Half-blood Prince'. If you are doing a reread, you will no longer find it, thank you.

'Give up the ghost' is a phrase meaning to die (or stop working).
‘Starkers’ is slang for completely nude.
'Bicarb soda' is the same thing as baking soda in the US.
A 'spanner' is an idiot.
'Scousers' are people from Liverpool.
A ‘chinwag’ is the UK term for a good catch-up session.

We have officially passed 200k! WOW! Someone in the comments called this fic a practice in patience, and it really is if you're looking for the instant gratification of wolfstar. I guess you could say my preferred wolfstar is the one you have to crawl, beg, and cry for (oop) so if that's you too, I thank you so much for taking the plunge into this world with me. You're all amazing <3
However, I will continue to edge you because Remus is sixteen, dumb, and a teenager in the 70s. But whether he realises it or

not, he's totally head over heels for Sirius Black.

Chapter 42: Winter Aches

Chapter Summary

> The boys have made up... just in time for another problem to present itself. And present it does.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Implied sexual references.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Have pity on the young man,
They ain't got nothin' in the world these days, I said;
They ain't got nothin'!
They got sweet fuck-all!

- "Young Man Blues" The Who, 1970

There was no denying it: he'd utterly wasted November. The prank with the lads had been proof of that. The time Remus had spent being mad at Sirius could've been put towards putting shits like Snape and Barty in their place. They could've been spent on music, or actually studying for his exams like he'd meant for. In reality, Remus had spent more time in the library than ever and yet between his constant worrying and bad mood, none of it had sunk in. It was the greatest waste of his sixteen years of life.

And so, as the November chill gave way to the fluffy snowfalls of December, Remus told himself he'd do better. He'd get some real studying done, hang out with his friends like he was meant to, not just because he was avoiding one of them. Except, the final month of term came with a few more unforeseen circumstances, one of which being the revelation that while he'd been off being bitter and snarly, James Potter had proved himself a more than capable guitarist. In fact, their first real practice session in the dorm had left Remus' jaw on the floor.

"I know right?!" Sirius said, practically vibrating with delight.

Remus could hardly believe it. Where Sirius' playing ranged from delicate and bewitching to furious and erratic, James had found a

home right in the middle. He was charming and humble and yet his careful fingers danced up and down the strings as gracefully as a ballerina. It would've been captivating without any sound at all.

"Wow," Remus had said when James had drawn his song to a finish. "That was… amazing."

"Thanks, Moony," James smiled shyly.

Remus looked down at his lap, where the Fender sat abandoned between his legs. He suddenly felt the need to busy his fingers with anything other than playing.

"I think your E-string sounds a bit out of tune though," he said, gesturing to the acoustic, "how 'bout I—"

"Oh, no it's okay, I got it," James said, flipping the head toward himself and fiddling with the tuning keys.

"He picked that up fast too," Sirius said. "Looks like we'll have a real band soon!"

He hated himself for it, but the next time either of them asked him to play, Remus made up an excuse and escaped down to the common room.

This is what you wanted. If you're missing out, it's your own fault, a nasty voice would ring. *Your fault! Your fault! La-la! La-la!*

But he'd already missed out. When Andy's guitar had first shown up in the mail and James agreed to learn a few chords, he'd been just as excited as Sirius; they'd found yet another addition to the bolshie cult that was rock and roll. He had no idea at the time how their dynamic would shift. Now *why* that would bother him so badly in the first place, Remus still wasn't sure. What he *was* sure of, was the exact moment it became apparent that he no longer needed Sirius' extra tutelage with the bass.

After the stink-bomb incident, the school's supply of tomato juice, paste, pie—anything that could get the smell out—had been exhausted and the only four non-Salazar students who smelt of steaming rubbish had been effectively pinned for the prank. Sadly for those like Snape who were praying for a more public downfall, the Hawkings' statute of limitations had played in their favour. Rather than being hung from Castle Hall by their thumbs, each of them served a light two-week detention sentence with their forms teachers before they were freed to

ensure they still had plenty of time to study for their examinations.

Come their final weekend of indentured servitude, Mrs. Buchanan was promptly absent and her place had been filled by some flighty secretary who was more than content to leave them alone in the music room while she smoked and read gossip rags down the hall. He and Sirius were supposed to be polishing the brass instruments, but the moment the secretary popped her gum and strode away they'd both reached for their guitars. It was the first time they'd been alone with their music since before Sirius' birthday, and Remus was so elated by this fact that his fingers played every note like a reflex. They managed "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" all the way through perfectly on their first try and on top of it all, they sounded *good.*

Rickenbacker in hand, Sirius danced up and down the orchestra risers with his tie unlaced and his shirt open to the third button. "That was bloody brilliant!" He'd declared when they finished.

"It did sound cool, didn't it?" Remus bragged, suddenly desperate for Sirius' praise.

"You're a dab hand—a real musician! Now just imagine how cool it'll sound with another guitar."

And that was that.

As long as Remus was a *real* musician, Sirius was free to throw himself into teaching James, which he did whole-heartedly and with enough vigour even Peter was tempted to join in—though he still refused to admit it. By the time exams were upon them their private practices had become virtually nonexistent, traded instead for studying that left Remus' brain more sore than ever. Often he would return to the room after studying with the girls to find the two of them practising, and though they would always welcome him, he had begun to see a wall go up between them, brick by invisible brick. Sirius had found a new hobby-project in James, and Remus, though now more advanced as a musician, had lost his place as musical confidant.

During the moments he felt most reasonable, Remus thought to himself that it was only natural; Sirius and James were best friends and had known each other as long as they could remember—brothers in almost every sense. They deserved to find pleasure in each other's talent. It helped some to remind himself that after Kimmy's oh-so-public dumping Sirius had been left more than a bit rattled—people didn't just dump guys like him—and was just looking for the next best

distraction, but still it stung. Stung worse even than the times Sirius had skipped out and disappeared with Stacy, his brief fancy after Kim that hadn't lasted more than a week and a half but succeeded in propelling his cheeky reputation even further into the school's stratosphere. Since after all, Stacy had been one of Kim's best friends. Apparently dating one's ex was club-exclusive.

Not that it mattered—Mary had already generously informed him and anyone who'd stop to listen that Sirius and another girl named Vivian had been caught snogging behind the football stands.

With nothing else to do Remus threw himself back into school work, determined that he would at least be able to get Sirius to look his way when they received their exam results. He told himself that the competition he'd constructed in his head was to make up for Sirius making a fool out of him the year before, but he couldn't deny the part of him that missed the connection that had originally belonged to only the two of them. If cigarettes had gotten him in the door with Tomny, the key to Sirius was music.

* * *

Monday 13th December 1976

"So it's A, D, D, E?"

"No, A, D, E, D. Like this."

Sirius let his fingers ripple across the strings.

"Oh, so—" James hit the riff perfectly, two strums on each fret.

"Yeah!" Sirius exclaimed. "That was perfect! There is some variation later on, but you've basically got it now."

James let out a long breath and leaned back against the side of his bed, Andy's acoustic guitar slung across his lap. He and Sirius had been working on the same chorus for hours, heads tucked down low over practice sheets and music tablatures. Peter was at the Great Hall, surely crying over his maths exam, while Remus had secluded himself on his own bed, whittling away the tip of his pencil as he tried to finish an essay. Tuning the two of them out was hard, but Lily and Marlene were in another exam and the library would surely be a

whirlwind of clamour anyway as other students struggled with last-minute cramming.

So he'd stayed, and as a consequence, Remus had already imagined himself striding across the room and scattering their music sheets about a dozen times. Demanding the attention he'd been craving ever since Sirius had unwrapped Andy's guitar on his birthday, he would throw open the Fender's bass and play "Sweet Emotion" or "Stone Cold Crazy" or whatever bloody Bowie song Sirius wanted—*anything* to get a reaction.

But of course he didn't, and eventually he'd started to whittle the pencil from the other end too, grinding it between his teeth as his friends played up and down the chromatic scale.

"I still can't play it fast enough," James said, sourly glancing over his sheet music.

"It's not about going fast," Sirius insisted. "It's about the rhythm—hasn't Evans told you that yet?"

"Shove off."

Sirius laughed. "Sorry, that one's on me. But your fingering was great. Moony tell him his fingering was great."

"The dexterity with which you move your fingers is swell," Remus answered from his bed.

"See?"

"Rhythm *was* a bit off though."

"That is not being helpful."

James smiled, rapping his fingers on the body of the guitar. "I forgive you, Moons. I like this song too, it's fun to play."

"That's what it's all about, mate," Sirius hummed.

"I thought it was about fame and glory?" Asked Remus.

Sirius whipped his head around. "Don't you have a paper to finish?"

"Don't you have an exam to write? It's almost three."

"Nah, that's him," Sirius said, at the same time as James exclaimed;

“Oh shit!”

Scrambling to his feet, James set Andy’s guitar on his bed as he flew to the door where he’d left his boots in a heap with his jacket. “Sirius, I told you to remind me! I’ve got a law exam!”

“It’s not my fault you let your dad talk you into taking that class. Who takes law in year twelve?”

“It’s for uni prep,” James moaned, shoving his arms into his jacket sleeves. “Moony, lend me a pencil?”

With a tsk, Remus tossed him the one he was using and James caught it out of the air, setting it between his teeth as he zipped up his jacket. “See you at dinner,” he mumbled around it, before opening the door and rushing out.

“You’re a bad influence,” Remus said as Sirius got up from the floor to stretch. He paused with his arms mid-way to the ceiling, and Remus’ eyes fell to the bare strip of stomach that peeked out between his shirt and the top of his trousers.

“Eh, he can run. Still dunno why he even took the class in the first place. He doesn’t want to be a lawyer. S'just his dad talking.” Sirius dropped his arms and the sliver of skin disappeared out of sight, making Remus snap his eyes back to his essay. He padded his bed covers for his pencil before remembering he’d given it to James not thirty seconds before.

“You could be a bad influence too, you know,” Sirius said, casually striding across the room and leaning against one of Remus’ bed posts; “If you actually joined us once in a while.”

“No, you’re the teacher,” Remus said quickly, looking anywhere but Sirius’ face. He couldn’t stop seeing that bit of stomach in his mind; it was just under Sirius’ navel. He wasn’t wearing a belt so his trousers had sagged a bit around the narrowest part of his waist.

“But we could play together,” Sirius said.

“It’s your thing.”

“I thought it was *our* thing.”

“You have lots of things with lots of people, Black.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Remus looked back at him. “You going out with Vivian Bartley now?”

Sirius pulled his head back in surprise. “What? No. Who said that?”

“Mary. Yesterday at dinner. You weren’t around. Though that’s hardly new.”

“For your information, I was in detention! Flitwick kept me behind to clap erasers like it was the nineteenth century. And Mary doesn’t know everything.”

“So she was lying about Vivian?”

Clicking his tongue in irritation, Sirius looked away and crossed his arms. “It’s nothing now.”

“But it was something.” Not a question. “Really, where do you find the time?”

“Why? You got a thing for Viv or something?”

Remus jerked back. “No, ‘course not.”

“I just thought that—”

“Can we stop talking about Vivian?”

“You’re the one who brought her up.”

Remus puckered and reached to open his bedside drawer, but there was no pencil in there either. Sirius’ gaze dropped to the floor as a stilted silence echoed between them. Finally he pushed off the post and stepped closer, hooking both thumbs into the belt loops of his slacks.

“You got any exams tomorrow?”

“No, just a final essay due.”

“That one?” Sirius pointed to the papers on his bed.

“No, I finished it already. This is just something extra I’m doing for Bilshin.”

“Well, Señor Swot, you’ve lost your pencil,” Sirius smirked, “and I *do*

have an exam tomorrow, so why don't you forget that 'something extra' and come and be a bad influence on me for a bit?"

Remus' mouth went uncomfortably dry. "What—" he had to clear his throat; "What did you have in mind?"

Sirius wiggled his eyebrows. "Let's try playing 'You're My Best Friend' again."

Oh…

Remus blinked. "Er—yeah, sure. Sounds great."

Clapping his hands together eagerly, Sirius darted back to his own bed as Remus stood up stiffly and reached for the Fender's case. Lifting it onto his bed covers, he snapped the clasps open and opened the lid, staring down at his bass guitar dumbly. He was suddenly aware of how chapped his lips were, and his stomach felt weird, and—

Oh no… no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!

Remus squeezed his eyes shut.

Stomach.

He opened them, trying his hardest to recall anything even moderately disgusting. The stink-bomb stench, the way Snape's nose hairs curled at the ends, kissing McGonagall's bare feet—

"I'm definitely going to make you sing this time," Sirius called, looping the Rickenbacker's strap over his shoulder and turning around with a pick in his mouth. "Even if it's just the 'oooh' bit. And you gotta do the high note—like your balls haven't dropped."

Balls. Nob. Skin. Stomach?

"Fuck."

Sirius looked up from his guitar. "Moons?"

"Yeah! Sorry! I'm just gonna—I-I'm gonna go to the loo first."

Keeping his back to Sirius, Remus waddled into their bathroom, slamming the door behind him and throwing the bolt into place. He had only a few seconds to breathe before Sirius knocked.

"Moony, you okay?"

“Yeah—yeah, fine!”

“You feeling sick?”

“No, just give me a minute…" He needed noise. "Er—play the record maybe? I think I’ve forgotten the bridge bit. Just need to hear it and I’ll be good.”

“Okay, sure. Take your time.”

Sirius padded away from the door and Remus sighed again, cheeks burning as he rubbed at his eyes. “What the fuck…” he whispered to himself, before glancing down at his trousers, now awkwardly tented in the front. He looked around desperately, just as a record scratch sounded from outside the bathroom door and Queen began playing in their bedroom, followed by a great *'ooooh!'*

Dropping his head back against the door, Remus let out a short groan. “Please, please don’t. Just shut up you idiot…”

But there it was. Sirius began to sing along, possibly even louder than usual to ensure that he’d hear it from inside the bathroom.

“Ooh, you make me live! Whatever this world can give to me, it’s you, you’re all I see! Ooh, you make me live now, honey! Ooh, you make me live!”

Fuck it, Remus thought in frustration; *He can wait then, the bastard.*

* * *

Thursday, 16th December 1976

Any problem could be avoided if one tried hard enough. Unfortunately, Sirius Black wasn’t just a simple problem, he was a personified predicament.

A second ‘incident’ popped up during their geography exam, leaving not only Remus’ sanity to suffer as a result, but surely his marks as well. It was freezing in the Great Hall, but he’d still had to remove his jumper midway through the test to cover his lap after an essay question pertaining to the ‘rolling plains of East Africa’ had left him unable to think about anything other than the curve and dip of Sirius’ pale stomach. It wasn't even the boners themselves that had him

frazzled—he'd been insatiable at fourteen, once popping a woody after a school matron had praised him for being so good about his yearly check-up—it was the fact that they'd been spurned by none other than one of his bestest friends.

Everyone has a stomach, this doesn't mean it's about HIS stomach, he tried telling himself. But then, *no one's stomach looks like his.*

It was *so* stupid. Remus was positive that if Sirius ever caught wind of it he'd pitch himself off the roof of the astronomy building.

As always Sirius had finished the exam first and was waiting around outside when Remus marched out, his cheeks already splotched with red.

“There’s my little bookworm,” Sirius called, tucking his chilled hands under his armpits as he fell into step next to him. “How’d it go?”

“Fine,” Remus mumbled gruffly, keeping his eyes on the ground.

“So you reckon you’ve got this one bagged then? I know you’re trying to beat me, and I swear I won’t hold back. That’d just hurt your pride, hey?”

“Great. See you later.”

“Woah, hold on. What’s the rush?” Sirius grabbed his arm, and Remus flinched back sharply.

“I’ve just got something to do, okay!” He snapped, and Sirius stared at him until the red spread further down his neck. “Sorry. I—I really gotta return this book to Lily, so you should… wait for James.”

It felt wrong to blame Sirius for a problem that was so clearly his, but even when he managed to avoid the more physical reactions, Remus was unable to concentrate. He laid awake at night drowning in intrusive thoughts he normally would’ve been able to read or study through. Music might’ve helped, but there was no way he was going to cross their bedroom in the middle of the night and camp out mere inches from Sirius’ bed.

Things had only got worse the more Sirius tried to get his attention. He’d become awfully handsy since dating Kimmy, which made sense since they’d hardly kept their *hands* off one another, and every time he came close to touching him Remus had to resist the urge to pull away. Then, as if everything else weren’t enough, Sirius would play the most

distracting songs he could think of every chance he got; as though he was unknowingly trying to punish Remus for his indiscretions. On the same evening of their failed practice session, he'd played "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?" on repeat under the guise that the cassette got stuck in the tape deck. That did not go over so well with James, who like Remus, had been suitably anxious over his exams—though he doubted he had to worry about rolling plains in Africa and stiff peaks elsewhere. The reality was that Remus needed a distraction from his distraction or he was going to fail every test he took.

After abandoning Sirius on the front steps of the Great Hall, he trudged down the snowy lane to the girls' dorm and began tossing small pebbles at their window until Marlene's face appeared and she stuck her head out into the cold.

"Just bringing back Lily's study guide for MFL," Remus said, holding up the booklet.

"Okay, bring it up," Marlene said, and he hopped on the slick electrical box to stretch up to the edge of the window. They were almost nose-to-nose.

"Lily not in?"

"No, it's just me actually," Marlene said with a tone of disappointment. "Mary was supposed to be around, but she said this morning that Laurence MacGregor had been eyeing her up during their exam. I doubt she'll be back any time soon."

"Oh."

"Mhm." She took the notes, and sheepishly traced her finger along the binding. "So… Do you want to come in?"

Remus immediately thought of Sirius. *A distraction from his distraction.*

"Yup, sure."

Smiling, Marlene drew back and let him pull himself inside. He knocked the snow off his boots on the ledge and she carried them into the bathroom before they could drip across the carpet while he slid the window closed after himself. It was nice and warm inside the girls' rooms, trunks already open and lined up against the wall in preparation for Christmas holiday.

"Tea?" Marlene offered. "I made it for Mary, but she's not gonna drink

it. Should still be warm. I can put some music on too if you'd like."

"Please." Shucking off his coat, Remus looked around before deciding to settle down on the floor between Marlene and Lottie's beds, leaning his back up against one of the hutches.

"I'll spare you from any ABBA," Marlene said, setting an album on Mary's turntable. Remus smiled a bit, and a second later Joni Mitchell was playing.

"This okay?"

"Yeah sure, s'great," Remus said, as she tucked herself up onto her bed and passed him a cup of tea. "Joni Mitchell's… cool."

"I think so too," Marlene gushed. "I like 'Ladies of the Canyon' best… I think listening to her is what falling in love must feel like."

"Oh… Guess I never thought about it like that."

"Lily said it first actually. James sent her a couple albums over the summer—remember when they were just 'talking'? I guess this was one of them."

"That sap, he never told me that."

"It's cute to think they can finally say how much they like each other."

"Mhm." Remus raised his cup to his lips.

"You don't have to pay any attention to what Lily's been saying, you know," Marlene said suddenly, making him pause.

"You mean like the—"

"Yeah, she… she's just being silly. She's got it in her head that you and I… well, I dunno. Don't worry about it if it makes you uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," Remus said, choosing his next words carefully; "I… like you, Marlene."

"Oh."

"I mean, you're a great friend."

"Oh, yeah you too."

He resisted the urge to smack himself in the forehead. *Idiot.*

While Marlene lifted her cup to her lips, looking anywhere but at him, Remus did the same and instantly frowned at the tea's bitter taste. No sugar.

"Oh that's right," Marlene chuckled lightly, "I forgot you preferred your tea as sweet as lemonade in summer. You'd probably be able to tell me exactly how much sugar is in each cup down to the gram."

"Ha, probably..."

With a funny look, Marlene stood up from her bed and plucked his teacup from his hand. "I'll be back with something sweeter," she said, lifting the tray and making for the door.

"No Marls, it's fine, really."

"It's not a bother, you just sit tight."

As the door fell closed behind her, Remus relaxed against the hutch and listened.

'Oh honey you turn me on,
I'm a radio;
I'm a country station,
I'm a little bit corny;
I'm a wildwood flower,
Waving for you—'

He closed his eyes, smiling to himself. "Oh Potter, you're so getting bullied for this one."

When Marlene finally returned, he was in the middle of changing the album, sorting through the girls' collection after being pleasantly surprised. "Who's got the Genesis album?" He asked, turning around to find Marlene standing there with enough tea mugs for an entire party. "What are you doing?"

"An experiment! Come sit down."

Without objection, Remus set the album down and followed her over to her bed, gingerly sitting down across from her on the soft, Rowena-blue covers.

"It's a blind taste-test," she said, gesturing to the cups. "Close your

eyes and see if you can guess how many teaspoons of sugar I put in each one."

"Why?"

"Oh, indulge me, we've got nothing better to do. Unless you wanted to study some more?"

He didn't, so he closed his eyes and let Marlene push the first cup into his hand. This one tasted how James usually took his tea. "Two."

"Good job."

The next one was a little sweeter, but not by much.

"Three teaspoons—no, two and *half."*

"Damn, I thought I'd had you. Okay, next."

The third cup made him gag and his eyes flew open as he stared down at it. "Oh my god—you put the whole damn tin in here?"

"Close. That one has nine scoops."

Remus shook his head. Most of the sugar hadn't even dissolved, just sat at the bottom collecting into a tiny white mountain.

"Last cup," Marlene smiled, handing it to him. Remus sipped it and sighed. Perfect.

"Four scoops."

"Ding-ding-ding! We have a winner."

"Now you have to try the one with nine scoops."

"No way! It'll go straight to my waist. You're the only one who can afford it, you twig."

"Ow, my twig-feelings."

Laughing, Marlene set the tray aside and picked up her own tea. They sat there facing each other on the bed, sipping it in easy silence. Marlene watched him with her blue eyes and he found himself wondering if Lily really was right after all. If he could like Marlene, then maybe he could put all this nonsense with Sirius behind him.

“Marleeeeene, my looooove!” Mary sang as she burst into the bedroom. “You’ll never guess who I snogged under the stairs—oh, hi Remus!”

* * *

Saturday 18th December 1976

Despite Lily’s vote of confidence, Remus was not excited to receive his end of term marks. He hadn’t exactly failed, per say, but the results were certainly less than anticipated.

“What happened?” She gasped, flipping through his school report with green eyes the size of dinner plates. “I-I mean they're fine, but what the heck? You studied so much!”

“I know,” he said sorely. “Guess I just tripped at the finish line.”

Lily frowned sympathetically and passed his report back, adjusting her bag as they made their way down House Lane. “There’s always next term.”

“Yup.”

“Aw, cheer up, Remus. If Black has anything to say about it just tell me and I’ll give him detention for being an arse.”

He half-smiled, kicking a stone out of his path. “Lily Evans, my knight in shining armour.”

“And don’t forget, light of your life.”

“Of course. It’s a wonder James hasn’t gotten jealous.”

Lily locked her hands behind her back, smiling shyly. “He’s odd that way—I think he loves too much. Couldn’t be angry at his friends if he tried.”

Remus was suddenly reminded of his conversation with Marlene in her dorm room. “Speaking of love…” He glanced sideways at her, eyebrows raised. “Have you two, you know, said it yet?”

“You mean have we said *‘it’* yet?” Lily bit her lip. “No. Feels a bit heavy, I think. James said it once, but I think it was just sort of on an impulse. It surprised me, and I… didn’t say it back. He said it didn't bother him and that we should take our time, but… I think I’m

worried that once we do say it one of us will realise it's not true."

"You've got to be joking me," Remus replied automatically. "That's such bollocks, Lils. You and James are—"

"Are what—an expectation? Well have any of you ever stopped to consider how that might feel? The pressure it might come with? I know I'm right—James loves too much, and I don't want to be the thing that stops that."

"So you don't love him?"

"No—or I mean, I think I do, but I don't want to be wrong either. Everyone says that you just know when you love someone, like a lightbulb going off in your head. But how can you tell a regular lightbulb from a love lightbulb? I don't want to get it wrong and regret it, not when James is… you know, James."

"I get it," Remus said. "But you should know that James only has love lightbulbs, and if you asked him to, he'd happily share."

Lily laughed. "What a dumb metaphor."

"Bet James would find it funny."

"Ha, probably."

"You should ask him tonight, at the party."

"That's still happening?"

Remus nodded as they stopped outside Godric House. "James and Sirius somehow convinced Kenny to let us have the whole common room to ourselves. He wouldn't let them throw an actual party, so it'll just be us. But it's something before we all go home for the holidays."

"Sounds nice. I should go on ahead then. I've still got some packing to do before we leave tomorrow."

"You're coming on our train right?"

She nodded. "I'll get off midway at Doncaster and transfer onto Lime Street's line from there."

"And how's Snape feel knowing he'll be taking the other train alone?"

Lily bit her lip and scuffed her shoes on the sidewalk. "I haven't told

him yet actually…”

“You’re just full of secrets this year, aren’t you?”

“Must be contagious.” Lily looked him up and down pointedly before stepping down the sidewalk. “I’ll see you later, then. Make sure you get all your packing done so you’re not scrambling tomorrow.”

“Yeah okay, see you.”

With a wave, Lily left him outside of his dorm and Remus ducked inside. He checked the message board—a missed call from Giles, probably just organising his trip home; and *there!*

A call from Tomny.

Eagerly, Remus dropped his bag to the floor in front of one of the phones and dialled the flat. A voice answered after a few rings, one he didn’t recognise.

“ 'Ello, whatcha want?”

“Is Tomny around? It’s Remus.”

“Oh blimey,” the voice said, before distantly calling, “s'Remus!”

There was some shuffling of the receiver on the other end and Lee’s voice came through, bright and cheery; “Lupin! Hey! Long time no chat, mate. How’s tricks?”

“Good,” Remus answered, “how you been?”

“Oh, just hunky-dory. You lookin’ for Tomny?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, he’s not actually around at the moment—Tonya somehow convinced him to take her out for the night. Right now it’s jus' me and Ian—my lil' bro. You jus' heard him there—Ian say hi.” In the background, Remus heard Ian call out a friendly ‘ello’.

“Hey, Ian,” Remus replied, “I don’t think he and I've met.”

“Ah yeah, nah,” Lee said. “He’s new fish around here. We finally found someone to replace you, Lu!”

Remus swallowed, and took a moment to switch his receiver to the

other ear. “Oh yeah?”

“Oh don’t worry, the nob’s not nearly as tall or cheeky.”

“Glad to hear it. Well, I got a message that Tomny called but I must’ve missed him. I’ll be on the train back to London tomorrow, so I guess I’ll try him from home.”

“Oh yeah,” Lee started, “can’t wait to see you. When you droppin' in?”

Remus paused. “Oh, uh, I’m not sure.”

“Tom said you’d be comin' around. S'been too long—bet that school makes you want to tear yer hair out at the roots, yeah?”

Lee laughed, but Remus blazed right past it. “Tomny told you I was coming? He—he said I could come?”

“Mm-hm.”

“When?”

“I dunno, yesterday maybe? Tonya hasn’t shut up about it—did you know they never fight unless it’s about you? Most of us have money on which of them gets you in the divorce.”

It felt as though Remus’ entire body was humming. “I’ll come,” he promised. “When I get back—you can tell Tomny I’m coming.”

“Brilliant. Should be good. I’ll see you then.”

“Absolutely.”

Lee hung up and Remus squeezed the phone tightly in both hands, almost bouncing up and down on the spot. He could hardly believe it, Tomny was letting him come back. He wasn’t going to spend his entire holiday at the estate with only Giles, the dogs, and a few nameless servants for company. Everything else felt like pointless chatter—his jealousy, avoiding Sirius, bombing his exams. Screw his poor marks, nothing could ruin his good mood.

“Alright there, Moony?”

Remus turned around to find Sirius standing in the middle of the main hall, a piece of poster board tucked under one arm.

“Yeah, brilliant! You?”

Sirius looked him up and down and smiled. “Champion. Look.” He lifted the board up for Remus to see; in big block letters it read, *PRIVATE PARTY—MESSERS ONLY!*

“That for tonight?” He asked, and Sirius nodded eagerly.

“We get one final hurrah before we all return to our own shitty realities, so might as well make a show of it, right?”

Chapter End Notes

Lots of songs referenced in this chapter:
The opening song by The Who was originally written and performed by jazz artist Mose Allison (1957) and covered by The Who on their 1970’s "Live at Leeds" album. Both versions kick ass.
The song Remus and Sirius play is George Harrison's “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” (1968).
"Sweet Emotion" is by Aerosmith (1975).
"Stone Cold Crazy" is by Queen (1974).
The song Sirius sings is "You're My Best Friend" by Queen (1976).
“Why Don’t We Do It in the Road?” is by the Beatles (1968).

‘A dab hand’ is slang for being an expert in something.
A 'breve' is the UK term for a double whole note. 'Quavers' are eighth notes.
'MFL' is just an acronym for Modern Foreign Languages.
A 'school report' or just 'report' is the same thing as a 'report card'.
Lime Street is a large train station in Liverpool.

A/N: I believe I will make Fridays/Saturdays my post days for September. Something to start the weekends off right. Cheers <3

Chapter 43: Cherry

Chapter Summary

Final night at Hawkings before Christmas holiday. Friendships are changed and tested.

Chapter Notes

CW: Drinking and homophobic language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Man has always wanted a woman by his side to keep him company,
Women always knew that it takes a man to get matrimony and harmony;
Everybody knows that a man who's feeling down wants some female sympathy,
Gotta have love to carry on living,
Gotta have love 'til eternity...

- "People Need Love" ABBA, 1972

Really it was kind of Kenny to hand over the common room for their last night at school. Remus doubted it made him or any of his friends very popular, but other kids stayed away for the most part, deterred by Sirius' sign and the threat that any party-crashers would receive detention and in the very least, a nasty wedgie.

All of them piled in together and turned the couches into a single ring the way Simeon and his friends had done the year before. The fire burning in the grate was doing its job of keeping them warm with the windows cracked, though they had more than enough booze for that anyway. Invites had been extended to all of their closest friends, including a few plus ones. It had seemed like a good and fair idea at the beginning, but unfortunately Mary's choice of company couldn't have been worse. While Lily and James snuggled up to one another on the sofa and Peter and Lottie brought along their own respective partners, Mary called upon a year 13 bloke she'd been seeing named Bryan. Remus thought he could see the interest—Bryan had wavy brown hair with baby blue eyes and chiselled jaw to boot—but it only took about ten minutes for the rest of them to figure out he had the personality of sour milk.

While Lottie and Mickey disappeared to share one of the spliffs Remus had rolled, Sirius had set up the common room's turntable, only slightly frustrated that the needle needed a ten pence taped to its top to weigh it down so that it didn't skip. Everyone seemed content to sit back and let Mary and Sirius have it out over the music—Mary favoured Diana Ross and Bay City Rollers while Sirius wanted Faces and ZZ Top, so naturally they compromised with The Moody Blues and The Beach Boys.

"Always thought The Beach Boys were a little too buggery to be any good," Bryan said as Sirius set *Pet Sounds* on the turntable.

"Tell me Bry," he said wryly, "do you prefer painting everything in black and white, or just rock and roll?"

"You call 'Wouldn't It Be Nice' rock and roll?"

"Yes. They're a *rock* band."

"Pink Floyd's a rock band."

"Oh, you hear that, Pot?" Sirius called. "Pink Floyd's a rock band. Did you know?"

James shook his head; "Nah, could've fooled me."

"All I'm saying is there's levels," Bryan said.

" 'Levels'?"

"Yeah, like Syd Barrett had this whole thing going on—"

"Pretty sure that was the acid actually," Remus interjected. "The last few songs he wrote for the band were unplayable."

"Yeah well, these poofters couldn't hold a candle to real music."

"Oh save me from the follies of my betters," Sirius huffed sarcastically. "This is one of the albums that *made* the sixties."

"And 'Dark Side of the Moon' absolutely blows it out of the water."

"Syd Barrett wasn't even in the band when they produced that album!"

"That's enough ladies, we all have ears and opinions of our own," Mary said from her spot on the couch next to Bryan. "Now get back

here, Sirius, so I can finish your eyeliner."

Looking pointedly at Bryan, Sirius set up the needle and waited until the song had started before crossing back to Mary and dropping down in front of her on the rug. It'd been several weeks since Remus had last seen him wearing the makeup or polish, but he supposed going home for the holiday had Sirius wanting to push the envelope once more. He didn't mind either, it made the blue in his eyes stand out—made them 'pop', or whatever the girls were always going on about.

"Want another drink, Remus?" Marlene asked, as she divided up another case of beer. Looking away from Sirius and Mary, Remus took two and waved one at James.

"Potter, catch."

Unwrapping his arm from Lily long enough to snag the can from the air, James popped the tab and sucked up the foam before looking back to Bryan, who was still scowling in Sirius' direction. "Got something else to say, Bryan?" He asked.

Bryan leaned away from Mary's side, expression sour. "Just don't see the point in a bloke wearing makeup."

"It's fashion," Mary defended as she finished Sirius' eyeliner. "Since when has fashion needed a gender?"

"You're not coming near me with that crap."

James was on his feet in an instant. He crossed the circle and went around the coffee table to help Sirius to his feet before grabbing his best friend's face with both hands, turning it this way and that to get a good look at him while Sirius stared back with big eyes.

"I think it looks great," he announced, before releasing Sirius and pushing him toward his old spot next to Lily. "Mary, would you do mine?"

Mary's mouth dropped open into a little 'o'. "You really want me to?"

" 'Course. It's just fashion." James shot a dark look at Bryan, who just rolled his eyes and sipped his beer smugly.

Mary nodded eagerly and James dropped down to her level, barely flinching as she ran the pencil across his lower lash line. When she'd finished he stood up again, turning around to Sirius and Lily, who had

cuddled up next to each other in anticipation. “What do you think?”

“Very handsome,” Lily declared, just as Sirius said; “Hot.”

“You both look great!” Mary agreed enthusiastically.

James grinned and wiped under his eyes, which despite his bravery, had started to water. “Want her to do yours, Pete?” He asked, turning to Peter and Moira who were on the next couch. Peter looked at his girlfriend, then James, and shrugged.

“Er, sure—”

“Blimey, Mary, I knew you had girlfriends but I didn’t know you were *into* girls,” Bryan snorted.

James whirled around, but it was Remus’ turn. He stood and held a hand to James’ chest as he stepped past him, stopping over Bryan and Mary’s couch and holding out his hand. “Mary, may I?”

Without any hesitation, Mary passed the eye pencil over and Remus pressed it to the corner of his eye, drawing a very poor line across his lid with a shaky hand before doing the same to the other. Eyes watering like James’, he passed the pencil back and glared down at Bryan again, who hadn’t moved but had straightened up slightly on the couch. “I think it’s time for you to leave, Bry,” he ordered. “This is actually a private party.”

Bryan scoffed. “I was invited.”

“And now I’m uninviting you.”

“Oh yeah? Fine then.” He looked at Mary. “Guess we should get out of here, babe.”

“I think I’m gonna stay actually,” Mary said, while casually examining her nails. “You know, visit with my friends before we all go home for two weeks.”

“What?”

“Yeah, you should totally go though. Don’t think we have any Pink Floyd to play anyway, and to be honest, I’m just not sure you’re *girlish* enough for me, Bry.”

Affronted, Bryan drew back and looked around the room, then up to Remus, who was still staring him down. Finally he smacked his beer

down and stood up, putting them nearly chest to chest. Remus wrinkled his nose—he smelt like a mixture of sour aftershave and cheap cigars.

“Fine,” Bryan snarled, before stepping away. “Never wanted to hang around a bunch of fucking queers anyway.”

Acting on instinct, Remus flinched forward like he might lunge at him and Bryan just about jumped out of his skin before scoffing and stomping out of the common room. They heard the dorm’s front doors slam shut and instantly everyone began snorting in laughter.

“I think he about pissed his pants just then!” Sirius guffawed.

“You wouldn’t have really hit him, would you, Remus?” Asked Lily.

“If he had, the dick would’ve deserved it,” James answered, returning to the couch and squeezing in between her and Sirius.

“I think you all but ruined my eyeliner to prove your point, Remus,” Mary said, examining the makeup pencil with a look of disappointment.

“Yeah well, you’re not allowed to pick your own boyfriends anymore,” he said to her. Mary just shrugged innocently, blowing him a cheeky kiss as he returned to his own couch next to Marlene.

“I think you missed a few spots,” Marlene observed, licking her thumb and wiping it across his eyelid. Remus groaned fondly and batted her away as the rest of his friends continued their happy chatter. By the time they’d gotten through both sides of *Pet Sounds* they were all reasonably gassed and giggly and had come to the collective conclusion that wherever Lottie and Mickey had taken that spliff, they were unlikely to return.

“At least we know some of us are getting some,” Sirius observed, raising his beer toward the two remaining couples in the room. Moira blanched and Peter flipped him off, but James had the privilege of being closer and just shoved Sirius for the comment. Unfortunately, Sirius had been sitting on the back of the couch. He toppled backwards—drink and all—straight into the turntable’s stand. There was a record-scratching stop and the turntable went down with a bang as Sirius gave a low groan.

“Oh shit!” James yelped, jumping up. “Sorry, mate!”

“He deserves it for being so nasty,” Marlene called. She was half laying down on the couch with her legs draped up over Remus’ lap. It was hard for him not to be conscious of her since his and Lily’s conversation, but he’d had such a good day and was now decently drunk, which made leaving any anxiety at the door considerably easier.

“Yeah, don’t think the record player deserved it though,” James winced. He went around the couch to help Sirius up and then righted the player, which now had a broken needle.

“Damn,” Sirius sighed. “Okay, well, we’ve got the other stereo upstairs. Moony, come help me bring ours down.”

Remus set his beer aside. “Yup.”

“Wait,” Lily called, sitting up very quickly. “I forgot we left that gin and whisky in the fridge. Sirius, would you come and help me mix some drinks?”

“Why me? Get your man to do it.”

“James was just going to the bathroom. *Weren’t you, Potter?”*

James looked between the broken record player and his girlfriend. He appeared confused at first, like he was going to correct her, but then understanding bloomed on his face. “Ah—yeah. Now seems like a great time to wee.”

Lily smiled, clearly pleased. “Great. Sirius will help me, and… Marls, you can help Remus bring the stereo down!”

Marlene lifted her mouth from the drink she’d been nursing. “Sure...?”

Sirius looked around. “But it’s not Marlene’s room—”

“C’mon, Black,” Lily said, jumping up from the couch and reaching across it to grab Sirius by the elbow, leading him toward the dorm’s kitchenette. As they went Marlene withdrew her legs from Remus’ lap and stood up.

“Lead the way.”

Remus pushed up from the couch and together they unwound themselves from the circle, heading for the stairs. On the second floor, Marlene let out a loud groan.

“I forgot you guys lived on the fourth floor,” she sighed, before her foot came out from underneath her and she nearly slipped down the stairs they’d already climbed. Grabbing her forearm, Remus waited until she was steady again before letting go. “Sorry,” she half-laughed, “it’s like I’ve got two left feet when I’m drinking.”

“Better than me. I’ve always got two left feet, drunk or not.”

Marlene smiled and bit her lip and they went on to the fourth floor, Remus letting her inside their bedroom and flicking on the light.

“I’ve never been in a boy’s dorm room before,” she admitted, taking in the posters and discarded socks scattered about the room.

“It’s not usually this spick and span,” he joked, crossing to the window and lifting several albums off the top of the hi-fi.

“It’s not that bad. Much better than my brothers' rooms when we were growing up,” Marlene hummed. She’d stopped in front of his Queen poster and admired it with her hands locked behind her back. “This one your bed?”

“Mhm.”

Marlene bent down and picked up one of the books from the pile on his nightstand. “Oh, I’d wondered where this one went.”

“Sorry. You can take it back if you want.”

She set the book down. “No, it’s fine. You take your time with it.”

“Thanks.”

As Remus fiddled with the chords plugged into the stereo’s back, Marlene joined him, absent-mindedly spinning the volume dial with her finger. “It was good of you to defend Sirius and Mary.”

Remus shrugged. “Bryan’s a dick.”

“Oh yeah. Tried telling Mary that already. Guess she needed to hear it from another guy. She’s always got boys on the brain.”

“I guess not everyone can be as sensible as you, Marls.”

Marlene dropped her finger from the dial. “You think I don’t like boys?”

Remus froze. “No—er—that’s not what I meant—”

“I do,” she insisted, “but I sort of think it’s the person that counts, not their… gender…”

“Well, that makes sense.”

The hopeful expression that bloomed on Marlene’s face made a lump rise in his throat. She was tall for a girl but still had to look up at him, and Remus got a funny feeling in his gut.

“You really think so?” Marlene asked.

“Sure,” he said dimly, “shouldn’t you like someone as a person first? Before you—you know, date them?”

She considered. “I like you, Remus. As a person.”

“Oh.” He released the wires and stepped back from the stereo a bit. “I like you as a person too.”

Marlene dropped her gaze to the ground before looking up again, more hopeful than before. “Have you ever kissed anyone, Remus?”

He suddenly felt like he was holding his breath. “One or two people.”

“I’ve never kissed anyone,” she confessed.

“It’s really not all that.”

“It’s not?”

“No, I lied,” he said, quickly. “But I guess it feels better if you… like them as a person first.”

Marlene pressed her lips together and nodded slowly. She had such big blue eyes. Remus’ palms felt sweaty; he was still lashed. When had she gotten this close? She smelt like beer, but also sort of fruity.

“Are you going to kiss me?” She asked.

Remus opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He spread his palm out flat against the top of the stereo’s cool metal, and with it grounding him, leaned forward. Their lips met in the middle and they both bounced back slightly as though they’d given each other a static shock, but then the surprise wore off and they were just kissing. It lasted maybe only a few seconds before Marlene pulled away, cheeks

tinged with pink. They stared at one another, and Remus licked his lips, tasting her lip gloss.

“Tastes like cherry.”

“Huh?”

“Your lipstick.”

“Oh.” Marlene held a hand to her mouth before smiling behind her fingers. “Yeah. It’s Mary’s actually.”

“Cool…” Letting out a breath, Remus drummed his fingers on top of the hi-fi.

“We should probably go back down,” Marlene said, “before Mary and Sirius riot without any music to argue over.”

“Yeah, sure. Here, you want to carry this?” Grateful for the distraction, Remus grabbed Sirius’ turntable and passed it to her before hastily disconnecting the rest of the stereo’s wires and lifting it into his arms. With the sound system between them it was hard to imagine they’d been so close only seconds before.

Marlene smiled sweetly, still blushing, and turned to leave the room. They didn't say anything on the way down, eyes glued to the stairs so they wouldn't slip, and by the time they made it down to the ground floor Remus had managed to shake off most of his jitters.

“It just feels like socially-accepted misogyny,” Mary was saying, as they strode back into the common room.

“Disliking pop music is not the same thing as misogyny,” Sirius argued, passing her a drink.

“You like The Faces, but what is Rod Stewart on his own? He’s a *pop* star.”

“He writes ballads!”

“You’re delusional.”

“Moony!” Sirius shouted when he spotted them. Shooting across the room, he halved Remus' burden when he grabbed hold of the other side of the stereo. “Save me! They want to play more disco-pop.”

“Disco?” Remus echoed sorely.

“It’s party music,” Mary called. She raised a Bee Gees album and Marlene’s face lit up. Remus watched her, tongue pressed to the inside of his cheek, and slowly cracked a small smile.

“Maybe it is time we diversify, Black. After all, what is glam rock if not disco?”

Sirius’ mouth dropped open. “No, don’t tell me they’ve gotten to you too? I can’t handle losing three mates in one day.”

“I only said they’re kind of R&B,” James scoffed.

“And funk is kinda fun,” Peter added.

Sirius moaned and dropped his forehead down on top of the hi-fi in Remus’ arms.

“Oh c’mon, you whiner,” Mary cackled as Marlene brought her the turntable; “It’s good to leave your options open in life. You never know what sort of fun you’ll find if you do.”

* * *

Remus was thrilled to be going home. Not only was he going to get to see the rest of his friends, but this was the perfect way to reset the clock. No more jealousy or whinging—or *incidents*—just good friends and good music and good times. That is if Sirius ever got on the bleeding bus.

“C’mon, Black, they’re going to leave without us!”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

Remus danced from foot to foot. How was he supposed to explain to Sirius, who held such a strong distaste for going home, that it *was* a bad thing. Missing the bus and having to catch a later train would only mean less time spent at the flat, and therefore less time with the friends he’d only recently learned he’d get to see again.

“If you don’t come now I’ll never tell you what I got on the geography exam," he threatened.

“Alright, alright, don’t get your knickers in a twist.” A moment passed and Sirius gave a great ‘a-ha!’ from inside the bathroom. He came out

with his trunk in one hand, his chain necklace in the other. “Sucker must’ve fallen behind the toilet when I was showering last night.”

“Peachy, can we go now?”

Sirius shook his head and dusted the necklace off on his shirt before popping his top button and stringing it around his neck. As he did so, a charm on the end of the necklace caught Remus’ eye.

“That a pick?”

Sirius perked up and then glanced down before touching his collarbone. “Oh yeah,” he held up the guitar pick, which was strung on the chain as though it were some holy cross. “Put it on there myself. You like it?”

“Yeah,” Remus said, “it looks cool.”

Sirius smiled and then bit his lip before taking the chain off again and holding it out to him. “Here.”

“What?”

“Take it.”

“No, it's yours,” Remus scoffed.

“Only half. The other half’s yours technically.”

Remus looked at him, confused, and Sirius pinched the pick. “It’s the pick from last year. You gave it to me just after exams, remember? Guess it’s my turn to give it back.”

Remus was quite honestly stunned. He hadn’t even remembered doing that, and yet Sirius had been carrying the cheap and thoughtless gift around with him everywhere. “Still, it’s your necklace. You should keep it.”

“You really think it’s that tacky?”

“No, of course not! But it's clearly important to you—”

Sirius came forward quickly and grabbed Remus’ hand, folding the necklace into his palm. “Mum actually tried to take it last time she saw it. I’d rather you have it than lose it to her. Just think of it as an early Christmas gift.”

“I haven’t gotten anything for you,” Remus said slowly, staring down at the chain. It was warm to the touch, or maybe that was just Sirius.

“Good thing I’ve already thought up what you can give me,” Sirius said, strolling back to his abandoned trunk.

“And what’s that?”

He jutted his thumb toward Remus’ bed, clicking his tongue; “When you gonna make good on that promise of yours?”

It took Remus a moment to understand but once he did he glanced to his right, where Hope’s records sat quietly beneath the bed. Untouched and unplayed. “You want the records? Well… you can just have them, I suppose.”

Sirius sighed. “I don’t want to take them from you, dummy, I want to *listen* to them with you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. If you… want to, that is.”

“You sure that’s what you want for Christmas?” Remus licked his lips. “They’re just records.”

Sirius shrugged. “They’re important to you. I think it’d be cool if they could be important to all of us.” He smirked. “For now though, I’ll settle for you fessing up over that exam.”

Remus tucked the chain into his pocket and considered. “Okay. I got a sixty-five.”

“You—a *sixty-five?!”*

“Yup. Let’s go.” Remus turned and shot out of their room.

“Lupin!”

Sirius only managed to catch up with him on the ground floor, which was nearly empty now that most students were already down by the buses. James and Peter had gone on ahead to collect their girlfriends, both of which were accompanying them. Between them and the other girls, Remus expected the compartment was going to be rather crowded.

“I don’t need the ‘but you studied’ lecture. I already got it from Lily,”

Remus insisted as he and Sirius made their way down the path short-cut to Castle Hall, breath visible in the chilly December air.

“Bet mine would be way funnier though,” Sirius said, knocking his trunk into Remus’ thigh. He paused afterwards to let out a low groan, holding his stomach and still clearly feeling the effects of the hangover he’d sworn he didn’t have.

“You should’ve avoided that whisky,” Remus told him.

“I *paced* myself.”

“Uh-huh, whatever you say. Just make sure you sit next to James on the train. I’m not wearing your breakfast for nine hours.”

“You’re right. And you can sit with Evans. I don’t need to witness another show like last night’s lovefest anyway.”

Remus smiled as he recollected the shift in James and Lily’s outward affection the moment hard liquor had made an appearance. “They weren’t that bad. Nothing compared to you on the pull.”

“So you’ve been paying attention!” Sirius laughed. “Good. This must mean we’re okay.”

“Why wouldn’t we be okay?” Remus asked, slowing his strides a bit.

“Oh don’t give me that. You’ve been acting funny, and I think I know why.”

“You do?”

“Yup. You were upset I was spending so much time with James. We got caught up with the music and sort of forgot about you. So I’m sorry.”

“Oh, that.” Remus let out a breath of relief. “Don’t worry, I’m over it.”

“So you were mad?”

“More like ‘casually irritated’. But it’s fine now. James sounds really good for a beginner. You’re a great teacher.”

Sirius lit up and skipped forward until he was walking backwards in front of him. “Nah, it’s all him, I swear! He’s gonna take Andy’s guitar home for Christmas to practice too. Bet he'll come back sounding like Robert Johnson or something. Give his soul for God's own talent.”

Remus smiled. “Careful, he might just come back next term sounding better than you.”

“I wouldn’t put it past the wanker. He’s just got this magic in his fingers or something! Evans’ is a lucky gal.”

“Ugh, don’t be gross.”

“What? Oh c'mon, I know you’re a bit of a prude, Moons, but one day you’re gonna get over that and when you do you’ll see that—”

“I kissed Marlene.”

Sirius stopped dead in his tracks and Remus had to side-step to avoid running into him.

“What?”

“Last night,” he confessed. “In our room.”

Sirius blinked at him before looking around with a shocked sense of bewilderment. Remus could almost see the gears turning in his head, while just a little further down the road a crowd of teachers and kids stood shuffling around in front of a long row of buses.

“What the fuck,” Sirius said finally; “Marlene? Why her?”

“Why not?” Remus rebuked.

“It’s just… since when?”

“Since when what?”

“Since when have you liked her?!”

“I’ve always liked Marlene.”

Eyes widening again, Sirius huffed and muttered under his breath; “Jesus Christ… So what, this gonna be a thing now?”

“I don’t know. Why are you getting so pissy?”

“She’s our friend.”

“Lily’s our friend too, and you didn’t seem to have much of a problem with it when you propositioned me to get her to fall in love with James last year."

"I didn't ask you to get her to fall in love with him!"

"Okay, and what about you and Mary the year before that?"

“That’s different. Marlene’s…”

“She’s what?”

Sirius pressed his lips together in a sour line. “Never mind. Let’s just go.” He turned and stalked away, trunk in hand, and Remus was left to stare after him. There hadn’t been much time since the kiss to worry about what it meant for their friend group, and though he had expected some teasing, Sirius’ reaction left a bad taste in his mouth.

“Hey, hold on!” Remus used his long legs to catch up with Sirius, who was nearly to the buses now. “Are you really this angry that I kissed a girl when you—”

“Shh!” Sirius smacked a hand to the centre of Remus’ chest to silence him.

"Don't shush me!"

"Shut up then! And bloody look!”

Following his gaze, Remus spotted Snape staring down the rest of their friends as they waited to board the bus. "Oh fuck," he sighed. "Gotta hand it to the slimy git, he never really cares much about being outnumbered."

Sirius didn't respond, only set off across the berm with his trunk in one hand. Following closely on his heels, Remus met his friends and pulled to a stop next to Mary and Marlene, who were both scowling with their arms crossed over their chest. Sirius barely glanced at Marlene, and went straight to Mary’s other side, nudging her.

“What’s Snivellus want?” He asked.

Mary whispered back; “He’s upset Lily’s taking our train.”

“Why would you want to get off at Doncaster?!” Snape demanded loudly, making James huff at Lily’s side.

“It’s none of your business, Snivellus.”

“Wasn’t talking to you, skiver.”

“Stop that,” Lily snapped from behind her muffler. “Sev, I’m sorry, I just thought it might be okay to take the other line this time.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to him every time he comes whining,” James said.

“Shush. Sev, I really am sorry. You should come with us!”

“You're sorry? Sorry for what—lying to me?!”

“I didn’t lie, I just didn’t—”

“Tell me!” Snape howled. “You didn’t tell me! Just like you didn’t tell me you spent our last night before holiday at their dorm!” He jabbed a finger at James.

Lily’s eyes widened. “Who—”

“Bryan had some things to say when he got back!”

Remus resisted rolling his eyes. Did they put all the insufferable assholes in Salazar?

“Really,” Snape blagged on, “walking home so late—or should I say *early?* People are going to get the wrong idea, Lily. You don’t want anyone thinking you’re a slag do you?”

Marlene gasped loud enough for all of them, and James shot across the space between them, grabbing Snape by the front of his jacket. “Don’t you *dare* talk to my girlfriend like that!” He barked, and Snape’s eyes shot wide.

“Him?!” He shrieked at Lily. “You—*HIM?!"*

“Go ahead, keep talking, see what happens!” James growled, drawing an even bigger crowd.

“Gentlemen!” Sheila shouted, sliding through a few Byron House students who’d stopped to watch. *“Oh, Jesus F. Chop*—are we going to have to have this conversation again, you two?! Because I was under the distinct impression that we’d finished this last year! Mr. Potter—release Mr. Snape this instant!”

James immediately dropped Snape’s collar, and the other boy staggered back as their teacher stepped between them. Dressed in a bright blue parka, Sheila looked more like a blueberry than a teacher, but her threat cut through her wardrobe as per usual. “Whose bus is

this?" She demanded.

"Ours," Lily answered, earning her an extra-nasty glare from Snape. Sheila turned on him.

"Mr. Snape, is this your bus?"

"… No."

"Where *is* your bus?"

Snape begrudgingly gestured down the line.

"Then shouldn't you be standing next to it?"

Jaw clenched bitterly, Snape shot one last look at Lily and James before he marched off. They all watched him go and Sheila checked her watch. "Right, well, buses will be leaving soon. I want the rest of you on board. Now." She looked at James and gave him a pointed 'go on' wave.

Nodding, James turned and walked back to Lily. "Sorry, I think I messed up," he mumbled, and Lily sighed sadly before taking his gloved hand and giving it a squeeze. He smiled faintly, and together they climbed onto the bus followed by a rattled-looking Peter and Moira.

Remus turned to Sirius, fully expecting a quip at Snape's expense, but he wasn't there, and when he looked back to the bus doors he found Sirius climbing the steps behind Mary with hands in his pockets.

"C'mon, Remus," Sheila said, smiling at him. "Don't want to miss your bus."

Awkwardly, Remus nodded and set his trunk down with the rest where the driver was busy packing them in the bus's boot. He made his way to the stairs and turned back to find Sheila waving at him. "Have a happy Christmas," she called, before turning to say the same to any other student who looked her way.

"Happy Christmas, Mrs. Buchanan," he said quietly, before boarding the bus.

* * *

Sirius did not talk to him the entire ride to the station. He took a seat near the back of the bus with Sandy Herron from music and left him to sit with Lottie, who was apparently 'immensely sad' to be separated from Mickey for the holidays but 'uber-excited' to go home to do some proper shopping and visit her other girlfriends. A seat ahead, James and Lily leaned into one another, apologising quietly and comforting each other over the fight. Remus knew Snape was a touchy subject between them, but he hoped letting the cat out of the bag would finally put his and Lily's dying friendship to rest.

By the time their bus pulled into the train station Remus had to wee so badly he was practically dancing in his seat. Unfortunately bad road conditions on the way there meant there was only time to grab their bags and rush to the platform or risk missing the train all together. They piled into a compartment—only seven of them since Peter had gone off to join Moira—and played musical chairs until they all fit. The entire time Sirius stayed as far from Remus as he could, more content to let James sit with one asscheek on his lap than to even glance in his direction. If it'd just been the four of them Remus would've demanded they have it out right there, but with the girls around he felt less willing to poke holes in their veiled friendship. So, as the train pulled away from the platform he resigned himself to the reality that the next time he spoke to Sirius might just be in 1977.

Feeling extra-stuffy and *really* needing to go now, Remus finally excused himself from the compartment and set off down the aisle, looking for the bathroom.

"Remus? Wait up!" Someone called after him. He turned to find Marlene, slipping out of the compartment after him.

"Oh hey, Marls. Sorry but I really gotta—"

"I just need a second," Marlene insisted, reaching him and unlacing her scarf from her neck with one hand. She was tightly fisting a book to her chest with the other, her knuckles white. "I needed to say this before I lose my nerve."

"Marlene McKinnon lose her nerve? Imposs—"

"I wanted to apologise."

Remus stopped bouncing from foot to foot and cleared his throat a bit. "Apologise? Apologise for what?"

Marlene winced a bit. "For forcing you to kiss me last night. We were

pretty drunk—or at least I was—and I let this thing Lily said go to my head—"

"Marlene, you didn't force me to kiss you."

"I didn't?"

"No. I…" Remus shook his head, searching for the right words, "I kissed you too. It was fine."

"Oh…"

"I mean it was more than fine—it was good."

Marlene bit her lip. "Oh."

"Yeah, so—don't apologise." Sirius' words echoed through his memory. "You're not any different from anyone else. S'normal to kiss. Or at least, that's what I've heard…"

"Cool." Blushing a bit, Marlene reached up to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Because I didn't want you to think that I expected anything."

Remus straightened up. "Oh no. Never."

"Or that you had to—"

"Mm-mm, nope."

"But if you were interested, then I would, maybe—"

"Maybe—?"

"If you thought that—"

"We—"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Are we talking about the same thing?"

Remus pursed his lips. "What are you talking about…?"

"Um—us?"

“Oh, yeah! Totally.”

“Really?”

He gulped. “Mhm. Sure, I suppose?"

Marlene clapped her hands together lightly. “Great. So—um—I’ll call you? Over Christmas? Or—or you can call me… of course.”

Remus thought instantly of the flat. “How about I call you,” he suggested.

Marlene nodded instantly, biting her lip. “Okay. Here.” She pulled a little slip of paper from inside her book. “Glad I have that now—felt a bit silly, but it’s my family’s number. You can call it and just ask for me.”

“Brilliant.” He took the note and stared at it lightly before tucking it into his pocket. “I’ll… I'll call you then!”

“Brilliant,” Marlene said firmly. They stood there a moment until she gestured down the aisle with her book. “I guess I should let you go now.”

“Huh?”

“Weren’t you going somewhere?”

Remus chuckled awkwardly. “Oh, yeah. Just the loo.”

“Okay,” Marlene smiled shyly. “Well, I’ll meet you back with the others.”

He nodded and she turned away, moving back down the train corridor to their overstuffed compartment. Watching her go, Remus got that familiar squirmy feeling in his gut before realising it was just his bladder screaming in distress. When he finally returned to the compartment he walked in to find all of his friends playing poker and betting with a bag of peanuts from the snack trolley.

“All I’m saying is that you and Mickey were gone for a long time last night,” Mary said. “Care to fill us in?”

“If you must know,” Lottie drawled while sorting the cards in her hand, “there are two reigning factors in why you were so sorely missing my exuberant presence last night. First, I knew I was going to get stuck with you lot for nine hours on a train today, so who needed

the extra party? And second, our room was completely empty. So don’t act so surprised when one of us takes advantage of such an opportunity.”

“Oh Lot,” Lily moaned while the rest of them laughed.

“Hey, you could’ve tried Potter’s room,” Lottie shrugged innocently.

Marlene glanced up at Remus then, cheeks pink, and they shared a silent smile before she made room on the bench next to her for him.

“Want me to deal you in, Remus?” Lily offered as he drew the door closed behind him.

“Yeah, I need you,” James said. “Sirius won’t play and I'm horribly outnumbered. I can't win back our stolen dignity from Black's birthday all on my own.”

“Fat chance anyway, Potter,” Mary cackled, glancing at Lottie’s hand.

Lottie turned it over; “Straight flush. Next you’ll be streaking through the entire train, boys.”

James groaned in defeat while all the girls giggled and Remus slid in beside Marlene. He spared a chance look across the carriage but Sirius was turned away, jacket pulled up to his ears and head leaning against the window, eyes closed as though he were asleep.

Chapter End Notes

A ten pence is like a dime.
'Lashed' and 'gassed' mean to be totally drunk.
'On the pull' is like looking for a hook-up/sex/relationship.
Robert Johnson was a legendary guitarist who was said to have made a 'deal with the devil' for his talent.

LOOK—I know what you're thinking, but you just have to trust me reader. All things happen for a reason ;) Hope you're excited for year 12 Christmas.

Chapter 44: Christmas, 1976

Chapter Summary

Remus goes home. Then he goes home, home.

This chapter is dedicated to maraudmoons, who said they'd preform a sacrifice for me just to get some more of the silly words inside my head. Instead of that, I hope you (and everyone else) snuggles up with some fuzzy socks, your favourite tea, and enjoys this chapter. It's a happy one.

(Or you can just read it on toilet or the bus like the fan-fiction gremlins I know we all are. <3)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Subway's no way for a good man to go down,
Rich man can ride and the hobo, he can drown;
And I thank the Lord for the people I have found,
I thank the Lord for the people I have found…

- "Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters" Elton John, 1972

Nothing could be trusted to stay stagnant forever, not even the dour Lupin Estate. Though little had changed in actuality. The ground was still painted in damp rather than fresh wisps of snowfall, and Lyall Lupin's preference for keeping an ever-revolving array of staff hadn't waned, though Remus was pleased enough to find that the maid who brought him tea in the morning wasn't as stingy with the milk and sugar as the last had been.

A new litter of pups had been born in late-November to the even-tempered Zenyatta and a stud from some breeder in the Midlands. Remus knew better than to name them without his father's consent, but the runt of the litter was grey all over with a spotted nose and reminded him of Dusty. Secretly he dubbed the pup Smokey.

Ever man's bestest friend, Dusty still greeted him with enthusiasm—Giles even more so. They spent his first night back loosing to each other in cards and Remus had a great lie-in the following morning.

Outside of that, the halls were quiet and the house was calm. The only agitation came at supper time, when Remus took his meals in the dining room with his only father for company. Those were usually quiet too.

On the rare occasion Lyall would put down whatever document he was pouring over and acknowledge his son's existence. Mostly Remus wished he wouldn't, but that was probably one of the only reasons he did.

"How are your classes?"

"Fine."

"I hope they're teaching you proper politics."

"What does that even mean?"

His father answered with another question. "Are they still pushing the socialists's agenda?" He asked. "Or have they moved onto things that might actually be useful in life?"

Remus stubbornly pushed his peas around his plate. "They teach us *history*."

"That'll be a no then."

A roll of the eyes, and; "Whatever you say, Dad..."

Lyall raised a brow and set his empty glass down, wiping his hands on the cloth napkin.

"I'll be returning to the office early. Goddamn Labour Party has ordered a thirty million pound cut to public expenditure, meaning that the whole bloody country's about to go up in flames. It's like those lunatics in office want a crisis. There'll be strikes in the streets next, I expect. As if we need the traffic. I'll be staying in the city for the duration. You'll remain here with Giles. Use the time to study. I don't want you running around the streets—not when you're about to return to school. Do you understand me?"

"Was that a rhetorical question?"

"Do you understand?"

Remus set his jaw. "Yes, *sir."*

Eyeing him sourly, Lyall pushed his chair back from the table and stood, gathering a fistful of documents. Remus saw it coming before it happened—he would stride from the room without another glance and wouldn't look at him until another inevitable dinner the following evening. No, 'goodnight son' or 'have a good day tomorrow'. Certainly no 'I love you's. It irked him, but not because he needed any of that. He didn't want Lyall's attention, but the urge to scream in his face—*Look at me!*—it was so strong. Maybe it was just acknowledgement that he wanted.

"My literacy professor liked my final paper," Remus said suddenly, before his father could leave. "He said it was the best in the entire year. That I could probably be published one day."

Lyall glanced up at him. "So now they're filling your head with nonsense. Do I really need to tell you how much a freelance author makes in this economy? And that's if you even manage to find work. Not many would hire someone who can't even manage a few measly exams. Tell me, Remus, how could someone who's 'best in the entire year' achieve a mere 'satisfactory' on three out of seven exams?"

"It was a mistake," Remus grumbled, throwing himself back in his chair.

"You mean your teachers incorrectly marked their own exams?"

"No! I was... distracted."

"Do you think that is an adequate excuse? I didn't send you to Scotland to be distracted. What could be so interesting as to keep you from your *only* job?"

Remus ground his teeth together. "Never mind."

"There is nothing decent in life for 'satisfactory' people. Unless you'd prefer to live penny-to-penny, with some damn labour union waiting to snatch the food from your family's mouths every time the government denies them new gloves for the winter, I suggest you learn to *ignore* your distractions."

"Are you a Tory, Dad?"

"I'm a realist, Remus. I think you'll find they make more money. Now don't be bothering Giles. If you need anything—sort it out yourself."

Straightening up, Lyall adjusted his collar and strode from the room.

Remus watched him go. "Merry Christmas to you too, *Dad,"* he swore, before turning around in his seat and throwing his fork across the dining hall. He'd hoped it would miraculously stick in the wood, but it only landed with an empty clatter.

He almost ran off that night, but then—as if reading his mind—Lyall ordered him to help their head dog trainer, Sebastian, wean the new puppies onto solid food. It was a tedious affair; the dogs had to be fed every three hours and even then they still screeched for their mother's milk, but Remus appreciated the work. It kept him busy, and dogs were better company than people most days anyway.

"They're a scrappy bunch, these'uns!" Sebastian declared. The dog-trainer had a thick Norfolk accent and Remus was lucky if he could decipher every third word. "Best watch yoour fingers with Whistlejacket thurr. She'll tairke 'em roight off. Oi pity the poour bastard who's got 'er. But yow know yoour father—payment up front."

"You mean they're already sold?" Remus held Smokey close to his chest. He wasn't supposed to baby the dogs, but they were puppies. Barely four weeks old. Sebastian wouldn't rat on him.

"Yes sair, got all their pairpers sorted this mahrnin'. They'll be riddy to goo by end 'f Jan-oo-ary, oi figure. But doon' worry, we'll still 'ave plenty 'a beasts around for yow to 'alp me with. Navver a shortage of work 'ere."

Outside of caring for the dogs, he spent ample time catching up on the shows and music he'd missed while at school. Disco was officially in full-swing—it was all *Top of the Pops* was playing—and a sober Remus would have normally been less-likely to entertain it, but there was nothing else to do apart from listen, sleep, read, and make the trek across the damp lawn to the doghouse. He could've called James or Peter, but they were sure to be busy with their own families. Marlene had given him her phone number, but that too felt awkward. What would he even say? He hadn't read anything of substance since most of his books had gone with him to school. She would probably appreciate hearing about the puppies, but then wouldn't the sensible thing be to invite her over to see them? Remus had never had a friend over to the estate before. But then again, most of them didn't even know it existed.

There was Giles to distract him, of course. And despite what Lyall had to say, the old man was all too happy to accept a round of cards or an extra set of hands. Then, when he wasn't running his normal errands

or fixing something around the house like a driver-turned-handyman, Giles could always be found in the parlour in the same burgundy armchair that had been dubbed his for as long as Remus could remember. If it was before lunchtime he'd have that morning's paper in hand. Between lunch and dinner it was the same paper, though he'd most certainly moved onto the daily crossword. After dinner it was a glass of his favourite brandy, which always smelt okay but tasted horrible. Not that Giles had ever let Remus try the drink. That would be completely irresponsible.

There were a lot of memories attached to that chair; one of them being a faint stain on its left armrest leftover from a time when six year-old Remus had knocked a vase off its shelf in the library and split his hand open trying to piece it back together. He'd balled and went straight to the old man who just lifted him calmly into his lap and pressed the sleeve of his own jacket against the cut to staunch the bleeding until Remus was coherent enough to explain what had happened. He couldn't remember so much as touching the chair, just the comfort that came with being drawn into Giles' lap. Afterwards the stain remained; enduring the years in the shape of half of a tiny hand print, splayed wide as it reached for comfort.

Now Remus was looking for comfort again, but he wasn't six years-old anymore.

It took almost three days to persuade Giles to let him leave. He could've just left on his own of course—had been doing it for nearly half his life now—but something about that Christmas felt different. It was as though there was a fog hanging over him.

What if Lee had been wrong?

What if Tomny never meant to have him back?

What if he got *angry?*

It was like knowingly placing a bet on the wrong horse. Tomny had been ready to let him go that very first September he'd been shipped off to the Highlands; only Remus had been blind to the fact, and he'd dumbly forced himself back into his life again and again just like a bad cold. He'd already learned to stop feeling guilty over the phone calls—those felt safe because of the distance it kept between them—but showing up again, it felt dangerous. Remus wasn't sure he could handle being forced to leave a second time, but as muddled as everything felt, those nights spent back at the estate passed as though

he were racing the clock. He had a little more than a week until his return to school. So few days to do all the things he wanted.

And so, Remus did all in his power to convince his oldest friend and caretaker that he was an upstanding citizen, totally capable of keeping himself out of trouble while home. He did this mostly during the evenings, hoping that the brandy would butter-up Giles' sense of rationality, and eventually he got what he wanted.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, Giles drove him to Aldgate himself. He was quiet for most of the ride, despite Remus' excited (or nervous —he couldn't decide which) energy seeping out from the backseat, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to lecture.

"Sounds to me like you're just running from your problems," Giles said, after they'd passed through Bermondsey and started across the Tower Bridge. He was chewing on a toothpick, something he'd picked up to help kick his bad snuff habit.

"Has he even asked to see me since he left?"

There was no need to mention Lyall's name. Giles was quiet in the front seat of the Rolls.

"Well, then I'll do what I want."

"The dogs miss you."

"I've seen them."

"The ladies in the kitchen miss you."

"I've seen them too."

The driver was quiet again for a bit, then pulled the toothpick from his mouth; "Remus, son—I know you two don't always get on, but your father is just looking out for your best interests. You like that school, yeah? Well he sent you there. Tried to make it work for you after all the rest didn't."

Remus didn't bother to add how Lyall had neglected to mention that his mother had also gone to Hawkings. Perhaps he honestly didn't know, or had forgotten in the last twenty years since they were married—or maybe he just didn't care. Either way, he wouldn't be getting a thank you from him.

“I’ll still call you,” he promised, “but I want to go. At least for a few days. I have people waiting on me too, you know.”

Giles glanced back at him in the car's mirror. “It’s important to have friends, lad. No one likes being lonely, but try to take things seriously.”

“That would be becoming boring, Gil."

“What’s that?”

Remus smiled to himself. " ‘If you can’t be good, be smart’. It's good advice—wonder who gave it to me.”

Giles could only shake his head hopelessly.

Remus kept the exchange in the back of his mind for the rest of the drive. He wasn’t sure going back to the End was the smart thing—it’d certainly never been the *good* thing by anyone’s standards—but the rest of his school friends were enjoying their holidays with the people they loved. He wanted to, too, all nerves aside.

Luckily, it turned out that Lee was true to his word after all.

As Remus dragged his feet across the cracked pathway that led up to the flat’s steps, he heard someone shriek his name from above and looked up to find Tonya on the balcony, wrapped up in a robe and waving frantically. Even from three floors up he could see the dark circles under her eyes, the hollowness of her cheeks, and yet when she smiled at him it was as though all the worst parts of the world simply vanished.

Tonya immediately tossed the cigarette she’d been smoking over the railing and dashed back inside the flat, only to come flying out the building’s front door a few seconds later. She tackled him in a hug so fierce he almost fell over, but she was a small woman, and he used the momentum of her love to swing her around in a big circle.

“Oh, Remus, my love, I’m *so* happy to see you!” She gushed in his ear, before yanking back to get a look at him, hands moving from his shoulders to his cheeks. “You’ve grown! Look at how handsome you’ve gotten!” Her thumb brushed his scar. “And *so* devil-may-care.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively and Remus squirmed in her grip, embarrassed as he batted off her hands.

“C’mon Tonya, what are you, my mother?”

“Leave him be, Ton. He’s come home from school, not war,” Tomny called. He’d apparently followed her and was leaning in the building’s doorway, arms crossed over his broad chest. Remus immediately dashed up the steps and they grappled, hugging with a tight hand on the neck while clapping each other on the back.

“Happy to see you, Lu.”

“You too, Tom,” Remus said as he pulled back. His heart was slamming against his ribcage and he felt so happy that if Tomny had asked, he would've burst into song right there on the front steps. Luckily the older boy only smiled, showing off a handsome dimple.

“Glad Lee got a hold of you," Tomny said. "Been a bit busy around 'ere, sorry we haven't called much."

“It's fine—totally fine. But Lee—he said you wanted me… well that I should come by.”

Tomny nodded. “It’s Christmas, and no one pays attention around the holidays 'nyway. Not when s'brass monkeys outside and the whole country’s eatin' gingerbread and drinkin' themselves into a stupor.”

“Yeah,” Remus nodded. “But you don’t have to worry, Tom. I’ll only stay for a few days—less if you want. Promised I’d be back soon anyway.”

Tomny’s smiled tightened and he lifted a hand to cup the side of Remus’ neck again. “Yer a good lad, but don't worry too much. We missed you.”

Remus could've cried. Happiness or relief, it didn't matter.

“C’mon now,” Tonya said, appearing at his side and rubbing his arms comfortingly, “it’s freezing. Let’s get you inside and warmed up.”

Tomny took the bag he’d brought with him and they went in together, arm in arm. Everywhere in the building was drafty but the flat was still warm thanks to the amount of bodies filling it up. Remus was instantly bombarded by his friends—Doss and Lee, who tackled him with happy grunts of hello, Seesaw and Vint who nodded and bumped his fist cordially. Just like the estate there were new faces, including Lee’s younger brother Ian, who shook his hand so wildly Remus felt his shoulder pop.

“Don’ mind him,” Lee started, “ 'e’s always bouncing off the walls.

We're pretty sure s'cause he was conceived on poppers."

"You're so embarrasin'!" Ian shoved him and ended up in a headlock. *"Ugh*—gerroff, Lee!"

"Oi—watch out everyone he's gonna blow!"

The brothers began to tussle and Remus stood back, laughing with everyone else as Ian inevitably lost—unable to break Lee's hold around his neck. He could definitely see the family resemblance in their lanky frames and mess of freckles, but really it was their smiles that made them brothers.

"Oh fuckin' hell—now what's this?"

Tomny's cuss cut through the room, making everyone straighten up or jump as though a gun had gone off. Remus whipped around to find Tomny staring at him, eyes hard and suspicious. He stepped forward and the other guys parted around him like a ship at sea, following his back as though they were readying for a fight.

"Reckon you're bein' funny, do ya?" He asked in a low voice, looking Remus up and down.

Remus blinked. "I… what?"

"Explain, *now."*

"Tom, I don't know what you're…"

Tomny scoffed his laughter and raised a hand. Everyone watched him, deadly still, though instead of a fist Tomny just flattened his fingers and measured his own height. He passed over himself and then forward until his hand knocked against the top of Remus' forehead.

"You went and got taller than me didn't you, you lil' git."

Remus opened and closed his mouth, stupefied, then; "Maybe you just shrunk in your old age."

Tomny stared at him hard, until his mask cracked and a grin shone through. He began to laugh, and the tension visibly drained from the room. It was a bit unnerving how quickly it'd came and went, but Remus had no time to bask in it. Before he could say anything else, Tomny had him in his own headlock.

"Cheeky, Lu!"

"Fuck Tomny—get off!"

“He’s right though, Tom,” Lee added, “I think I see a few grey hairs even!”

“If I’ve got any greys it’s because I’m always lookin’ after dirty bleeders like you!”

“Ha-ha, yes, so funny!” Remus heard Tonya snap her fingers several times as he fought against Tomny’s bicep. “Now let me through, you nobs. I have a surprise for Remus.”

“Sorry Ton, Lu’s a bit busy at the moment,” Tomny said.

“Let me go!” Remus wailed.

“No can do, sweetheart. You’re just going to have to live with it.”

“Don’t be a dick, Tomny. Remus, look!”

With a grunt, Remus managed to lift his head. Tonya stood before him, smiling radiantly in her robe, and from behind her back she produced a brand-spanking-new album;

Queen: A Day at the Races.

“Happy Christmas, Remus.”

* * *

The initial bonhomie of his arrival had worn off by the next morning, replaced instead by the meager excitement that took hold of everyone come Christmas Day. Remus didn't mind in the slightest. It'd taken him all of one hour to realise just how badly he'd been missing the gentle existence of the shabby London flat. The humble two-bedroom had been left with its usual occupants, plus Ian, who according to Tonya had started coming around regularly after his and Lee’s mum had gotten back with their step-dad. The guy had a penchant for double-malt whisky as well as speaking with his fists and taking his anger out on sixteen year-olds with lippy mouths. And there were more than enough of those to go around.

It’d only taken one phone call from Ian for Lee to nearly put the prick in the hospital, which seemed only fair to the rest of them, since after

all, Lee had spent most of his childhood playing punching bag for the rest of his mum's piece-of-shit boyfriends.

Ian's arrival wasn't the only new development within the group though; Doss had a girlfriend now who worked in a Debenhams across the city and was always hopping on the tube to go visit her. The others tried to rag on him for it of course, but they were rebuked by Tonya, who was apparently the only one he'd permitted to meet the girl so far. Remus could tell that Doss must've really liked her—his usually cool and collected expression turned shy and embarrassed at mere mention of her name—and he was happy for him. Happier still that he'd been there a whole night and not sensed a single hint of animosity from any of his friends. It soothed the fear he'd secretly been carrying ever since Tomny revealed he knew everything about his real life and family. But it was obvious—Tomny had said nothing. Doss probably didn't even know that *Remus* knew, and it was enough. If he had to carry the secret for the rest of his life just to ensure his friends would stay this happy, he would gladly do so.

It was late on Christmas Day when they'd all finally woken and gathered together. Tomny sat in his armchair while Lee and Ian split the other sofa and Remus relaxed on the same couch he'd woken up on. Seesaw offered him a puff of his morning spliff but he declined, too busy watching Doss and Vint help Tonya prepare breakfast. It was funny seeing the two largest guys among them squeeze into such a tiny kitchen, only to gingerly move around Tonya as though she were a grizzly bear and not simply a girl who barely came up to their chins. The telly was playing some holiday special but no one was really paying any attention. There was too much to say.

"You jammy bastard," Lee hissed, "you set off a *bomb?"*

"Not a real bomb. Just these stink bombs my roommates concocted."

"Wicked. Do you remember the recipe?"

"Oh no!" Tonya shouted from the kitchen. "Remus John, don't you *dare* say another word. I will not allow stink bombs anywhere near this place. Not in my house."

"Oh c'mon, Ton," Lee tried, "we'll only do it outside."

"Bien essayé, dickheads." She emerged from the kitchen waving a spatula threateningly. "Now come get your breakfast."

Tonya had truly outdone herself. She presented them with dutch

pancakes and poached eggs, bubble and squeak and crumpets, even homemade hollandaise. In true formal fashion, they devoured the spread while sitting on the living room floor.

“Blimey, didn’t even know you could roast a plum,” Ian said as he licked his fingers.

“Those were figs,” Tonya laughed.

“Well they were fig-tastic.”

Tonya got up to collect their plates but Tomny just exchanged her seats. “Nah, I’ve got it,” he said, pressing a kiss to her temple as he passed.

Tonya smiled and dropped down into the recliner, draping her legs over one side. Remus caught her gaze and she winked before mouthing something. Unsure, he perked up and she leaned in to whisper to him. “Go help him.”

Remus nodded automatically and shot up from his seat, scuttling into the kitchen and collecting a few more empty plates as he went. He found Tomny standing over the sink, suds halfway up his forearms.

“Ah, some indentured help,” he said cheerfully; “Good. I’ll wash, you dry.”

Remus set the plates down and took up a rag, taking the next dish from him as he handed it over. "You guys seem like you're doing good."

“Mhm. Winter's are slow mostly. The others are glad you came back by the way,” Tomny said and Remus glanced at him, before dropping his gaze, a bit haughtily.

“Don’t think you’re beating around the bush hard enough, Tom. Might need a bigger stick.”

Tomny huffed in that way that meant he was laughing and Remus felt a little shudder run up his spine as he set the dried dish aside and picked up another.

“You always did have a mouth on you,” Tomny started again, “but you’re right. And I’m glad too—really. Though, I did wonder though whether you’d actually show if I wasn’t the person to tell you to come.”

“You mean this was all a fuckin' test?”

“Mm. Tonya and I took bets actually.”

“You utter asshole. Fine—what’d you bet on then?”

Tomny just smiled down at the dish water. “I don’t mind, you know—how much Tonya likes you. I don’t mind.”

Remus blinked. “Well why would you? She’s in love with you.”

“Yeah. S’pose she is. Feels good to be with the people you love during the holidays, don’t it?”

“Yeah, it does," he answered, ears burning.

“You haven’t been smoking as much,” Tomny said casually. “You quit?”

“No,” Remus answered, reaching to put a stack of plates away, “just cut back a bit. We roll our own at school.”

“Guess I should’ve gotten you something other than fags for Christmas then. Though I suppose I just ruined the surprise.”

“No, it’s fine! It’ll give my fingers a break for a while. Siri—I mean, my friends at school suck at rolling so it’s always me. And our fence has high rates—shit’s expensive up north.”

Tomny chuckled. “You got some books too, I think—and records. Don’t tell the other lads I told you, but Tonya picked it all out mostly. She's the only one with taste.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” Remus protested.

“That mean you have nothing for us, then?”

“No…” In truth, Remus’ bag was stuffed with several badly wrapped presents, most of which were recycled from Lyall’s extensive wardrobe. He had reasoned that it wasn’t stealing since all of it had been cleared out by the maids as part of their yearly household purge and would’ve been sent to the local refuse anyway. Most of the clothes were going to be too big on them, apart from maybe Doss, but they were clean and warm and it made Remus happy to be able to give his friends something in exchange for their generosity.

“Oh, yeah? Never gotten a gift from a blue-blood before,” Tomny said

snidely, and Remus shouldered him gently for it.

“If you’re worried about how much I paid you can relax. They’re gifts of practicality.”

“Practical—? Honestly, what is that school teachin' you? ‘Practicality’, pish.”

Remus snorted just as Tonya appeared in the kitchen behind them. “Hey, we can finish clean-up later. Doss wants to visit Felicia and I’d like to do presents before he goes.”

“Okay, we’re coming,” Tomny answered, turning off the tap and wiping his hands. Remus put away his last dish and together they wandered back into the living room, Tomny’s arm looped around his shoulders.

Watching Doss exchange his battered belt and boots for new ones while Tomny tugged a new jumper over his head felt like the best gift he could’ve gotten. Lee made a crack that he’d never owned a jacket that didn’t already need to be patched in the elbows, while Vint gave Remus an approving nod for the fresh slacks, which thankfully didn’t look entirely out of place with the rest of his get-up.

“We’re like new men,” Tomny chuckled, running his hands across the jumper's soft wool.

Lee popped his jacket collar. “Hold on Tom, you sure Lu didn’t give you a frilly skirt to match? Could’a sworn I saw one.”

“Yeah and s'up your arse.”

“Gentlemen!” Tonya called from down the hallway. “Drumroll, please!”

Immediately Tomny threw himself down in his recliner and began slamming his hands down on its arms while the rest of them smacked every available surface. A moment later Tonya emerged from the hallway in a sweeping white dress made top-to-bottom out of a delicate lace. Remus hadn't realised it, but it tied daintily at the wrists and neck, making her look like some fairytale princess. She was barefoot, despite the cold that seeped up through the floorboards, and glowing as she spun around in a circle and let the skirt billow outwards.

“How do I look?” She called, twisting her dark hair up into a bun and

holding it in place. “Like a proper lady?”

“Simply gorgeous!” Doss announced.

“Elizabeth Taylor would be shamed to know her!” Lee added enthusiastically.

Blowing them both a kiss, Tonya turned to Remus. “Well? What do you think, love?”

Remus’ mouth went as dry as paper.

I think you’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen, he thought.

“Looks… nice…” he said.

“Oh no,” Lee started, “you broke him.”

Still smiling, Tonya rolled her eyes lightly and Tomny slid in front of her, cupping her waist. “I think you look amazing.”

“Oh yeah?” Tonya dropped her arm, letting her hair untwist down her back as Tomny kissed her.

“Oi, get a room, you two,” Doss shouted as Ian and Lee gave a whistle. Tonya just wrapped her arms around her boyfriend’s back while Tomny shot them the bird, leaving them all laughing and nudging one another.

Remus sat back on the sofa, fiddling with one of the books he’d been gifted. He tried not to stare, but seeing Tonya emerge in all white had stolen the air from his lungs. The dress had been a lucky find really—lucky that the maids had found it in some back closet and decided to toss it and luckier still that the tags had still been attached and he couldn’t recall any memories of seeing Hope wear it. He wasn't entirely sure what qualified as 'tacky' but gifting someone his dead mother's clothes was probably not far off.

Before any of them had to bear further witness to more public displays of affection, Tonya sharply pulled back from Tomny and pointed at Remus with a devilish grin. She had a little slip of paper tucked between two of her fingers. “Oh Remus, I found this on the bedroom floor—think it must’ve fallen out of your bag. It’s got a phone number on it.”

Before he could take it, Tomny reached over and plucked the paper

from her fingers, unfolding it. " 'Hope you have a Happy Christmas'," he read; " 'Call me when you can'. Oh and look, there's a little heart."

"Give me that!" Remus grunted, jumping up to snatch the paper. Tomny was faster, and he yanked his arm back.

"Now who's givin' you notes with little hearts on 'em?"

"No one you know!"

"Well we should change that," Tonya said, giddily. "Someone get the phone."

* * *

Of course none of them would drop it. Each of his friends had an addictive personality in their own way—after latching onto something they never let it go until each and every joke or wise-crack had been wrung dry, and in this case, the joke was Remus' current relationship status.

"I'm not calling her on Christmas," he insisted, after he'd managed to steal Marlene's phone number back and stash it out of sight.

"Why *not?"* Tonya whined. "She gave you her number hoping you would call! Haven't you left the poor girl waiting long enough?"

"You're blowing this way out of proportion!"

"Aw, look—he's blushing," Tomny teased. Remus swat at him with the towel he was using to dry the rest of the dishes.

Tonya got between them. "You have to call her tomorrow. It'd be cruel to wait any longer."

Reaching over her, Tomny handed him a freshly-scrubbed cooking pan; "Yeah, and don't you worry, Lu, we'll be right here for moral support."

That was how he ended up dialling Marlene's house on the evening of Boxing Day with several of his friends behind him, craning their ears to listen in. They never stopped sniggering and Remus quickly began to pray that no one would pick up and he'd just get the machine instead. Too bad he had shit luck.

“Shhh! Guys, shut up!” He snapped.

The line clicked to life. “Hello?”

“Er—hi. Is Marlene around?”

“Speaking.”

"Call her something sweet!" Tonya hissed. "Make it unique! Tell her she’s lovely! She sounds lovely! Ooh—what colour are her eyes?”

"Tonya—*shut up!"*

"Hello...?"

“Oh! Hey there, er—Cherry. It's Remus.” He winced the moment the words left his mouth, and both Lee and Tomny burst into snorts of laughter while Tonya smacked her forehead. Mortified, Remus swatted the air in their direction as Marlene chuckled lightly into the other end.

“ 'Cherry'? That my nickname now?”

“Too weird?” He sighed.

“No,” she answered, “I think I like it. In goofy way. So what’s going on, you numpty? Have a good Christmas?”

“Yeah, was great. You?”

“Wonderful. It’s really nice to hear from you. I talked to Lily yesterday, has she rung you yet?”

“Er—no, but that’s not really her fault.”

Lee nudged him. “Psst, Lu—ask her if she’s got any fit girlfriends looking to boff.”

“Piss off,” Remus grumbled.

“What’s that?” Marlene asked from the other end.

“Oh—not you! S'nothing, just some idiot shouting in my other ear.”

“You got family visiting?”

“Nah, just some friends.”

“Wish I could see our friends right now,” Marlene sighed. “Might be a nice break. It feels like mum invited an entire village for the holidays. I have to bunk with my nan and aunt Rosie.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s not so bad actually, most of them leave tomorrow. Just wanted to whine a bit. My brothers are visiting so that’s been nice.”

“Oh yeah, two right? Michael and—what’s the other?”

“John. His wife Anna’s actually pregnant, announced it yesterday morning. I’m gonna be an aunty.”

“Wow. Congrats.”

“Thanks!”

“Psst, Lu—”

“Shut up, Lee—”

“Sounds like you’re having fun,” Marlene said.

“Something like that,” Remus grunted, pushing Lee away from the phone by the face.

“Look, Remus," Marlene started, her tone turning very serious, "I wanted to know if I could talk to you about something before we went back to school?”

Remus switched ears with the receiver uneasily. Tonya instantly pressed her head to the other side. “Oh. Or I mean—oh yeah...?”

“Yeah. I know we kind of talked on the train, but I really don’t like leaving things muddled like that. Mary says it's how people go from liking each other to switching their shampoo for hair-removal cream."

"She's *done* that?"

"Oh, I suppose you weren't around after she and Darby Ellis broke up in year ten."

"Fuck, that's insane."

"Oh yeah, it totally was!” Marlene stopped suddenly and cleared her

throat. “But like I was wondering… What do you think of… ehm —‘us’?”

Tonya gave a sharp gasp but clapped her hand over her mouth the moment Remus shot her a glare.

“ ‘Us’?” He echoed. “Well, we’re good aren’t we?”

“Oh sure, but I didn’t really mean just… friends ‘us’.”

“Oh.”

Tonya drew back and slapped Remus in the shoulder. “Don’t make her do all the work!” She hissed quietly.

Marlene spoke again; “I just mean that it might be nice, you know, to try it out. In the beginning I thought Lily was crazy—like we’re such good friends already—but she and James seem to be doing alright so I figured that maybe...”

Tonya slapped him again and the words tumbled out. *“Thatweshoulddate?”*

"Fuck yeah!" Doss shouted suddenly. Remus threw a hand up to ward off their laughter, but it didn't stop Lee from touching his shoulder and making a sizzling sound.

“You think we should?” Marlene asked.

“Sure," he bumbled. "As long as you want to.”

“Yeah, sure—I mean—yes. I think it’d be cool. An 'us'.”

Remus nodded. “Cool. 'Us' it is then."

“Wow. Mary’s gonna totally lose her head,” she giggled after a moment. “Lily too, since she called it and all. Though I suppose you’ll know all about that.”

Remus thought of Sirius, and how he’d reacted that last day on the train.

“They’re not the only ones.”

“Well, that’s great then! Us! So I’ll… see you on the train?”

“Yeah, ‘course.”

“Cool. Well, I should go probably. Mum needs help with dinner and all that, I’m sure. Ta then?”

“Yeah, ta.”

There was a final moment of nervous silence and then line clicked dead and Remus slowly pulled the receiver away from his ear. His friends all stared back at him, each of them looking right chuffed and proud.

“Holy fuck,” Tomny started. “Did our Lu actually just get 'imself a girlfriend?”

“I think 'e did,” Doss confirmed, crossing his arms.

“Not sure how smooth 'e was about it,” Lee shrugged, “but I guess it did the job.”

“He was brilliant!” Tonya declared, throwing her arms around Remus in a hug. Lee joined her, then Doss, and Tomny, and even Ian, who’d only just walked in the door with Seesaw and Vint, carrying enough booze to intoxicate an army.

“What we all huggin' for?” Ian asked after-the-fact.

“We’re huggin' to congratulate this spiffin’ tosser!” Tomny shouted, squeezing even tighter.

“You’re all crushing me!” Remus wailed.

"It's the weight of our love, Lu!"

“Alright, off,” Tonya laughed, and the boys released them. She turned and reached into Ian’s paper bag, withdrawing a large bottle of brandy. “Tonight we’re celebrating.”

Chapter End Notes

Snuff is another term for chewing tobacco.
'Brass monkeys' is a term for when it's really cold outside.
Poppers are drugs that are inhaled and give the user an instant high or rush.
Debenhams is a British department store.
Bubble and squeak is a British dish made with fried potatoes and cabbage and occasionally beef. Known as one of the ‘greatest peasant foods’ in the world.

A 'refuse' is a landfill.
'Tidy' means good-looking.
A 'boff' is a hook-up.

PS: I evidently lied about that posting schedule. Don’t trust me, I am a big fat, impulsive liar, lol.

This is chapter 1 of 2 for Christmas, 1976. Next chapter out soon. Cheers lovies.

Chapter 45: Tempo Rubato

Chapter Summary

> Remus battles his greatest enemy; time. 1976 comes to a close with love, and the barest hint of what may lay ahead.

Chapter Notes

> **Had to repost this chapter, sorry! If you saw it without this notice, it was a mistake.
>
> CW: Drug use and addiction. Blood, and a slight breakdown, but mostly just feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Michelle, ma belle,
Sont les mots qui vont très bien ensemble,
Très bien ensemble;
And I will say the only words I know that you'll understand,
My Michelle…

- "Michelle" The Beatles, 1965

The days following Christmas always seemed to blur together. That year was no exception.

Things around the flat were back to business as usual and everyone came and went, apart from him and Tonya. The sofa became their lonely island and they camped out on it under Tomny's duvet to keep warm in the crisp mornings and cooler evenings. When they weren't reading or watching something on the telly, they talked. Prompted by his phone call with Marlene, Remus told stories of his friends at school while Tonya draped her head on his shoulder and absent-mindedly watched the turntable spin. Being close like that never seemed to bother him, it was the dreaded quick touches that sent shivers up his spine, but just existing in one another's presence was comforting.

In the beginning they mostly talked about little things, like how frustrating it was that three out of four of them were night showerers and how Mary and Lottie had concocted this game of trying to paint his nails every time he wasn't paying attention—which Sirius had also

joined in on, raising the stakes by attempting to do it while he was sleeping.

“Sounds like you love them a lot,” Tonya murmured, gently picking at the chipped polish on his left hand he’d yet to remove.

“I’ve only been complaining about them,” Remus pointed out.

“S’normal to complain about the ones we love. You should hear me whine to Doss about Tomny.”

“Oh, I do.”

She pinched him, playfully, and they scuffled on the couch before finally settling again.

“So what happened then?” Tonya asked eventually. “What’s got you feeling so guilty?”

He sighed. “It’s… complicated.”

“Complicated?”

”We fought. Sirius got lashed over me and Marlene or something. But I was a right dick all term too.”

Tonya hummed thoughtfully and kissed his knuckles fondly. “Something tells me Sirius will come around. And even if he doesn’t, I’ll still love you.”

Feeling warm all over, Remus leaned his cheek against the top of her head.

“Will you tell me more about your band?” She asked.

“It’s not a real band, we’re all just novices—apart from Sirius, that is. He’s like some piano prodigy or something.”

“He’s that good?”

“Well, I’ve haven't exactly heard him play, to be honest. He doesn’t like it anymore, something to do with his mum.” Remus looked down at his hands—at the way she cradled his fingers; “I didn’t want to pry.”

“Hm, maybe he just needs a new reason to play," Tonya reasoned. "Who says everyone has to be a Tchaikovsky or a Rachmaninoff.”

Remus tilted his head up thoughtfully. “I heard on the radio once that Billy Joel learned to play the piano from his father, but then he put all the classical stuff behind him for rock and roll.”

“Well there, maybe he’ll be the next ‘Piano Man’. Who wouldn't be happy with that?”

He knew that Sirius would have rather been ‘the only’ rather than ‘the next’ anything, but if he’d met Tonya he would have certainly taken it as a compliment.

“Ton, what makes you happy?”

The question seemed to catch her off guard. She stopped stroking his hand and awkwardly readjusted her head on his shoulder. He hadn’t meant to make her uncomfortable, but before he could apologise Tonya cleared her throat and clapped both hands over his.

“You make me happy, Remus,” she said simply. “You and all the others.”

It felt like an excuse—too simple an answer—but perhaps out of selfishness, Remus couldn’t bring himself to correct her.

“You make me happy too,” he told her.

They had more conversations like that as the days passed, with funnier stories and vaguer answers. Most nights they drank or got high, and Remus would pass out every night only to wake up to find one of the others had tucked him in with a blanket. On the mornings where he could stand without the room spinning, he helped Tonya make breakfast; soft-boiled eggs with little strips of toast to dip in the yolks. He overdid the first few but she just peeled the shells away and sprinkled on some salt and pepper and they ate them while standing side by side over the hob.

Things almost felt normal, and they might’ve been able to pass for a regular family of strays had every other conversation not been made up of whispers and subtle talk of moving 'stock' or meeting with this person or that. Remus was never directly made party to these conversations but the living space was small and any conversation spoken in even a moderate volume could be heard from every corner of the flat. He pretended he couldn’t hear it mostly, leaving the room or else answering with a ‘huh?’ or ‘hm?’ every time one of the others asked his opinion on something. They were testing him, he realised early on; they wanted to know if they could trust him or if he’d just

get scared and back out. Tomny never did it, practically keelhauling anyone who tried, and every time Remus was reminded that he was doing the right thing by ignoring it when Tomny reached out and affectionately ruffled his hair or punched him in the arm.

Not all of it was sad or suspicious though—in fact most things came with more joy than the average Londoner experienced in a year. They danced and sang and lost to one another in cards, and whenever anyone was feeling tired or lethargic they popped a pill or snorted a powder that left them feeling on top of the world again. Everyone was the same, though some parts of them looked different. A bit of weight lost or gained here, a newly-chipped tooth there, fresh scars between it all. Seesaw had taken to wearing sunglasses while indoors to hide his lazy eye and Doss had gotten a new tattoo of a pair of swallows, which looked miles better than the dice-bruises on his forearm.

It was startling to realise that when compared to his friends, Remus had changed too. While Tonya had been more than willing to point out how his jaw was coming in handsomely or that his nose finally fit his face, the realisation that he'd outgrown everyone apart from Doss in height left Tomny amused and only slightly bitter.

"Must be the hair," he said. "Those cutesy curls give you what, four inches at least?"

"Says you," Remus laughed, making a swipe for the back of Tomny's head.

"I could cut it for you," Tonya said from the kitchen table. She had both feet tucked up on the edge of her chair and was painting her toenails. "Both of you could use a trim, actually."

That was how the three of them ended up squished into the flat's tiny bathroom together. Tonya clambered into the tub to save space, and ordered them to sit on its edge in front while she flapped a towel out in front of her. Remus took up a spot on top of the toilet while Tomny went first, insisting Tonya just take the clippers to it to save time.

"Pardon me for not wanting a cue ball for a boyfriend," she scoffed, buzzing the sides and cleaning up the top and neck until Tomny's mop was distinctly less-mopish.

"You're up, Lu," he said, after she'd dusted the hair from his shoulders.

Tonya shook out the towel. "While you're in here you might as well

have a shave, Tomny."

"She only wants me bald in some places," he chuckled, as Remus traded him for his spot on the edge of the tub.

"You didn't cut it while at school, did you?" Tonya asked, running her hands through Remus' hair. He shook his head.

"No. Haven't had it cut since the summer when you did it."

He saw her smile in the bathroom mirror before her reflection was replaced by Tomny's, who winked at him as he wet his face and smeared shaving foam across his cheeks and jaw.

"Well, we'll just have to freshen you up," Tonya said happily. She set a towel around his shoulders and had him lean back into the tub to dampen his hair before parting it with a comb. They fell into a shared silence afterwards and the only sounds were that of Tonya's snipping and the flat's humming radiator. Tonya muttered that they should've set up the stereo, but Remus was content. As always, the flat's silence was the only kind that had ever brought him any comfort.

When Tomny finished shaving he ran a damp towel over his face to get rid of any leftover foam and turned around, leaning back against the sink. "I think you missed a spot, Ton," he said, reaching behind himself.

Tonya grabbed Remus' chin and tilted his head toward her. "Where?"

"Right—" Tomny spun around and smacked him on the cheek, leaving behind a fat smudge of shaving foam; "there."

"Oh fuck you," Remus sighed, wiping his cheek on his shoulder.

Tomny snorted and grabbed his razor, tapping him on the knee. "You're looking a bit scruffy, Lu. Best to clean you up too. C'mon, put one leg over the tub."

Eyebrows raised, Remus waited until Tonya pulled her scissors away before doing as he was told. Tomny did the same, straddling the edge of the tub next to him with a cup of foam in one hand and the razor in the other. He came forward, hands outstretched, and Remus suddenly became very aware of how close they were.

"Ah, on second thought—" He pulled back sharply only to bump his head against Tonya's stomach.

“Oi, stop wiggling,” she warned, “I’m working here.”

"Yeah, Lu, hold still. Don't wanna nick ya."

“It’s fine, Tom, I can do it myself,” Remus rattled.

“Pish, I’ll do it. Tonya’s not the only useful one around here, you know.”

Remus jerked again and Tomny’s thumb poked him in the eye.

“Ooh—that was your fault.”

“Stop bloody squirming down there,” Tonya ordered, stepping forward until Remus could feel her knees bump against his lower back.

Trapped between them, he sucked in a breath as Tomny slid even closer and began coating his cheeks in shaving foam. The razor felt cool against his skin, and he heard every graze like thunder in his ears. Each stroke left him feeling more exposed—as though Tomny were peeling back layers of paint to discover the rust underneath.

“Pull your lip down, m’gonna get that cute little moustache.”

Remus rolled his eyes and Tomny smirked, pinching his chin to tilt his head up.

“Right, I think I’m done,” Tonya announced, stepping back and brushing the hair from Remus’ shoulders carefully so as to not jar him. “I’m gonna leave you two to clean up while I get dinner started. And don’t just wash the hair down the drain, Tomny.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Taking one last moment to fuss over Remus’ new cut, Tonya dusted herself off and stepped out of the tub, disappearing down the hall.

“She’s fussy but she means well I promise,” Tomny said out of the corner of his mouth.

“She’d have to, to be with you.”

Tomny clicked his tongue in amusement and tilted Remus’ head to draw the razor across the hollow of his other cheek. Remus watched him, unable to take his eyes off that little scar on his upper lip. For the most part all he could smell was the shaving foam, but this close he thought he could almost catch a whiff of Tomny’s tobacco.

“I do know how to shave on my own, you know. Giles taught me.”

“Oh yeah? Thought he was just your driver.”

“Giles is lots of things mostly,” Remus said, and Tomny paused his shaving to let him talk. “He’s lived at the estate since I was a kid. I used to take him broken toys and he’d fix them for me. He says that I wouldn’t listen to anyone but him, but that’s probably just him bragging. Once when I was five he saved me when I fell into this pond that’s on the western edge of the grounds.” Remus held his hands out like he could draw an invisible map of the estate in the air between them, shying away only when he realised he was rambling. “He’s—er —He's gonna teach me to drive this summer too."

“Sounds like a stand-up bloke. Dunno why you’d want to ditch him to hang out here.”

“You try telling people your only friend is your chauffeur.”

Tomny smiled wryly and wiped the razor on the towel. “Only teasing. I taught myself to shave, you know?”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm. Mum tried this one time, but she was never really interested in that sort of stuff. Or very good at it. I hardly had any hair in my pits back then anyway, let alone on my face.”

Remus licked his lips. Tomny never talked about his mum, but he supposed that sharing bits of himself was bound to pry out a few memories he’d usually keep hidden.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

Tomny took up the razor again and drew it across Remus’ jaw. “Two… three years maybe? Last I heard she was living in some public housing place in Newham. But it’s fine. We were never close. I made my own way—glad for it. Never would’ve been able to find out what I could do myself if I relied on others to do it for me, ya know? Anyway, what about your dad? Where was he when the driver was teaching you to shave and shoving greens down your throat?”

“He’s a workaholic. And a right asshole.”

Tomny laughed. “Guess fathers are useless rich *or* poor.”

“I wouldn’t want to be one,” Remus said. “Let someone else fuck up the next generation.”

“Hear, hear, ol’ John.”

Setting the razor aside, Tomny drew a warm towel across Remus’ face and grabbed his chin once more, turning it this way and that to inspect him. “Perfect,” he said once he’d let go, standing up and swinging his leg over the side of the tub. “Now the girls will surely throw themselves at you when you’re back at school. Ooh, but I’m forgetting—they already do.”

Tomny started making an obnoxious kissing noise and Remus chuckled half-heartedly, pulling the towel off his shoulders and reaching up to scratch the spots of his neck that were itchy from the stray hairs. “I’m sure you’d do better there than me.”

There was a pause and then suddenly Tomny whipped around to look at him, eyes narrowed playfully. “Hey, Ton!” He called into the hall. *“Tooooon!”*

”WHAT? I’m doing the dishes, you dolt!”

”But I gotta know! How cute is our Remus?”

There was a clatter, and Tonya appeared back in the doorway. "Wha—Whatchu on about?"

"I asked how cute Lu is."

"Oh!" She melted against the door frame, looking sly as a fox. *"So* cute."

"Stop it," Remus moaned.

"But *how* cute?" Tomny leered.

“Cute enough to eat,” Tonya answered automatically, clicking her teeth together.

Tomny leaned in. “Ah, but is he cute enough to... *kiss?”*

Remus shook his head as Tonya's face split into a grin; “Oh *yes!"*

“Well, Lu,” Tomny shrugged, “you heard the lady.”

“Wha—” Remus started, but a second later Tomny had swooped in,

grabbing him by the back of the head and planting a great wet smooch directly on his cheek. *“Ack*—get off, you dickhead!” He cried, but half a second later Tonya was on his other side—both of them smothering him with affection. *"Ohmygod*—Ton, please!"

They both drew back with a loud *‘mwah!’* before splitting into a laugh. “Sorry Lu, can't help it!" Tomny cackled, pinching his nose lightly.

"You’re so cute we just couldn’t resist!” Tonya preened.

"You're so embarrassing!" He hissed, swatting Tomny with the towel and sending hair everywhere. Shrieking with laughter, Tonya fled the bathroom before he could get a shot in and Tomny began spitting hairs, quickly backing out of the room after her.

“Ooh, better get you the broom for that. Back in a tick!”

They left him there alone, still reeling, and Remus stood up with burning ears and both cheeks still damp from their kisses. Almost too nervous to look at his own reflection, he leaned on the sink and gulped down a deep breath. His legs had turned to jelly as they always did when anyone tried to pay him too much attention. In the mirror he could see his and Tomny’s hair collected in the base of the tub behind him—a muted brown mixed with chunks of ashy gold.

A sudden squeal came from the kitchen, then Tonya’s voice, high-pitched and pretty; “Tomny stop it, I’m actually trying to clean!”

“You stop it!” Tomny shouted playfully.

“I’m going to drown you in the sink!”

“You can’t—you’re too small. Like a lil' mouse—what could you do?”

“Remus, save me!”

“Oh no—that skinny lover boy can’t help you! He's too busy hanging his cute lil' head! Ha!”

“Let me go, Tomny! *ACK—!* Reeeemus!”

Smiling quietly to himself, Remus ran his hands through his hair once, before pushing off the sink and storming out of the bathroom.

“Don’t worry Ton, I’m coming!”

That was one of the good nights.

* * *

Tonya liked to dance. It didn't matter who her partner was or if she was alone, she would dance anywhere, anytime. The summer before Remus had watched her skip or sway home more times than she'd walked, and once when they'd come across a pair of buskers outside the local market she'd tossed her shopping aside and danced and spun to their music until she'd fallen into his arms, dizzy and glowing like the sun. They'd broken more than a few eggs that way but Remus never minded. He didn't really like dancing—or more accurately, he didn't enjoy being embarrassed. He wasn't coordinated and didn't have the confidence to just do it anyway, but like someone else he knew, Tonya was hard to say no to. On the nights he couldn't sleep and she didn't want to, they'd stay up late and listen to her records. When they danced it was always together, occasionally hugging one another in a slow sway and other times swinging around so furiously it left them panting and laughing in the middle of the living room.

Every night Remus would dance while half-expecting Tomny to appear and order him away; *'alright, you said a few days so scat'.* But he never did, and eventually his time was spent anyway.

"It's Remus' last night *and* it's New Years! You're being a dick!" Tonya spat at Tomny as he slid his arms into his jacket by the front door. Lee, Doss, Ian, and Vint stood by waiting for him, each of them looking puckered and more than a little sheepish.

"C'mon Ton! You know we'd rather stay," Lee tried, but Tonya only scooped up an old newspaper from the dining table and threw it at him, letting the pages scatter everywhere.

"YOU'RE ALL DICKS!"

"And you've gone bloody manic!" Tomny said in his friends' defence. "Exactly how much have you already had tonight?"

"None of your fucking business!" She shouted.

" 'None of my business'? Wanna try that again?"

Tonya fumed, looking as though she were ready to implode right there in the entryway, but before she could, Remus drew her back by the arm.

“Tonya, it’s okay,” he said. She didn’t pull away, but her glare in Tomny’s direction didn’t lessen any either.

“Maybe I should stay,” Ian offered, stepping forward until Lee grabbed his arm and shook his head sharply.

“No, we gotta go,” Tomny sighed. “I’ll meet you guys outside.”

The others nodded and one by one they filed out of the entryway and down the hall, out into the cold night. Remus dropped Tonya’s arm as Tomny approached her and she crossed them. “You said we could spend tonight *together,”* she hissed.

“Yep, I did. Then something came up.”

“You’re a liar.”

“I'm not lyin'. You heard the phone ring.”

“Then just blow whoever the prick is off! It’s our last night together!”

Tomny sighed and reached up to finger a lock of her hair and Tonya yanked away. Over her head, he smirked sorely at Remus. “We’ll be back before midnight. Enough time for a countdown.”

“Not good enough," Tonya snarled.

“Then I guess we’ll jus' have to get by with ‘not good enough’.”

“Fuck you, Tomny.” She turned sharply and strode into the living room. Immediately the turntable's volume increased and Tomny shook his head hopelessly.

“Sorry, Lu,” he said, stepping closer to Remus; “wish we didn’t have to go.”

“It’s alright, Tom, don't worry about it."

“But we'll see you later, orright?"

"Absolutely."

Tomny grinned lazily and grabbed him by the back of the neck. "Oh, and—don’t let her stay mad.”

"Figures you'd leave me to deal with your marital problems, you lazy arsehole."

Tomny chuckled and drew him in, touching their foreheads together for the briefest moment, before mouthing a goodbye and slipping out the front door. Remus locked it behind him and sighed heavily before wandering into the living room, where he found Tonya swigging from a bottle.

“We don’t need them,” she shouted; “You’re a better dance partner anyway!”

She held out her hand and Remus took it, letting her swing him about the room off-beat and without care. He was disappointed the others were gone, but secretly also content to spend it exactly like this—drunkenly happy and possibly, ever-so-slightly in love.

As with last year, Queen became the favourite of the evening, and they screamed the lyrics off the new album until their throats were horse and they had to wet them with more booze. By the final song they were just swaying, tired and out of breath but unwilling to stop.

‘Let us cling together as the years go by,
Oh my love, my love,
In the quiet of the night;
Let our candle always burn,
Let us never lose the lessons we have learned…’

“I’m sorry our friends are such dicks,” Tonya murmured, head resting on his shoulder as they rocked back and forth.

“I think you’ve called them dicks about a hundred times now,” Remus chuckled, eyes closed as he listened.

“They deserve it.”

“Well, s'okay. I’m fine here. You’re here.”

“But it’s your last night. And it’s New Years!" She moaned into his shoulder.

“There’ll be other nights," Remus reassured her.

“Never one like this.” Tonya raised her head. “We get this night only once. Then it’s gone forever.”

“And then we get another one, right? New and exciting and all that crap.”

“Maybe one where Tomny’s being less of a dick.”

“Or more, you never know.”

Tonya jabbed him on the collarbone lightly. “Oh?” She said, before tugging down the collar of his shirt, revealing Sirius’ silver chain and the guitar pick that dangled on its end. Remus had been wearing it the entire holiday. It was still as warm as the day Sirius had given it to him.

“This is nice,” Tonya said, thumbing it.

Remus' cheeks burned. “A friend gave it to me for Christmas..."

“Sweet friend.” As the song ended she took the pick and raised it up to his nose, flicking him with it gently while grinning. “Actually, that reminds me…”

Pulling back, Tonya left him in the middle of the living room and scampered over to her small bookshelf, digging through it. A few seconds later she returned, hands behind her back.

“Ta-da!” She announced, after whipping a small leather journal out from behind her and pushing it into his hands. “You'll have to forgive me, this present's a little late.”

“I don’t need any more presents,” Remus said, flipping through it.

“Shut up, it’s more for me anyway.”

“Ha. How so?”

“It’s for *you,* so that you can write *me* a song.”

Remus’ stomach plummeted to the floor instantly and he looked up. “But I don’t—”

“But you could!” Tonya surged forward, grabbing his arm and pointing down at the book. “All it takes is a few words, and you have more than enough of those! You like listening to music don’t you?”

“Well yeah, ‘course.”

“And you like *playing* music, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but I—”

“And you’re *good* at it, aren’t you?”

“Yes!”

“Then why can’t you be good at writing it too?!”

“Because I’m not him!” Remus barked. “I’m not Sirius with some big dream and I’m not my father with his fucking money—I’m just me and sometimes that ain't enough! Everyone bloody expects you to be something you’re not and then when they figure it out—then it’s somehow your fault! Well, *fuck that!”*

He hadn’t meant to yell, but it came out anyway and Tonya flinched away. Instantly Remus felt a surge of guilt. "I'm..." He tried to turn away, but Tonya only pulled him back, reaching up to gently push the hair off his forehead.

“Oh Remus…” she sighed, “I’m so sorry.”

He kept his eyes downturned, ashamed. “I just… I’m tired of disappointing people, Ton.”

“You could never disappoint me, darling. Not ever.”

“I could, if you knew… If you knew what Tomny knew. You’d be upset.”

Tonya glanced around, but they were alone. Of course they were alone.

“Remus, I know,” she whispered. "I know about your family—and your school."

It was suddenly very hard to swallow. “You do?”

“Yes. Tomny told me after you left in August. I was ready to fight him when he sent you off—I couldn’t see how you’d be any better off without us, but he told me and helped me understand.”

Remus stepped back from her, completely shaken. She followed him, a look of concern on her face, and he had to hold up an arm to keep her away.

“Why aren’t you angry then?” He demanded. “I’ve been lying to you! To everyone!”

“You think I care about that?” Tonya shouted back. “We’re all liars!

We lie every day, even if it's just to save the feelings of those we love!"

"Don't say that," he pleaded; "Don't say you're not in love with him."

Tonya's shoulders drooped like all the air was leaving her. "I didn't say that," she said sadly.

Remus reached up to rub his face. It was the wrong thing to say, and now he'd disappointed her too. He moved to the couch, slumping down on its thread-bare cushions and cradling his face in his palms. A second later, Tonya was prying them apart, kneeling before him with those sad eyes of hers.

"Remus, I'm going to tell you something," she whispered again, "and I need you to believe me."

"What if you're lying too?"

"I promise I'm not."

Slowly he nodded and Tonya sniffled, before smiling at him and cupping both of his cheeks in her hands. "You haven't even met a fraction of the people that will love you in this life, Remus, and those people—*those ones*—they're going to be so amazed by you."

"You amaze me."

"And I love you for it. But you know, darling, the happiest we've been isn't the happiest we'll ever be…" She pressed a hand to the centre of his chest; "I know you like music, I can hear it in your *soul*—and I promise that other people will want to listen. You just have to let them."

Remus reached up to grasp at her wrist. He was trembling. "What if I don't know the words?"

Tonya smiled sadly. "You will, sweet love. You will."

He met her gaze and slowly she dropped her forehead against his, closing her eyes. They stayed like that for a while, clutching onto one another like the physical touch of being together could solve any problem. Finally, Tonya pulled away and he released her. His eyes were stinging—he'd almost cried, but she just wiped his face for him and stood up.

“I’m going to get cleaned up,” she said, sniffling once more. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, go on.”

Tonya smiled and kissed his temple before walking around the couch and disappearing down the hall. He watched her go as he slumped back on the cushions, staring up at the ceiling. It took him a few minutes to realise the record had stopped and a few more to find the motivation to get up and switch it. As he did, he almost knocked over the bottle of cheap scotch they’d left next to the pile of albums. Remus moved the bottle, instinctively taking a swig of it as he did, but the moment the sour scent of the booze reached his nose he was pulling it from his lips.

“Hey Tonya, want some tea?” He called, swallowing the musty taste in his mouth as he dropped the needle down on a Rod Stewart vinyl.

“No thanks! You go ahead!”

He stayed by the turntable, almost entranced by the spinning record.

“Hey Ton, what do you think of Rod Stewart?”

There was no answer, and Remus turned back toward the bathroom. "Hey, Ton!" He called, gently tapping his hands along the walls; "Is Rod Stewart more soft rock or pop?"

The bathroom door was cracked and spilling yellow light out into the hall. It swing open easily.

“ ‘Cause Sirius actually put money on—”

There was a sharp clatter as Tonya accidentally knocked the toothbrush holder from the sink to shatter on the floor. He'd spooked her, and she cursed beneath the towel she was holding to her face as she scrambled to collect the pieces.

“Careful, don’t step on it!” Remus blurted, instantly bending down to collect the scattered bits of glass. As he did so, he spotted a mirror set up on top of the toilet like a tray, white powder cut up into thin lines and a tiny newspaper straw sitting next to it. He froze slightly, before robotically picking up the chunks and rising back up to his feet, tossing them into the sink with another clatter. Tonya watched him sadly, face half-covered, but he didn’t miss the blood this time.

“They say seeing red where you want white is a bad sign,” Remus mumbled, tugging the towel away away from her. Tonya let him, fingers holding onto empty air as he took in the sight of blood smudged beneath her nose.

“Yeah, well I always thought red was a nice colour on me,” she said, almost attempting a laugh before snatching the towel back and wiping her face. “S'fine, it’ll stop soon.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Nope.” She tipped her head back and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Actually yes—pour me another drink?”

“We were just crying in the living room and you want another drink?”

“Oh, were you crying?”

“Now who’s being the dick?”

Tonya dropped the towel and smiled into the mirror. She had blood in her teeth that she sucked away with her tongue. “Tea, then.”

Remus nodded and stepped away from the door, biting his lip. He turned to go, before something inside won out and he stopped just outside that little sliver of yellow bathroom light to watch her. “Tonya, why do you take so many drugs?"

She looked to him, pretty face still stained with her own blood, and sighed. "Same reason as everyone else, I suppose. They help me forget myself for a little while."

"What's there to forget?" She was so beautiful, he couldn’t ever imagine wanting to forget her.

"Oh, sweet love." Tonya smiled again—sadly—and his heart ached.

"Are you at least... happy then?”

Just like last time, the question caught her off guard. “What do you mean, love?”

“I mean… are you okay?”

She didn’t respond right away, just looked him up and down before gently rapping her knuckles against the porcelain sink three times. Remus felt his breath hitch, and she nodded softly, mouthing to him,

‘I’m okay’.

Squeezing the bathroom doorknob tightly, Remus couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Alright, Ton…” He made to step away.

“Remus, what makes you happy?” Tonya asked suddenly.

Pausing, he bit his lip, then; “I’ll tell you next Christmas.”

Tonya’s smile broadened and she shook her head with a light laugh. “Cheeky. Fine. Call me when tea’s ready.”

* * *

In the end he'd left her there, cleaning up the mess that would exist even if he didn’t, and made the tea. They took it in the living room ("Rod Stewart is *totally* soft rock.") and when their friends finally returned, only a few minutes shy of midnight, Tonya somehow found it in herself to welcome them with open arms. No one mentioned the ragged looks, or the desperation with which they chugged their booze and pills, and things were normal. As normal as they could be. In a time as tumultuous and unsure as 1976, you’d have been hard-pressed to find a single person without an addiction, whether it be drugs or alcohol or cigarettes or football or porn rags. Everyone owed their day-to-day to some habitual dependency, and maybe that was why Remus didn’t say anything.

Love *was* blind, after all.

Years down the road, in another haphazard radio interview he’d let Gideon talk him into and wouldn’t even remember the next day, Remus would recall that the only things *to do* in the seventies were get high and listen to music. They didn’t have fancy electronics like VHS tapes or boomboxes and it would be years before the Average Joe was carrying around his own cell phone. The only football matches that were shown on TV were the championships or highlighted *Match of the Week,* and if you wanted to watch a film you had to go to the cinema and cough up a couple of quid just to sit in the dark for a few hours and forget the rest of the world existed at all. That was all right and good, but whether you were in London and poor or Scotland and rich, your options were limited.

At school he made and played music and eventually he would get real good at it too. The whole thing had mostly started as a joke—just

another way to distract themselves or else skive-off studying for A-Levels. None of them knew it then but that joke would turn into the rest of their lives, messily intertwining with relationships, money, fame, and personal introspection. Things would go wrong just as many times as they went right and people would come and go until no one was surprised by anything anymore. Some things were predictable of course, like James and Lily, though they had their own fair share of surprises in store too. They should've seen the first big mess coming—there would be many—but even then they were young and stupid and Peter was hardly the only one at fault. Marlene was less shocking; by their last year of school it was clear she was never going to wait for anyone to simply hand her happiness to her. Lottie was more simple, but still brave. It took Remus a while to realise just how much he admired her for it. And Mary had also done well for herself, even if it had taken her a while to pick up the pieces.

But then there was Sirius.

Sirius and his ever-damning belief that being able to live through your suffering was just further proof that you were alive. Remus had never bought much into the idea, but what did he know? For most of his life he'd looked at everything the wrong way; upside down or backward. He was like a cup half empty. A guitar with no strings. Where others saw sunshine he saw rain. And he fucking hated the rain. It was quite pathetic—but made for a few damn good songs in the end.

The radio interview had come after most things, during that bit where he was just floating, using what was left of his talent to collaborate with friends like the Longbottoms and write cheap pop ditties for the likes of Gilderoy Lockheart. He never let the studio put his name on any of them, even though Sirius would teasingly tell him to be proud of the work. They weren't together then but they talked nearly every day, saw one another every *other* day, and occasionally fucked on the couch. It was an unspoken rule that the bed was off-limits until they figured out what it was they were doing. Only, Remus wasn't sure they'd ever really known what they were doing.

Eventually he would came to learn that there was a technique in music that felt a lot like this, called 'tempo rubato'. It involved speeding or slowing the traditional tempo of a song to invoke new feeling, as beautiful representation of freedom that relied completely on the discretion of the musician. If done incorrectly the technique could effectively butcher a thing of beauty—but if done right, it could award complete and utter freedom over the most expressive art known to man. That rubato was the thing one heard when an orchestra

conductor briefly slowed a key moment in a classical piece. It was that breath at the end of a love ballad where your very heart felt as though it was shattering. It was responsible for every moment of emotion felt by conscious beings capable of hearing a music note played aloud.

Tempo rubato meant ‘robbed time’. That was the name humans gave to the concept. Like a word, time could not be captured, so people did the only thing they could, they attempted to defy it. They used surgeries to fix the physical flaws that came with age, and took photographs to help them remember a moment otherwise lost. People defied time by naming it. They called the past ‘memories’ and the future ‘what’s yet to pass’. They called hopelessness ‘rubato’, and in doing so, they granted themselves the *illusion* of controlling time.

At least, that's how he'd described it whenever someone cared enough to ask.

But still, it remained a comforting thought. If someone could speed up or slow down something as uncapturable as music—as pure *emotion*—then maybe time really was within their control. But everyone knew it wasn't possible. Not really. Whether as a conscious realisation or an inherent knowing, the answer was clear; time passed with or without people. With or without photographs or tempo. It always did, and it was easy to look back and desperately want to cling to it. Natural even, because what was behind was clear—it'd already been lived. It was the unknown ahead that scared people.

At sixteen Remus couldn’t have told anyone what a ‘tempo rubato’ was, but he’d been unknowingly experiencing it all his life. Being at school felt like the traditional, fast-moving tempo of the piece, and those few precious moments in the flat were his rubato. There he couldn’t play or make music, he could only listen and live. Conversations were without any real goal, the days blurred into one another, and the nights felt endless but not hopeless. There was very little action or adventure and that was how he liked it. The flat was rubato, one he’d never find anywhere else. There would be others, yes, but none the same. If he’d known then maybe he would’ve taken more pictures and less drugs so he could better commit them to memory.

But that’s the thing about memories—in the moment they’re not memories at all. They’re not even time.

They’re just life.

Chapter End Notes

'Chuffed' means proud.
'Skive-off' means skip out on something.
The song they dance to is “Teo Torriatte” by Queen, off their 1976 album ‘A Day at the Races’. It’s the final song on the album, and is otherwise known as “Let Us Cling Together”, which seems to work perfectly in this bitter-sweet situation.
So the after bit at the end feels very lethargic to me, but I've always wanted to better hint at the future, especially that of the band! (You may catch a few references to some characters you’ve been wondering about, lol) I cannot wait to give it to you. See you all in 1977!

Chapter 46: Healing

Chapter Summary

Back to Hawkings, January 1977. Remus has a plan. Sirius has a secret.

Chapter Notes

CW: Scars and allusions to child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So where are you going to, I don't mind,
If I live too long I'm afraid I'll die;
So I will follow you wherever you go,
If you offered hand is still open to me;
Strangers on this road we are on,
We are not two, we are one…

- "Strangers" The Kinks, 1970

Monday 3rd January 1977

Three days at home after visiting the flat would've normally sobered him, but even as his stomach squirmed and his eyes twinged from the smoky smell of the burning tar that always seemed to accompany London train stations, Remus made his way through Kings Cross feeling as though every vein had been electrified. He'd just finished the best Christmas of his teenage life, and though he was heading back to school, things were sure to be different. His luck was shifting, and he'd already made a list of ways things were sure to improve;

1. He had a plan for a prank, courtesy of Seesaw.
2. He was going to fix any poor marks, probably courtesy of Lily.
3. He had a girlfriend.
4. He was going to apologise to Sirius.

The last point was certainly the most contentious, but things with Sirius had ended on a poor note and Remus couldn't stop thinking about it, despite the fact that he wasn't entirely sure what they'd fought over in the first place. It was bad enough that Lily and James' argument had divided them the year before, he couldn't imagine what

living in the same room would be like if things between them were still foul after the holiday. After Remus had spent first term sour as a grape, James and Peter would have no choice but to take Sirius' side, they owed each other such loyalty. There was another thing too; he'd promised Tonya that he would find the words, and starting off with an apology sounded like his best bet.

By the time he made it to the correct platform there were only a handful stragglers left to board. He glanced through a few windows, hoping to spot the other boys, but as the train's first warning whistle cut through the station Remus threw himself up into one of the cars and began moving toward their usual section of the train. The other passengers were mostly students of course, and he waved to the occasional friendly face as he made his way down the corridor, trunk bumping between the wall and his knees.

As expected, he found all three of the other boys sitting towards the back of the train in one of the more spacious compartments and tugged the door open, plucking the toothpick he'd stolen from Giles that morning from his mouth; "Wotcher."

"Hi-ya, Remus!" James called. "Thought you were going to miss the train."

"It's called being fashionably late, Potter, look it up." He nodded to Peter. "Hey, Pete."

"Hey there, Lupin."

Remus swallowed. "Hey, Black."

Sirius turned back from the window he'd been focused on and looked him up and down. Across his lap sat Andy's acoustic guitar, which he was plucking absent-mindedly with his legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. He was wearing his suede jacket over a white button-up and he had to toss his dark waves out of his eyes to get a good look at him. Add in a few cigarettes and a glass of scotch left abandoned on the windowsill and he could've been on an album cover.

"Hey, Moony," Sirius answered coolly.

It was as though the entire apologetic script Remus had been rehearsing in his head for the last three days had evaporated into thin air, and he was left to smile awkwardly and nod. Returning the toothpick to his teeth, he closed the door after himself and lifted his

trunk up onto the overhead shelf with the others' before taking a seat between Peter and the window.

"You have a good Christmas?" James asked. He had Andy's empty guitar case tucked up between his legs and was gently rapping his knuckles against the painted leather.

"Yeah, brilliant."

James raised both eyebrows. "Anything exciting happen?"

"Er—not much."

"You got a haircut. Looks nice."

"Thanks, Prongs."

"Okay enough with the pleasantries, let's just spit it out already," Sirius said. "How long did you think you could keep such a dirty little secret?"

Remus balked a bit. There was no way they could've found out about Tomny and the others, not unless Marlene had somehow figured out how to trace phone calls—*oh!*

"You mean that," Remus sighed before moving the toothpick to the other side of his mouth with his tongue. He hadn't expected Sirius to bring Marlene up so quickly—or at all, really—but he supposed getting it out in the open sooner was better than later.

"Yeah," Sirius drawled, "when were you gonna tell us about Olga?"

"I'm sorry—who?" Peter snorted.

"The mail-order bride Lupin's dad got from Russia—you know, to ensure that prestigious Lupin line of theirs continues."

It took a second for all of them to realise Sirius was joking, but when they did James and Peter snorted while Remus let out a breath and then a laugh.

"You dickhead," he said, using one foot to reach across and knock him in the shin. Sirius smiled smugly and just like that any hint of animosity between them melted away.

"No, but seriously," James started, "when were you going to tell us you're dating Marlene?"

“You’re dating MARLENE?” Peter shouted, loudly enough to make Remus flinch away. “Since when?!”

“Not very long! We’ve all been on holiday and—”

Another loud whistle blew, indicating the train’s incoming departure and Remus bit down on the toothpick.

“I’m surprised Lottie didn’t tell you, Pete,” James said, making Peter roll his eyes.

“She never tells me anything. She left last week to see Mickey and I had to find out from mum *after* they’d already dropped her at the station.”

“She taking the other line to school then?”

“Mhm.”

Remus cut a glance across to Sirius, who had turned to tuning the guitar, expression neutral. “Oi, Sirius,” he started, just as the compartment door flew open and Mary and Marlene stood there, half-panting on the threshold.

“Made it,” Mary said, tugging her trunk inside and collapsing on the bench next to Sirius. She looked different, he realised. Her natural hair which she was always pinning in place with gel or pins was now done up in braids so close to her scalp that Remus was sure it’d hurt to get them done. She had big hoops dangling from her ears too, but the same merry-Mary smile.

“You guys look like you ran here,” Peter said.

“We wouldn’t have had to if this one hadn’t bothered to stop and flirt with the train attendant,” Marlene huffed, drawing the door closed after her. She looked the same, save the fact that she was wearing a leather jacket over her clothes that was so big it could’ve fit Doss.

“He looked *just* like Jermaine Jackson from the Jackson Five,” Mary defended, “I had to tell him!”

“You did a lot more than just tell him.”

“If he’d looked like Andy Gibb you’d have been asking for his autograph.”

Marlene rolled her eyes and began trying to lift her trunk up onto the

shelf.

“Here, I got it,” Remus said, standing. She let him take the trunk, smiling as she lifted a satchel from her shoulder.

“Thanks, Remus."

When the trunk was securely stowed, they sat down together to find the rest of their friends staring and wearing the same shit-eating grins on their faces.

“What?” Marlene snapped, nervously tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

“Nothing,” James and Mary said in unison. It made Marlene blush terribly, and Remus shot them the bird just as the final whistle blew and the train rumbled to life beneath them.

“Hope the trolley comes by soon,” Peter mumbled.

“My mum packed us some samosas if anyone’s hungry,” James offered.

“Oh, yes please,” Mary said; “Forgot to eat breakfast.”

While Sirius continued tuning his guitar, James produced a bin full of homemade goods courtesy of his mum and Marlene pulled her bag onto her lap.

“Remus, I got a few new books for Christmas. Would you like to see?"

“Sure."

“I’ve already read this one—devoured it, actually—but you might like it too.” She withdrew a copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* and passed it to him. As Remus flipped the cover open to have a look, he realised he couldn’t get past the first line. Instead his attention was being drawn across the carriage to Sirius as he pensively traced the strings of his guitar up and down. It was an odd gesture for him—for Sirius who was always looking to expel endless energy.

As the train shook and trembled beneath them on the tracks, Remus could hear Marlene distantly explaining the synopsis of the novel, but he was too distracted to do more than nod along. Instead he watched, transfixed, as Sirius’ long fingers gently plucked a few chords. He kept his left hand pressed to the top of the strings to mute their sound, and

Remus felt the agony of the silenced notes like a red-hot poker in his gut.

Play, he silently pleaded. *Please play something.*

Finally, Sirius lifted his right hand high, ready to strum, but the moment he flexed his wrist his hand seized as though he were in pain and he clapped his fingers over the strings, gagging the life out of them. Remus sucked in a short gasp, and though there was no way he could've heard him over the noise of the train and their friends, Sirius' eyes shot to his and for a split second they were alone in the world.

Find the words.

There wasn't time.

Just as quickly as their eyes had met, Sirius looked away, setting one elbow atop the guitar's body and leaning his chin on his hand to stare out the train window in silence as the clamour of London's city-life drifted away.

* * *

It took a few days, but eventually Remus had grown sure in his suspicions that Sirius had indeed injured himself somehow. When they were finally talking without giving each other strange looks he tried bridging the subject, but Sirius just passed over the question with simple denial. Still, Remus remained unconvinced by the blasé attitude. Sirius wasn't playing anything in their dorm or in music class, and whenever anyone tried to prompt him he would also dismiss their interest with some lazy excuse. Not even James could get him to play, though Sirius hadn't cut him off completely. He let James regale him with everything he'd practiced over the holiday, supplying lukewarm congratulations and corrections where necessary as though he'd lost all interest in the art. But that wasn't even the most startling part; since returning to school Sirius hadn't played a single album.

Not *one.*

In fact, he hadn't even reconnected the hi-fi after they'd brought it downstairs for their end of term party. Remus hadn't realised until he went to play something himself and found the cords hanging abandoned behind Sirius' hutch.

“He’s just in a slump,” James said. They’d just gotten out of maths and were on their way to meet Lily and Marlene for lunch. So far having a girlfriend had consisted mostly of walking one another to and from classes and meeting for meals, which to Remus didn’t feel all that different from having friends. The only new bit was the kissing, which if he was being honest, they’d only done a few times and usually only as a fleeting goodbye.

“It happens sometimes,” James continued, “usually when he comes back from holiday or after his parents call or something.”

Remus glared at the ground. “I don’t fucking get it. Why do they care so much if his dad’s such a dick and his mum’s a right hag?”

“Pete and I’ve been asking ourselves that since we met him. Miles was better with it, I think. His grandfather was a mean old coot, so he could relate better than we could or—I don’t know, maybe he just had better advice..."

Remus shook his head. He knew why Sirius hadn't told them, it was why Marlene refused to let her girlfriends visit her in Southwark. James and Peter both had perfect home-lives as far as anyone like Sirius could be concerned, how could he ever expect them to relate?

“So Miles had family problems too then?”

“Kinda," James murmured. "His mum left when he was really young and his dad went a bit berserk after so he was raised by his grandparents. We never met 'em though. They were old and didn’t like making the trip up here, even when we were little. Miles always said it was the damp, made it hard on his grandfather since he was injured in the war or something. They were pretty strict though, never let him watch TV or call us up over the holidays.”

“Is that why you haven't spoken to him since he left?"

"Yeah. We tried sending letters, but never heard anything back."

"You don't think he could've..."

“Died?"

Idiot!

Remus halted in the middle of the pavement, and James stopped with him, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Sorry, Prongs! I-I didn't mean to..."

"It's fine," James said. "But do us a favour and don't mention it when Sirius is around. It upsets him, and we can't know for sure what happened, so best just let it lie."

Remus nodded solemnly, and bit his lip. “Yeah... yeah, alright. My bad... Think I’m just looking too far into things anyway. I never met Miles, but Sirius, he… something’s up with him.”

“Always is, after the holidays. I'm sure he’ll be back to normal in a few days.”

"But it's never been this bad before. Maybe he just needs a change of pace."

“Dunno where he’s gonna get that. Hawkings has existed the same way for hundreds of years, and it’s not about to change just because we want it to.”

“Never took you for a pessimist, Potter.”

“Call it the age-old January blues.”

With a shared smirk, they began walking again. But Remus' mind was still reeling.

“Still... Doesn’t have to be a big change or anything... Maybe we could just...” He trailed off, reaching up to thumb his shirt collar. Just beneath Remus could feel the silver chain and pick, strung together just like Sirius had meant for. Meanwhile James began peering at him suspiciously through his round glasses.

“Okay, you went quiet real fast... What're you thinking, Lupin?”

“Just that I never got Sirius anything for Christmas.”

“Well in that case, you never got me or Pete anything either.”

Remus began laughing, and shoved his friend lightly.

“Tosser.”

He’d spent the rest of their walk explaining his idea to James, who turned out to be pleasantly surprised. Sirius had asked for only one thing before holiday—to listen to Hope’s albums, and if they could be the thing that broke him out of his musical funk, well then maybe this

was exactly what Remus had been waiting for. For so long he'd let those damn records hang over his head like a suicide note, when really they were just bits of plastic with grooves impressed into them. Break them, play them, it didn't matter, she wasn't going to come back for them. So might as well put them to some use before the memories they represented decayed any further.

Later that evening he enlisted James and Peter's help to set up the stereo while he pulled out Hope's trunk. There were fresh cracks along its corners, water damage leftover from the prank on Sirius' birthday, and he ran his fingers along them as though they were fresh joints in the trunk's history.

"He's gonna be so excited," James chimed, half-stretched out under his bed to plug everything in.

"It's gonna nearly double his collection," Peter agreed. "How could he not be happy?"

"Just remember it's about his happiness when he starts blaring the volume at all hours again," Remus said happily, lifting the trunk up onto his bed. He had the key already in hand but the moment he heard the tiny lock click open something in his chest sank and he had to ask Peter to sort through them while he escaped under the guise of needing to take a piss.

The click had been the trigger. For a split second it sounded identical to the latch on the door of the estate's stables and he'd seen a flash of Hope as she led him across the hay-strewn floor toward her own mare, Georgina. Remus had always disliked horses, even at five. They could sense nervous energy and fed into it with their own agitation. He'd cried, not wanting to go in, but Hope insisted because they'd come all the way from the house for a visit and pulled him into the pen anyway. Terrified, he'd thrown a screaming fit in the middle of his stall and Georgina matched it, nearly cracking his mother in two with a swift kick. The stable hand who'd found them had to have assumed she was half-dead thanks to all the blood, but Hope just wobbled around holding her bloodied head in her hands and ranting about how it wasn't the horse's fault and that they couldn't put her down.

Remus didn't learn until much later that the horse hadn't been Georgina at all, but an unbroken stallion Lyall was housing for a friend. The real Georgina had been Hope's horse as a little girl and had been dead for more than a decade. *Silly me,* she'd said later, *I must've forgotten.*

Remus splashed cold water on his face to help him shake the worst of it off. Perhaps the records weren't such a good idea, after all there was a reason he'd kept them shut away for so long—but he'd been so confident they would be the thing to help Sirius. Yes—he could do this. They were just bits of flattened PVC.

"Moony, which album did you want to play first?" James called through the door. Towelling off his face and neck, Remus walked out and avoided looking him in the eye.

"Nah, play whatever you want."

"Okay. Cheers!"

James had of course found the only Kinks record in the collection and put it on. A few minutes into it the front door finally opened and Sirius strode in quickly as though he were already on a mission.

"Hey mate!" James called eagerly from his bed.

"Hey," Sirius responded, entirely oblivious to the fact that his own stereo was playing and instead surging toward the jacket he'd left hanging up on his peg and rifling through its pockets. "Oh Potter, did you see where I left that twenty quid?"

"You used it as a bookmark," Remus called first and Sirius pointed at him fondly, winking, before rushing to the foot of his bed and sifting through the stack of books he'd left there—most of which belonged to Remus in the first place.

"Hey," James tried, "we have a surprise for you."

"Cool. Can't wait to see it."

James and Peter exchanged a look.

"It's a good surprise," Peter added.

"I'll bet."

James stood up from his bed. "What are you doing?"

"Sorry, just in a bit of a rush. Lupin, which book was it?"

"Maths text…"

"Ah." Sirius whipped his head back and forth before spotting the

textbook on his bedside beneath an empty tea mug. He ripped the bill free and shoved it into his pocket. “Kay, see you guys later then.”

James stopped him halfway to the door. “Oi, what’s your rush?”

“I’m meeting Xeno.”

“For what?”

Sirius waved the twenty pound note in the air. “What else? Don’t worry, I promise I’ll share.”

“But *Remus* has a gift for you,” James said pointedly. Pausing, Sirius glanced Remus' way and he bit his lip before ever-so-slightly gesturing to the hi-fi with his chin. Sirius followed his gaze before his eyes finally settled on the stack of albums left piled on top of his bedspread. Slowly he made his way toward them and began to gently sift through, as though they might disintegrate should he be too rough.

“These…” Sirius started, before looking up, “these your mum’s?”

Remus nodded. “Thought we could mix them in with the others… if you’d like.”

Sirius looked back to the pile and flipped through a few more, stopping on Jimi Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland.* “Wow,” he said, “guess your mum did have some taste.”

“More than mine, all she listens to is polka,” Peter said, making them all smile.

Sirius straightened out the album stack and patted his hands on his trousers. “This is great, thanks Moony. Would you—erm—would you mind sorting them in with the rest? I… told Xeno I’d meet him and I’m already late.”

James visibly deflated, but very secretly, Remus was relieved. He’d been having second thoughts the entire time, but Sirius’ nonchalance had saved him from having to gush and play pretend-sentiment over it all. “Yeah, no problem,” he said and Sirius flashed him a grateful smile before slipping out of the room. He took with him the hopeful mood and James immediately collapsed back onto his bed as Ray Davies serenaded him through the hi-fi’s speakers.

"What the fuck was that?" He wailed. "You would'a thought we offered

him jellied eels for dinner and not three dozen fresh-fucking albums for his collection."

Remus crossed over to James' bed and set a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll figure something else out, Prongs."

"Like what? If Hendrix can't solve his problems, who can?"

“Maybe his tastes have changed?” Peter suggested. “Maybe he’d just more into country now.”

James and Remus cringed at the same time.

"Pete, not all thoughts are meant to be voiced aloud, mate."

Despite the surprising failure, James only grew more invigorated than ever to break Sirius’ bad spell. He sought his best friend out one-on-one most times, but James was too kind and every time he tried to get into the nitty-gritty with him Sirius would expertly distract him by asking about the new football kit he got for Christmas or some latest win by Arsenal. When he did manage to get anywhere, Sirius would turn stony and James would have no choice but to back off. So, the term trudged on, wet, muddy, and grey, until the entirety of dorm 4A felt about as exciting as a cancer clinic.

“The rest of us have noticed a difference too, you know,” Marlene said, as she chugged from a water bottle. He’d dropped by the indoor pitch to walk her back from practice and was sweating more than she was, dressed up in his full winter garb.

“You have then,” Remus confirmed. He knew it wasn’t just them.

“Yeah. Black's been quieter lately, especially in class. I think he even let Flitwick get through an entire lecture the other day without tossing a paper airplane over his head.”

“God, he’s sicker than I thought.”

“I hope that’s supposed to be funny,” Marlene said with an arched brow. “I wish I could offer better advice but if he’s been like this for—how long did you say?”

“Almost two weeks. Since we got back from holiday.”

“That long, huh? Well I’m sorry, Rem, but I’m not sure what you

should do. No one else was there with him."

At that moment, a lightbulb went off in his head. Remus shot up from the sports bench, suddenly very enthused. "That's it! Oh my god, Cherry, you're a genius!"

"I am?"

"Yes!" He jumped over a few scattered footballs and kissed her cheek. "Sorry, I'll walk you home tomorrow, promise—I just gotta check something!"

He sprinted—actually *sprinted*—across the dark campus until he made it to Salazar House. Pausing to cough up half a lung—he'd made a mistake smoking that fag on his way to the football pitch—Remus took a deep breath and marched up the front steps of the dorm. Salazar House was decidedly less dank and dreary-looking with the lights on, and like its fellow dorm counterparts was decorated according to its House colours of silver and forest green. The space might've even felt cozy had he not gotten several nasty looks before he'd even crossed the threshold.

Struggling to recall which dorm was Regulus', Remus had almost resolved himself to stop and ask when he heard Barty Crouch's harsh crowing from the common room. Peeking his head inside, he spotted the group of boys sitting together near the fireplace, a circle of cards set up on the table between them. Already regretting not bringing any of his friends for backup, Remus started across the room, dodging couches and other students until Yaxley spotted him and whistled in the others' directions.

"Well, look at what we have here," he called; "a wolf's fallen into the snake pit."

"Come to try out Salazar's fangs, Lupin?" Barty sneered. "I warn you we're a bit more dangerous in the daytime."

Ignoring the lame jab, Remus scowled harshly before looking to Regulus. "I need to talk to you."

Regulus kept his eyes on his cards, a teacup in one hand and a cool expression on his face. "That sounds like a you problem, Loony."

"Reg—"

"Oi Loony, how's the new girlfriend?" Barty tried, casually flipping

over a card. “You know—the tall one who acts likes a bloke. Reckon she’d be prettier if she weren’t so worried about stretching pennies? I didn’t know we were still supposed to date within the same caste.”

“Shut your mouth,” Remus lashed, before turning back to Regulus again. “I said I *need* to talk to you.”

“You should get out of our dorm,” Regulus said dismissively, sipping his tea.

“Yeah,” Travers sneered, “I think you’re starting to stink up the joint.”

“Nah, that’s just Loony’s natural pheromone. Attracts all the little scrubbers and bag ladies to him.”

Travers leaned over to give Barty a high five and Remus took a deep breath to calm himself. Caring about Sirius’ well-being was really starting to weigh on him.

“It’s about Sirius,” he ground out, and Regulus looked up at him with a muted expression.

"What about Sirius?"

“Yeah, what—has Big Bro Black finally learned some manners? Or is he running around campus starkers again?” Yaxley ragged.

"Shut up, Yax," Regulus snapped, shooting his friend a dirty look. Yaxley froze a bit, but no one said anything as Regulus set his cards and teacup aside and got to his feet. Coat in hand, he stepped past Remus stiffly and began marching toward the door. Remus didn't have to ask whether he was meant to follow.

"Regulus?" Barty demanded, sounding confused. "What you going with this lunatic for?"

Regulus ignored him, and feeling a bit smug, Remus paused and glanced down at the table before giving one of its legs a sharp kick. Instantly all the cups on the table overturned or splashed tea over their rims, soaking the cards and several laps. The boys hissed.

“Ta, dickheads.”

He followed Regulus out to where the two of them quickly skipped down the front steps and split off the path to head around the side of the dorm. Remus frowned at the squelching mud underfoot and the

distinct smell of week-old rubbish, but Regulus had finally stopped near the dorm's noisy radiator, crossing his arms over his chest. He kept tapping either arm with his fingers rhythmically, as though he were keeping time, but then switching hands and doing the same on the other side.

“Talk," Regulus ordered.

"Is there a reason we're standing next to the bins?"

“I said *talk.”*

“Okay, okay,” started Remus, gingerly. “I want to know what happened over Christmas. Sirius is acting funny and I think you know why.”

“Why would I know anything about how Sirius acts? I’m not his babysitter.”

“You live in the same house.”

“For three months out of the year, maybe.”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Remus snapped. “You’re not an idiot, despite the company you keep, so fess up. What happened—how’d he get hurt?”

Regulus paused. “He told you he got hurt?”

“No, but it's pretty obvious. He keeps favouring his wrist. Do you know what happened?”

“It was his own fault.”

“What was?”

“His arm. He fell out a window.”

Remus’ mouth dropped open. “He fell—*a window?* How?!”

“I don’t know, but I suppose you run the risk of it when you’re trying to climb out of one.”

“Well why was he trying to climb out of it?!”

“I already told you I don’t *know,”* Regulus scoffed, mouth puckered. “He was probably trying to run away to *you* lot. Sirius seems to think that choosing your family makes you better than the one you’re given,

but he's just delusional."

Temper flaring, Remus looked down at his feet and then up again, letting out a long breath. Regulus watched him with the same blue-grey eyes as Sirius.

"He always has to push everything," the younger boy said lowly. "Nothing's ever good enough—he *always* has to pick a fight. Can't even go a few weeks without running his stupid mouth."

"Sirius doesn't pick fights for no reason," Remus replied cuttingly. "If you pushed him then that's your fault."

"I didn't push him."

"Then why aren't you ever on the same bloody *team?"*

Huffing, Regulus uncrossed his arms. "I'm going back inside."

As he passed, Remus grabbed his arm. "I thought brothers were supposed to defend one another."

Regulus looked up sharply. "We haven't been brothers for a long time."

Wrenching himself free, Regulus stomped away and Remus let out a long sigh, holding his forehead. He'd always known that Sirius' issues with his brother went deeper than the typical sibling spats, but he couldn't help agreeing with everything Reg had said. Sirius did run his mouth, but he also chose his family, just like Remus did, and nothing had ever felt better than that chosen family.

Making his way back to his own dorm, Remus walked in feeling tired and grumpy. He'd gotten what he wanted out of Regulus, but at the cost of his own temper, which had nearly gotten away from him. "I'm back," he called unenthusiastically, hanging his bag up on the hooks by the door.

"C'mon, Black, open the damn door!" James was shouting, while also hammering his fist on the bathroom door.

"Piss off, Potter!" Sirius yelled from the other side.

James groaned and stepped away before turning to Remus and throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"What happened?" Asked Remus.

“I pushed him,” James said, crossing to his bed and tugging his jacket on. *“Figuratively,* that is. His parents called today and he came back to the room all lashed and upset. I asked why, but he just pissed about again. I got tired of just taking the excuses, so I pushed him and the bloody pansy locked himself in the bathroom!”

“Did he say anything?”

“Weren't you listening?! No, he didn’t!” James sighed and shook his head. “Sorry, Moons. Don't mean to snap."

"S'okay."

James looked around, clearly frustrated, and moaned again. "Damn it —I promised Pete I would help him and Francis move the AV room stuff out. They’re getting that new clubroom they requisitioned. You staying in?”

“Yeah.”

James nodded, looking more relieved. “Kay. He’s a sulker, but if you just leave him be he’ll get over it eventually. Maybe just check on him in a bit.”

“Got it.”

“See you in a few.” Before he left James held out his fist and Remus bumped it in farewell. He thought about stopping him—telling him what Regulus had said, but in the end he let James go. Perhaps they all needed the space.

After the door closed behind him the dorm room felt eerily quiet, and Remus cast his eyes to the bathroom. “Always picking a fight,” he tsked, before shedding his jacket and falling down on his own bed.

Already ahead on homework thanks to Lily (#2 on his list was progressing nicely) he picked up the latest book Marlene had lent him. It was fine so far—some gothic parody by one of her newest obsessions, Margaret Atwood. Its plot felt maybe a bit long-winded but he suspected the bit about the feminist poetry and the main character faking her own death to flee to Italy had appealed to something inside Marlene. He’d really only agreed to read it on the promise that she would read his newest favourite, a book he’d been gifted for Christmas. It was called *Carrie* , a horror-thriller novel by some debut-writer from America. He’d originally thought the concept to be rather baseless and simple but it had hooked him enough that he’d read it

twice before passing it on to Marlene, who appeared less than excited as she skimmed its pages.

When he finally dropped his book to stare at the bathroom door again it'd been nearly an hour. Sirius hadn't made a single peep in all that time, and glancing at the clock, Remus began to feel antsy. James hadn't mentioned if Sirius had taken anything into the bathroom with him and he couldn't smell any weed, but if he was willing to hurt himself jumping out of a window, what else would Sirius entertain if he'd been pushed to the edge?

Sitting up, Remus started toward the bathroom and gently rapped the tip of his knuckles against the door.

No answer.

He knocked harder this time, and still nothing.

"Oi," he called, "Black, open up."

He knocked again—nothing.

"Sirius? Sirius!"

He pounded.

"Sirius! Open the door!"

Sirius did not answer and quickly Remus felt his heart rise into his throat. He slammed his fist against the door until he heard its hinges begin to squeak. He used both hands, hammering until he felt as though he were punching cement.

Finally the door flew open.

"JAMES FUCK OFF—!"

Remus froze as Sirius gaped up at him. Remus gaped right back. In nearly a year and a half of living side-by-side, he'd never seen Sirius without a shirt on. For so long he'd chalked it up to insecurity; everyone was insecure about something—even self-satisfied works of art like Sirius Black. But this—he'd never expected *this*.

Sirius was shirtless, wearing only his pyjama pants as though he'd started getting ready for bed only to stop halfway, but his skin was far from bare. Lacing up the left side of his torso were patches of pink flesh pulled taunt over muscle, rippling with age and imperfection as

though his body was a classical painting that'd been through a botched restoration. The scars stretched up across his chest and shoulder, interlacing with one another like tiger stripes, but the expression on Sirius' face was neither fierce nor undaunted. He stared back at Remus as though he were simply the edge of the world, and he was ready to tip over the edge and be swallowed by nothingness.

But Remus was just a boy, and so Sirius' shock broke and he spun around, whipping his shirt up off the floor from behind him and tugging it over his shoulders with sharp, furious motions. The scars disappeared out of sight—they were burns, Remus realised; old and healed by time but not erased entirely.

"I thought you were James," Sirius said gruffly, not looking at him.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "You didn't come out and I just… I'd wondered if you drowned in the tub or something."

Sirius fumbled with his shirt buttons. "Yeah, well, obviously not."

Twinging red in the face, Sirius did his shirt up to the last button and then they stood there, facing each other down but unsure of what to say next. Remus half expected the door to slam in his face, but before Sirius could, words came tumbling out. "I know a trick, you know. For —for when you're in the bath or just want to be left alone."

Sirius glanced up at him and raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"It's this." Swallowing, Remus raised his fist gently and knocked his knuckles against the doorframe once. "It means I need help."

"Help?" Sirius echoed. "How could that mean help?"

"Well it's... It's for when all you have left in you is a single knock. One knock is still better than nothing, you know."

"I don't get it. Sounds useless."

"Maybe, but two—" he knocked twice; "Two means, 'I'm okay'."

Sirius' eyes shifted to the door frame and Remus' bruised knuckles. "And three?"

Remus shook his head. "There is no three. Just 'okay' and 'not'. No knocks at all means 'I'm already dead, bury me with white roses'."

"Why white roses?"

“Because they’re… pure?”

Exhaling like he'd been longing for a different answer, Sirius started to close the door.

“Sirius, wait—” Remus jammed his foot in the way. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—to walk in on you or pry or anything.”

Sirius sagged backward slightly. “I don’t care if you see,” he griped, though Remus got the feeling it wasn’t the truth. If it was, Sirius wouldn’t have spent so long hiding the scars under long-sleeved shirts and pyjamas. They didn’t seem like the kind one got while jumping out a window, but he knew asking right now would just make him shut down completely.

“I had an idea for a prank,” Remus tried instead. “I flagged Darby Harrison down on the train at the beginning of term—he’s been an altar boy since seventh year, right? Well, he told me that the ministers rarely check what it is they’re putting in those thuribles before communion. I brought a lot of hash back with me, and I thought that maybe it might be funny to test that theory about Jesus and weed.”

“You mean hotbox the entire church?”

“Or... try to, at least," he shrugged. "I have a friend back home who managed it when he was twelve. He tried to do it again but his friend thought it would be funnier to put gunpowder in instead. Nearly blew the priest’s arm off.”

Like a lightning flash, Remus saw the corner of Sirius’ mouth quirk up. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve heard.”

“Ha, maybe…”

Sirius looked down to the ground, then back up through those dark lashes. “Do you want to listen to something later?”

Remus’ heart jumped. *Oh yes. Oh dear god, yes.* “Yeah, anything. Whatever you want.”

“Okay,” Sirius said, and then he closed the door.

Remus stood there for a long moment, staring at the dark wood. Had he done it then? Had he found the right words? How would he know if he had—would Sirius open the door again?

He breathed in and held it, waiting, but then exhaled when nothing happened. Perhaps he was wrong, then.

“Stupid,” he muttered to himself, turning away. But before he moved, there was a gentle knock, followed by another. Two.

I’m okay.

Remus bit his lip over a small, grateful smile. “Okay,” he whispered. “You’re okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Andy Gibb was the younger brother of the Bee Gees trio and a certifiable heartthrob in the mid-70s. He passed away in 1988.
The book Marlene lends Remus is "Lady Oracle" by Margaret Atwood (1976). It's a good read Marlene would've absolutely loved.
Also, “Mrs Dalloway” totally isn’t a queer-coded novel… not at all…

"Strangers" is an absolutely under-appreciated Kinks' song, and frankly I'm appalled that I've never seen a Marauders edit for it. Heresy. Go stream it and you'll understand.

Also as a little author's note; I wanted to say how grateful I am for all of you who are keeping up with this story as you are. I've hit a tiny creative block lately due to my own tiredness, but I wanted you to know that I absolutely read (and re-read, and RE-READ) every single comment. They're always so lovely and really motivate me to keep going! I love this fic so dearly—I love all of you even more dearly, and I'm excited to keep the story going! Cheers, babes.

Chapter 47: Band of Marauders

Chapter Summary

Remus eases into the dating life, whilst also juggling his friends and their many, many mishaps.

Chapter Notes

CW: Brief references to smoking/weed and sexual themes. Mostly cheeky fluff, which you deserve!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Johnny told his Mama,
"Hey Mama, I'm goin' away;
I'm gonna hit the big time,
Gonna be a big star someday;"

Mama came to the door,
With a teardrop in her eye;
Johnny said, "Don't cry Mama,
Smile and wave goodbye..."

- "Shooting Star" Bad Company, 1975

Remus liked kissing Marlene. She was tall enough that he didn't have to bend down and risk neck injuries the way James always seemed to be doing with Lily (not that he ever complained of course). She was also honest about the things that she liked and disliked; for example she liked it when Remus greeted her with a kiss on the cheek but didn't when there were enough people around to draw attention, and she enjoyed holding hands but always preferred to let go before things got too clammy. She always smelled good—like fabric softener and mint toothpaste—and even when they were so close that her face blurred together like an Impressionist painting, he always found her pretty.

The actual dating part turned out to be easier than he'd expected too. Perhaps it was just an upside of finding a partner within the same friend group, but hanging out with Marlene as boyfriend and girlfriend didn't feel all that different from how they'd hung out before. Living at school full-time meant they couldn't just pop off to

the cinema or ice cream parlour for a casual date, so like the rest of the couples at Hawkings, they had to find other ways to preoccupy themselves outside of homework or music or Marlene's football practices. After playing matchmaker for most of first term, Remus had expected Lily to put her efforts to rest once it came out that he and Marlene were indeed an item, but she'd always been an overachiever.

"I just think it's so cute!" She would gush—often. It was a taxing affair, but luckily he and Marlene were alike in more ways than one.

"We're not golden retrievers, Lils. Why don't you give it a rest already?" She would complain—equally as often.

The boys were just as bad, though their preferred method of teasing tended to involve betting on how many times he and Marlene had bunked up already. Remus finally knew how Peter was always feeling.

"C'mon, Moony! Four times? Five times? At least tell me if I'm getting close! Am I really that far off the mark?"

"You're so far off you might as well be floating in space, you arse!"

"You mean it's more than that? *Ooh,* you slag!"

"Oh piss off," Remus grumbled, kicking his leg up on the coffee table in front of him. Sirius smirked from across the common room and leaned forward to continue his rag-fest but James beat him to it;

"If Lupin wants to share then he will. Not everyone's as ripped-and-ready as you, Black. Sometimes people like to take care with… special matters like this."

"Nah, Moony's sneaky. Bet he's got the leg over twice as many times as you and Evans since term started."

Lily threw a couch pillow at Sirius from her spot next to James, and he snatched it out of the air. "It's lucky for McKinnon really," he started. "For a while there it was beginning to look as though she wasn't going to be able to find a bloke who could see over her head. And you, Moons—with that grumpy attitude of yours—I was beginning to think I was going to have to set you up with one of my cousins. Although I'm not sure how they'd take to dating a tree."

"Get a haircut, hippy," Remus quipped.

“Beanstalksaywhat?”

“What?”

“HA!”

“I’d date Remus,” Lily surmised, barely glancing up from the day-timer she was flipping through. Her omission instantly sobered Sirius of his laughter and he coughed a bit before clearing his throat.

“You already have Potter.”

“James would date Remus too.”

Sirius turned on James, who shrugged amicably. “Well, wouldn’t you? He’s just so cute.”

“Better get in line then,” Mary called, appearing behind Remus’ couch with Marlene in tow and leaning down to plant a kiss on his cheek. Remus accepted, only because it made Sirius roll his eyes, and both girls slid into the couch on the other side of him.

“Hey,” Marlene smiled, tucking herself into his side.

“Hey.” He kissed her.

“Really, why is that so hard to find?” Mary demanded, after watching them. “Just a simple little love—that’s all I want! One I can grow old with and retire to the countryside where we can let creamed spinach drip down our wrinkly chins in peace!”

“You are an absolute liar,” Lily called. “As if anyone could actually get Mary Macdonald to ‘retire in peace’. You love anything and everything grandiose. You’ll try it once and demand to be flown to Paris every other weekend because you miss the smell of a fresh baguette.”

“Oui! But there is a difference between grandiose and *tacky.”*

“Does this mean trouble in paradise with the newest beau?” Asked Sirius. “What’s his name again? Leroy? Linus? Leonardo?”

“It’s *Lance.”* Mary crossed her arms. “And he’s been taking pointers from *you* apparently. Today in class he tried singing that ‘Mary Mary’ song to me *acapella.”*

“I was there,” Marlene said to Remus, “it really was awful.”

“I broke up with him on the spot!” Mary cried. “But he wouldn’t stop bloody singing so who knows if he even heard me! I think I’m going to have to do it again tomorrow at lunch.”

“Shall I serenade you with a half decent song in the meantime?” Sirius offered.

“No, I’m taking a break from lead singer types actually. So, Remus, is there any chance you and Marlene are looking for a third?”

Remus squirmed a bit. “Like polygamy? Ain’t that an American thing?”

“Not polygamy—it’s called polyfidelity. Hippies do it in communes all the time.”

“Well, no offence Mary, but I think one girlfriend is enough.”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, “Lupin’s a dog person didn’t you know? He wouldn’t know what to do with two pussies.”

They all groaned and Sirius got several more couch cushions to the face for the dirty jab. There’d been a lot of jokes like that, and more since he’d come round from his beginning-of-term slump. Sirius had never outrightly admitted to hurting himself over holiday, but the day after their interaction outside the bathroom, Remus had told James what Regulus said and James had practiced a bit of tough love on his best friend. He’d marched right up to Sirius in the dining hall that same morning and clamped his hand over his wrist until he yelped and confirmed their suspicions.

“You’re a right idiot, you know that?” James had snapped, as he lovingly wrapped a tensor bandage around Sirius’ wrist. After a quick visit to Ms. Pomfrey’s medical room the injury turned out to be just a nasty sprain, but it at least gave Sirius reason enough to slack-off in class. He ended up milking the injury until Professor Bilshin threatened to give him detention cataloguing his extensive collection of foreign newspaper clippings if he so much as tried to get another student to write his next paper for him.

As if by magic, Sirius' wrist had been miraculously healed the following day and he was back to his regular wisecracking self. The teasing was not exactly pleasant, but Remus tolerated it. It wasn’t as though he was the only one feeling it and getting defensive would only lead to questions as to why he *hadn’t* bunked off with his girlfriend yet. They were teenagers living at a religious private

institution in the bum-fuck backyard of Britain, with the only neighbours for miles being sheep and cattle—the only thing hornier was a travelling businessman or a Catholic priest. And yet they'd done little more than a bit of heavy petting. Marlene seemed to think that the best time to discuss the downsides of premarital copulation was after they'd already started snogging one another, which usually left little conversation to be had on the matter anyway.

Sexual escapades aside, neither of them were adverse to bit of peace and quiet. Their favourite spot for privacy had quickly become a quiet hallway on the second floor of the Flamel Block, just across the way from the languages department. It wasn't uncommon for couples to be found camping out in various spots across the school; the outdoor bleachers were commonplace, or the private study rooms at the back of the library—though one did run the risk of getting caught by Ms. Pince, who seemed to disappear and reappear throughout the extensive library as though she could teleport. James wouldn't admit where it was that he was always taking Lily, but Sirius had his money on the sports equipment room and Remus was inclined to agree with him.

He'd entertained the idea of taking Marlene to the astronomy building, but that was always dark and he was worried she'd think he was trying to pressure her or something. In contrast the hallway she'd shown him was brightly lit and boasted several window seats that overlooked the campus gardens and wildflower fields. Much of the grounds were still covered in a thin layer of snow and frost, but the view was always picturesque. Other students rarely came down that far unless they were heading to lessons and each seat had just enough room for the both of them to sit with their legs stretched out, ankles resting on top of one another in the middle.

These were the moments Remus appreciated most about being with Marlene. Together they'd discovered a new sort of quiet that brought comfort, and that comfort always included her, their window, and a good book. He also liked watching her from that spot, seeing the way her blue eyes flitted across the page while she read.

Marlene glanced up from her book and caught him staring. "You finish the chapter already?"

"Yeah," he nodded.

"Okay, just give me a second, I'm almost done mine."

She looked back down at the book in her lap and he leaned his head back against the wall behind him, gently picking at the peeling paint on the window's edge. A few spaced-out minutes later, and Marlene finally clapped her novel shut and sat up excitedly.

"Okay, chapter summary—twenty words or less. Go."

Remus drew his knees up and held up his fingers to count. "Lorrie skips out… leaves Jack to clean up pub… they end up at the Christening… Montgomery gives shitty apology."

"Nice."

"Thanks. Your turn."

Marlene cleared her throat. "Beatrice meets lighthouse keeper… daydreams about her ex-husband's farmhouse… hurts ankle falling off wagon… rescued by handsome keeper… storm hits."

"That was a lot of compound words just now, Cherry."

"Well, get on my level," Marlene sniggered. He smiled and they leaned forward, exchanging novels. It was all part of a little game they'd constructed—switching back and forth until the words began to blur together or they both agreed the book was dry as the paper it was printed on.

"I expect a scandalous twenty-word review of whatever Beatrice and that lighthouse keeper get up to during the storm, just so you know," Marlene warned.

He waved the novel at her. "I'm on the job."

Marlene giggled again and began flipping through the pages of her book. Remus watched her, zoning out on her hands for a moment before he lifted his arm and checked his watch. "Oh shit," he said, sitting up right and swinging his feet down to the floor.

"What's the matter?"

"It's past eight."

"Really?" Marlene clicked her tongue. "I hate winter sometimes. The sun disappears and it's just night all the time. Oh well, curfew isn't until nine anyway."

Remus stood and reached for his bag. "Actually, I promised the lads

I'd meet them."

Marlene raised an eyebrow. "For what?"

"Nothing—music stuff."

"Ha, that's rubbish."

"I'll walk you back?" He tried, smiling guiltily.

"Fine." She sighed good-naturedly, getting down from the window bench and reaching for her jacket.

"Thank youuu…" Remus sang, tugging on his own. Marlene picked up his scarf and looped it over his neck, tugging him down for a little peck before releasing him.

"This better not be anything too insane," she warned.

"Oh no, in fact I think everyone will find it pretty *relaxing."*

A man of his word, he walked Marlene back to Rowena House and they said goodnight on the dorm's front steps. He was properly late by the time he made it back to his own dorm, only to find that the room was empty and the others must've gone on without him. Unwilling to miss out on the prank that had been his idea in the first place, Remus tossed his bag aside and set off across campus toward the church, only stopping once to avoid a pair of passing teachers on their way out for the night. He was just crossing the church courtyard when a hand grabbed him by the back of his jacket. Remus sent up a silent prayer for his eardrums, readying himself for Filch's horrendous curfew-breaking lecture, only to receive a light hissing from Sirius instead.

"Where have *you* been?"

Remus sighed in relief. "With Marlene. Sorry, lost track of time.

"That's all right and good but while you were shoving your tongue down McKinnon's throat, we were here putting moves on *your* prank."

Remus glanced around the empty courtyard. "Yeah, ball really seems to be rolling."

"Guess this is what they mean by new year, new priorities."

"Is that jealousy I detect, Black? And here I thought green was Salazar's colour."

“Yeah, bet you’d look real good in black and blue too.” Sirius raised both fists tauntingly.

“Lay off him, Sirius,” James said, appearing out of a bush behind him and dusting the frost and leaves from his wild hair. “Pete’s not here either.”

“Yes, I am!” Peter wheezed, rushing up to James’ side from the road and stopping, bent over while he caught his breath.

“Hope you two at least had fun shagging your girlfriends while we waited here freezing our bits off,” Sirius grumbled.

“When you find someone who can put up with you for more than ten minutes it can be your turn to be late,” Remus said.

“Why bother? I’ve already got you as a captive audience.”

James grinned and socked Sirius in the shoulder with a large baggie of weed. “Okay, drama queen, let’s get this show on the road.”

Shooting another disapproving look in Remus’ direction, Sirius snatched the weed—courtesy of Seesaw—and began marching toward the church. The hash was mostly seeds and stems and not all that good for smoking, but would still smoke and smell strongly enough to peak a few sinful noses during the following morning’s service.

“Wait, we’re just walking right in?” Peter asked, as they went up the steps and James reached for the front door.

“We already scoped the place,” James said. “It’s Father Minsin on confessional duty tonight and he’s already fallen asleep in the booth.”

“You still sweating over what Francis told you, Pete?” Sirius asked disdainfully.

“He said one more problem and I’ll lose my spot as club treasurer," Peter whined. "We couldn’t meet for almost two weeks after the stink bombs because half of us smelled to high heaven!”

“Well, what would you rather be known as? The guy who turned his church into the Jimi Hendrix Experience or the guy who sits around watching telly in some dark clubroom, tugging on his nob?”

Peter glowered like he’d swallowed a lemon. “Whatever, get on with it then.”

Sirius nodded to James and he opened the door wide enough for all of them to slip inside. Most of the church's lights were off, but they scooted along the wall closest to them anyway, avoiding the hallway of confessionals and ducking toward the church offices.

"One of us should be keeping watch," James said, and Sirius immediately turned to Peter.

"You heard him, Pete. You were the late one after all."

"So was Remus!"

"Watch the volume," James winced.

"Last in, first out," Sirius said firmly. "And it's Lupin's weed."

Peter huffed, but unable to argue, finally turned and trudged back the way they'd come.

"You are certainly losing the popular vote tonight," Remus said, earning himself a threatening finger in the face from Sirius.

"Best learn some loyalty or you'll be next."

Remus yanked the weed bag from his hand and hit him with it, still sniggering. They followed each other into the ministers' offices and found themselves in a large room with a long meeting table taking up most of its middle. They left the lights off, and the room remained blue-cast thanks to the winter moonlight drifting through the sheer window coverings. Someone had left a set of vestments draped over the back of one of the chairs, and Remus held it up to James, who was busy snacking on a box of sacramental bread he'd found.

"Next Halloween costume—Father Potter?"

"I'd do it," James said around a mouthful of wafers.

Sirius turned around from the front of the room. "If you're done stuffing your face with the body of Christ, I found the incense box."

Remus tossed the robes down and together they joined Sirius by a heavy wooden hutch on the other side of the room. "You sure you're feeling okay, Black? You're not normally so cranky while laughing in the face of God."

"And you're not normally so flipping oblivious," Sirius grumbled. Remus exchanged a look with James, who only shrugged and offered

to share the wafers. He turned it down with a small smile as Sirius opened the incense box and they were met with the instant smell of frankincense and myrrh.

“I don’t think we should replace all of it,” James said, “or they’re bound to notice the change in smell.”

“A fifty-fifty mix then?” Remus suggested. Sirius nodded in agreement.

“Find me something to put the rest of the incense in.”

Remus looked around. There was a large array of silver and gold chalices along one wall of the office, the same ones that the ministers used in their service. He went to them and plucked one with a lid off the shelf and brought it back to Sirius, who began scooping incense into it with his hands.

“You figure anyone’s actually going to get high ‘cause of this?” Asked James.

“Nah,” Sirius scoffed, “but in the very least the church is going to be needing some airing out, just like our friends in Salazar.”

“And we get out of church early,” Remus smirked.

Suddenly the office’s overhead lights blazed to life and left each of them momentarily blinded as they spun round to find Father Minsin standing in the doorway, hands clasped in front of him. “Good evening boys,” he smiled, and Sirius visibly deflated, one hand still in the incense box.

“Fuck.”

"No need for foul language, Mr. Black," the priest said. "I believe we're in plenty enough trouble already."

Completely caught, Father Minsin made them wait on the front steps of the church until Filch showed up. The groundkeeper and self-appointed child-torturer looked about as happy as kid on Christmas as he held the bag of hash aloft like a trophy.

“Caught breaking and entering with illicit substances, eh?”

“No, Mr. Filch, we were going to smoke it all but then the voice of God came to us and we ran straight here to repent.” Despite the

excuse, Sirius' delivery read as rather unenthusiastic, and Filch only smacked him upside the head before ordering them to start the long march toward Castle Hall.

"What happened to Pete?" James whispered sorely, his breath coming out as hazy puffs in the cold night air.

"The little *worm* must've ran off with his tail between his legs, the bloody coward," Sirius growled. "All for his fucking knob-jockey AV club. That little rat!"

"Quiet!" Filch barked.

Remus pulled his winter cap further down over his ears in silent protest. The street was dark but Filch marched just behind them with his torch. He could see someone else making their way toward them from the Bellchant building, and as he watched they slipped on the icy pavement and went down with a spectacular shriek. Filch straightened up and squinted into the dark.

"You three don't move," he ordered, before wobbling across the street to help.

"I'm freezing," Sirius said, "maybe we should just make a break for it."

"He literally knows where we sleep," Remus scoffed.

"Hey," James started, nudging Remus with his shoulder; "isn't that your guys' music teacher?"

Remus and Sirius followed James' gaze to find that he was right. Filch was helping Sheila gather up a stack of books she'd dropped in her fall, all while chattering and pointing his torch in their direction. Sheila looked to them in the dark and Remus straightened up a bit before she smiled and crossed the street ahead of of the sour old man.

"Evening gentlemen," she said. "Mr. Filch has just told me some very interesting news. Can you guess what it is?"

"It's all a lie, Sheila," Sirius said.

"Church is a very serious thing."

"So am I—'what's in a name', right?"

"You watch your mouth," Filch snapped, appearing at Sheila's side with a stack of her books in hand. Their teacher smiled anyway and

turned to him.

“Mr. Filch, I’m sorry to say I have a bit of bad news myself. You see, just earlier when I was leaving the Bellchant building I could’ve sworn I heard a noise coming from one of the storage closets. I think it was Mrs. Norris.”

Filch’s eyes shot wide. “M-Mrs. Norris?”

“Yes, but I’m afraid I didn’t have the right key on me. I was going to ring your office when I’d gotten home but good thing we ran into one another here. It was such an awful yowling. If you are worried, I won’t mind walking the boys back to Castle Hall myself so you can go and check on her. In fact, I’ll make good use of them while carrying these books.”

“But ma’am—”

“Oh,” Sheila sighed suddenly, “I just realised it was the same closet with all the bass drums stacked in it. I do hope she didn’t knock them over and get trapped underneath.”

That was enough of a push for the caretaker. He practically threw Sheila’s books at them before taking off up the street.

“It was storage closet number seven!” Sheila shouted after him. “At the very back of the building!”

All three boys gaped up at her. “Was all of that true?” Remus asked, after Filch had legged it all the way up the street.

Sheila sighed wistfully. “He never really was very pleasant, even when I was a girl.”

“You went to school *here?”* Sirius demanded.

Sheila looked back to him and winked. “Okay, time to go home. It’s freezing and we all have class in the morning.”

They deflated slightly and turned to start up the street toward Castle Hall. Suddenly Sheila whistled at them from behind. “Boys, where are you going?”

“To the Headmistress’s office?” James said dumbly.

“Professor McGonagall is not in her office at this time,” Sheila said, “and unless you’d like to draw her from her warm bed, I suggest we

go this way. Now c'mon."

All three of their jaws dropped and it took another friendly wave from Sheila to get them going again. "This is insane," James whispered as she led them back toward House Lane. "Isn't she going to punish us at all?"

"Shh!" Sirius snapped quietly; "Don't tempt her."

They walked silently behind the music teacher's clacking boot heels until they reached Godric. *"Brrrr!"* Sheila said, stopping just shy of the dorm's front lawn. "I don't know about you boys but I am ready for spring."

She smiled and Remus looked from her to the dorm. "Mrs. Buchanan, are you actually letting us off?"

"Yes, Remus, I am," she said simply, "but only on one condition—no more pranks in church. We have enough silliness at Hawkings without you three parading around in the middle of the night like a little band of marauders. So I want you to swear to me, no more issues with the church."

"Absolutely," Sirius agreed automatically; "We promise to be on our best behaviour from here on out. You'll not find any witches to burn among us."

"You swear to me?"

"We swear!" They said together.

"Good. Oh and boys, one more thing—don't go wasting perfectly good hash on some gag. Filch just smokes it himself, you know."

If Remus' jaw were any looser it would've fallen off. *"You—?"*

"If you tell anyone I said that I'll deny it," Sheila said firmly. "Now give me my books and get your sorry butts inside. If I catch you out again tonight I'll let Mr. Filch hang you by your thumbs from the gym's rafters."

"You heard her, Lupin!" Sirius scooped the books from his arms and handed them over to their teacher before yanking him up the path to Godric's front doors. Remus stumbled after him in the dark, and when he looked back Sheila was already walking away from them down the street.

“I cannot believe that just happened,” James half-laughed as they fell through the doors. “You two get to have the *coolest* forms teacher in the entire world, and I get stuck with Bilshin?”

“Now who’s jealous?" Sirius cackled. "But listen—who cares, we got off the hook! And Sheila thinks we swore off pranks.” Grinning spectacularly, he lifted one hand to reveal crossed fingers and James—matching his expression—revealed the same. They both looked at Remus expectantly, but he only stared back dumbly, still a little stunned by Sheila’s entire spiel.

“Oh Lupin,” Sirius sighed, “so smart and yet still so slow on the uptake.”

“Who cares, two out of three marauders ain’t bad!” James declared, locking his arms around both of his friend’s necks and leading them toward the staircase. “I think I like this new moniker too. Much better than ‘messers’ anyway. Just wait until Pete hears!”

“Wherever he went," Sirius said. "But hey—Marauders? You don't think Sheila’s already copyrighted it, do you? Because I think we just found the perfect name for our band.”

* * *

Remus was awoken early the next morning by hushed voices and short clatters. He turned over, groaning, and drew back his bed curtains to peer out. James and Sirius were standing by Peter’s bed and had somehow dragged Sirius’ entire stereo over with them. James had the Rickenbacker strung around his neck, its cord plugged into the stereo like an amp, while Sirius leaned over Peter’s snoring form with a metal baking tray.

“Wha...? What are you doing?” Remus called groggily.

“Shhh,” Sirius hissed, while James held a finger to his lips. Eyebrows shooting upwards, Remus laid back down to watch as James raised his hand in the air and the pair of them began to silently count down;

‘Three—two—’

On one, James’ hand came down and he strummed an intense note on the guitar, which was then amplified ten-fold by the stereo. Immediately Peter flew upright in bed and slammed his forehead into

the baking tray, before collapsing back into his sheets with a yowl. Victorious in their scheme, Sirius and James erupted into laughter and fell back, killing themselves as the guitar's reverb echoed around the room.

"What the hell?" Peter moaned, clutching his face.

"S-Sorry Pete!" James crowed between his laughter.

"My nose!"

"Don't—Don't worry!" Sirius wheezed. "It's just a little payback—*Wormtail!"*

Chapter End Notes

'Polyfidelity' is an earlier coined term for 'polyamory'.

This was a comforting chapter, I feel :') And finally! A NAME—MARAUDERS! And not just that—three out of four now have their nicknames, cheers babes!

Chapter 48: Horribly Brilliant

Chapter Summary

An upset in a string of relationships leaves Remus with a rather 'boring' problem on his hands.

Chapter Notes

CW: Violence? Or really, just a few punches to the noggin. Ends well <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Treat him well, he is your brother,
You might need his help one day;
We depend on one another,
Love him that's the only way…

- "He is Your Brother" ABBA, 1973

Tuesday 25th January 1977

Sirius gave a great groan as he stretched his arms above his head. His shoulder popped and he let out a sigh of relief as he rubbed it. "I swear to bleedin' Christ, Binns gets more and more boring the older we get. The old dinosaur would probably explode into to dust if you so much as threw a pencil at him."

James wrinkled his nose in amusement. "I'll bet he doesn't even know how boring he is. He probably lost his hearing in '69 and has just been rambling ever since."

"Sight too," Peter added over a yawn, stretching as Sirius had. Both of them had elected to take a nap during the second half of the lecture.

Remus didn't mind Professor Binns' class as much. They all had it together and he was already ahead of the assigned reading, which gave him time to work on other, more trying things.

"So how's that novel coming along, Lupin?" Sirius asked, nudging Remus in the side as they made their way down the hall.

“I told you I’m not writing a novel,” Remus dismissed. Ahead of them, James spun around next to Peter and began to walk backwards.

“What is it you’re always scribbling in that diary of yours then?” He asked.

“It’s not a *diary,* it’s a journal.”

“Love notes for McKinnon, perhaps?”

Sirius clapped his hands over his ears. “Please, spare me.”

“They’re not love notes!”

“ 'Course not. They’re love *songs* aren’t they, Moony?” Peter smiled.

Sirius’ yanked his hands down. *“Songs?* You’re writing songs and you haven’t told me?”

“I’m going to ask Binns for a new seat partner if you keep spying over my shoulder, Pete,” Remus threatened bitterly.

“Don’t change the subject!” Sirius snapped. “C’mon, pull the diary out, I want to see them.”

“No way! Nothing’s finished yet.”

“I don’t care if they’re finished. Art's best in its rawest form anyway.”

“I’m not giving them up so you best just give it a rest.”

"Fine." Sirius reached out and grabbed Peter by the shoulders. “Wormtail, my main man, c'mon, fess up now—what’d you see? Were they any good? Did they even rhyme?”

“Don’t even try it Pete!”

“I’m not telling you anything while you’re still calling me ‘Wormtail’,” Peter rebuffed, shaking Sirius off. Sirius glowered and James slung an arm across his shoulders as they all started down the staircase toward the ground floor.

"Should'a known you were fightin' a losin' war, Black. It *is* Moony."

“We’re supposed to be a band," Sirius complained. "Brothers in arms—Marauders! How can we do that if we’re holding back from one another?”

James lifted a hand off Sirius' shoulder and pinched his nose between two knuckles. "Didn't realise there was such a rush."

"There isn't," Sirius said in a nasally tone, before ripping his nose free, "unless you *want* to leave school and head straight for Law like your dad wants."

James rolled his eyes and Sirius pinched him back smugly, before wheeling on Remus. "C'mon Moony, let us see the songs?"

"No."

"Come on! I've shown you mine, so you show me yours!"

"I really hope I heard that out of context," Mary said, appearing above them and taking the stairs two at a time until she'd caught up.

"Oh don't be jealous, Macdonald," Sirius said as they all stopped to wait for her, "not everyone can woo someone as stoic as Moony."

Uncharacteristically, Mary ignored the quip and looked straight at James, her dark eyes hard and serious. "Potter, can you bench someone from the football team for being an utter cunt?"

James blinked at her foul language. "Maybe. Why?"

"It's about Lottie," she sighed. "Yesterday she... Well, she found out that Mickey's been cheating on her."

"Oh fuck," James and Sirius said together.

"Mickey?" Peter echoed, the picture of surprise. "Mickey cheated on her?"

Mary rubbed her arm sorely. "I wasn't supposed to tell you, but Lottie won't do anything about it and Mickey's walking over her like rubbish. You should've heard him! The prick deserves *something* after what he did."

"What'd he do?" Asked Sirius. "I mean, aside from the cheating part."

Mary looked around the crowded hallway sorely before beckoning them all over to a quieter corner next to the seminar halls. "You know she went to visit him before school, right?"

All four of them nodded, leaning in very close.

"Well... when we came back she said she felt as though something were off. She'd found another girl's underwear in his bedroom."

They all balked a bit at that, and Sirius murmured *'yikes'* under his breath while Peter just shifted uncomfortably.

"What'd she do then?" James prodded.

"She confronted him, of course! But Mickey just denied the whole thing. Said the underwear belonged to his sister."

" 'Cause that's any better," Sirius shuddered.

"Yeah, so yesterday they got into a fight and Lottie brought it up again—because it was complete and utter *bollocks*—and he totally fessed up! Said a whole bunch of nasty crap too."

"Like what?"

"I... can't tell you that."

James and Sirius exchanged a sorry glance, and Remus suddenly felt very grim. He hated gossip on the best of days, but if Lottie's relationship was really in such shambles and she didn't want anyone to know, then... "Maybe we shouldn't be talking—"

It was Peter, of all people, who cut him off. "Where's Lottie?" He demanded, looking like a shaken fizzy drink ready to burst.

"Should be downstairs somewhere," Mary answered. "I think she and Lily just had psychology."

Like a tin soldier, Peter did a full turn and started down the staircase again. His urgency was infectious, and suddenly the rest of them where chasing after him as well. After a bit of rambunctious searching, they eventually found the two girls sitting alone in one of the break rooms, both looking rather forlorn. Lily noticed them first and leaned down to whisper something to Lottie, who was hunched over the table with a tin of chocolate biscuits open in front of her. When she looked up her eyes were rimmed red and purple from crying, and her face was bare of all makeup, making her look startlingly young. Remus wasn't sure he'd ever seen her without painted eyelids and lipgloss, and it was the first time he could really see the resemblance between her and Peter.

"Hi guys," she mumbled, through a mouthful of sweets. Mary smiled

warmly and pat her head as she pulled out a chair to sit down. James sat next to Lily, who elbowed him pointedly.

“Oh—hey Lottie,” he said awkwardly. “How was psych—”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Mickey?” Peter blurted. Instantly Lottie’s blue eyes shot wide and she swallowed before spinning on Mary, expression furious.

“You *told* them?”

Mary shrunk in her chair slightly. “Sorry Lot, but Mickey—”

“I can’t believe you! I told you I didn’t want anyone to know! This is mine and Mickey's business to work out, no one else's!”

"Then you shouldn't have told everyone!" Peter barked.

"I didn't!" Lottie howled. "I told MARY! Which was clearly a mistake!"

Wincing, Lily leaned in closely and reached to stroke Lottie's hand as a comfort. “Lottie, you can’t really expect to just work it out with him, can you?”

“It’s no one else’s business!” Lottie shrieked again, pulling away.

Undeterred, Peter leaned in over Lottie's chair. “You want to forgive him?” He demanded. “Are you mental?!”

Lottie spun around to glare at her brother. “It’s *especially* not your business!”

“Why not—why couldn't you tell me? I'm your brother!”

“Exactly! Which means you're practically useless!"

“I am not! I could—Well, I could talk to Mickey!”

“I don’t want anyone to talk to Mickey! I don’t even want to hear his name! Now will all of you just *PISS OFF?!”*

Peter bristled at his twin's harsh dismissal. *“You*—You would’ve told Sim!”

“Who says?" Lottie hissed. "Even if I did, Simeon would be able to do something about it! At least *he* could kick Mickey's ass or something!"

"Who says?" Peter lashed back, a perfect mirror.

"Okaaaay," Sirius tried, grabbing Peter by the shoulders; "Maybe we should take this down a notch, hm?"

"Oh, piss off, Black!" Lottie snarled. "You'd just as soon cheat on me too!"

"Ouch." Sirius released Peter and turned to Remus, sniffling sardonically. "Moons, she hurt my feelings."

"You're a troublemaker, Black, not a peacemaker. Can't fight nature," Remus chuckled wryly, putting a consoling hand on Sirius' shoulder.

"You're such a bag!" Peter ground out, as he and Lottie continued their face-off. "We're just trying to help."

With a terrible growl, Lottie launched herself to her feet, nearly knocking Peter with the chair as it clattered backwards. "And since when do you even care? God, you're infuriating! It's always 'Sim this', 'Sim that'. Newsflash, baby brother—you're not Simeon so stop trying to act like it!"

"I'm—I'm not!" Peter sputtered. "Why would I even want to act like Simeon?"

"You're asking *me* that? Oh, that's rich."

Peter huffed, looking about as red as a tomato. "I'm telling you now, I could do something about it. I will do something about it!"

"What will you do Petey—call him a prick? Tell him that he's a horrible asshole and a sorry excuse for a boyfriend? Well, I've already covered that! Now if you're done, I'm going back to my dorm." She shot a venomous look at Mary. *"Alone."*

Pausing long enough only to shove a final biscuit in her mouth, Lottie snatched up her bag and sweet tin and pushed past her brother, stomping out of the student break room and down the hall. They all watched her go, and Remus cleared his throat awkwardly. "Well, that went well," he mumbled, earning an ironic smile from Sirius that he then had to swallow.

"Screw her, she's gone mental," Peter grumbled, taking up his sister's now-empty spot at the table. Next to him, Remus pulled out another chair and Sirius promptly threw himself into it, grinning like he was

having a grand ol' time.

"Thanks, Moons, you're such a gentleman."

"Stop making a joke out of this!" Mary snapped, making Sirius flinch.

"Alright, alright. Far from me for trying to defuse the tension. You could cut it with a bloody spoon. Though, I think Lot should go out for acting. She'd win an Oscar with a performance like that."

"Oh, shut it. Lupin, sit!"

Shooting a 'thanks for that' look at Sirius, Remus sat too, and a stilted silence came over all of them. Luckily they had Lily to break it for them; “You guys couldn’t have done that in a calmer manner?” She sighed, taking James’ hand.

“Was she actually considering forgiving him for cheating on her?” He asked, forehead creased with worry.

Lily frowned. “I don’t know, she’s out of sorts. Her and Mickey have been dating for over a year."

"That's like a decade in teenage-girl years," Mary interjected.

"Yes, well... The whole thing really caught her by surprise," Lily amended with another deep sigh.

“That’s generally how cheating on someone goes,” Sirius said, having moved on to picking at the dark polish on his nails. Mary noticed and swatted his hand for it, making him jump. “Alright fine, but what I want to know is what he said to her after.”

“No, it was so mean!” Lily said immediately.

“Not to mention vulgar,” Mary added.

Peter, who had been utterly silent ever since his sister's prompt exit, slapped both hands against the table top. “James, you and Sirius have gym with Mickey next, yeah?”

“Er—yeah.” He checked his watch. “In a few minutes, actually.”

Wordlessly, Peter stood up from the table with his bag and started away.

“Wormy?” Sirius called, looking around. “Where’s he going?”

“Pete? Pete, we got class! We—ah shit,” James said, getting up to follow him.

“I’ve got to go get Lottie,” Lily moaned, doing the same.

Mary, Remus, and Sirius were left to stare at one another. “Well, I’m not missing this,” Sirius declared.

“Me neither!” Mary agreed, as they all shot from the table after their friends. Peter didn't bother to wait for them as he marched from the main building and out onto the frosty lawn. They were a decent walk from the gym, but he was moving so swiftly that even Remus had to jog slightly to keep up. Despite Sirius and Mary's initial enthusiasm, a knot of dread had taken up residence in his stomach. Remus had known fighters, and Peter with his below average height and only moderate athleticism did not make par. He wished Lily had come with them and not gone after Lottie, at least she might've been able to frighten some sense into him. For now all they had was mild, tender-hearted James.

“C’mon Pete, do you really want to go after Mickey? Lottie’s already pissed at you," James reasoned, surely doing his best to sounding sympathetic without being condescending.

“Shut up, Potter, this is the coolest thing he’s ever done,” Sirius hissed, holding onto Peter’s shoulders as he strode across the grass toward the gym. "You can do this, Wormy. Mickey's all talk and no balls. I'll be he runs away at first sign of trouble. Otherwise just give him a sharp right hook! Don't let him talk too much or he'll one up you."

James pulled his muffler away from his face. “He says as if he's ever actually been in a fight."

"I've been in a fight before! Remember year nine? I went three rounds with Nick Durbey! And he was a year above us!"

"That was gym class, we were wrestling on sponge mats, and you still barely touched each other! Hooch had to push you into the middle of the ring herself!"

Sirius leaned into Peter's ear like a devil on his shoulder. "C'mon Wormy, who you gonna listen to? Me, or the guy whipped by a ginger?"

James crossed his arms over his chest with a scowl. "You’re actually the worst sometimes, Black.”

“Pete wants to be a Marauder,” Sirius announced, “it’s time he proves he can keep up!”

“Mary, tell him he’s acting like a lunatic!”

"No way," Mary answered, fingers tucking up tight in her arm pits. "I say kill the bastard. Guillotine, castration—something."

"Moony—!" James whirled around. "You make them listen!"

Trying not to huff too loudly as he kept up with them, Remus took a moment to consider. Lottie had gone for the low-blow mentioning Simeon, though he supposed Peter *had* brought him up first. Perhaps this could be the thing that mended that chip on his unbrotherly-shoulder. Then again, Remus had never had siblings. Honestly, James was just asking for the impossible.

“Though I rarely agree with his methods—and he *is* being a total nob—I think... I might actually with Sirius on this one,” he said, making Sirius practically punch the air in glee.

"HA! Take that, Potter! Moony agrees with me!"

James nearly tripped along the path in his shock. "Moony! You can't be serious?"

“Mickey... deserves whatever’s coming to him," Remus said, trying to ignore the squirmy feeling in his gut.

"That's right!" Sirius said, clapping Peter's shoulders again as they made their way up to the gym doors. "It's only right we rough the prat up a bit."

"You're gonna get our best friend killed, you daft—*oh!* N-Not that I don't believe in you, Pete!"

"Nice save, Potter," Sirius sniggered, while James punched him in the arm. "Ow—fuck! Save it for Mickey, mate!"

“Are you girls fucking finished?” Peter growled.

"Sorry, Pete. Didn't mean to 'take the mick'. Heh."

Peter shrugged Sirius off, who turned to grin at James, looking a little too satisfied with their friend's newfound virility. Afterwards all four of them, along with Mary, emerged in the gym's foyer.

“We’re definitely going to be late for biology, Remus,” Mary chittered, though she didn’t look anything less than entertained. Next to her, Peter was already scanning the room for any sign of Mickey.

“Anyone see him?”

“There,” Remus answered, pointing to a group of boys across the gym sitting on the second row of stands. Peter took off instantly and they all followed, though his strides did slow the closer they got to Mickey and his friends.

"C'mon, Wormy, you can do it," Sirius hissed quietly, midway across the floor. "Call him out on it!"

“Mick—” Peter’s voice cracked and he had to try again; “Mickey!”

Mickey glanced up lazily and Sirius gave Peter a comforting smack on the back. “There you go—give 'em a piece of your mind!”

“Yeah?” Mickey called, staring them down from his seat on the benches. “Whatchu want?”

Peter cleared his throat a bit. “I need to talk to you, er… prick.”

Oh dear, Remus thought, as James pressed his lips together to stifle a moan.

Across from them, still lounging casually, Mickey set his jaw. “Let me guess, this about your sister?”

“Yeah it’s about my sister!" Peter yelped; "Who do you think you are, cheating on her, you barmy dickhead?!”

“Oh good, insult number two’s got a bit more bite to it,” Sirius whispered to Remus.

“Oh get off it,” Mickey scoffed, “it’s none of your business, Puny-grew. This is between me and Lot, so you can butt-out.”

“You don’t get to call her ‘Lot’ anymore!” Peter seethed. “And it is my business, she’s *my* sister!”

“Hmph. I’m surprised she even told you anything. You two aren’t exactly close, right?”

Peter balked a bit. “A-As if you know anything!”

“I know enough. You always were royally gassed over not being the favourite brother, even when we were kids. You’d think things would be better now that Sim’s gone, ‘cept you’re still the bottom of the food chain with this lot.” Mickey gestured lazily at all of them, and next to Remus, James bristled.

“Oi, watch your mouth, Mick,” he warned.

Mickey shrugged, uncaring. "Not my fault you collect friends like it's a contest in charity, Potter."

That got Remus going. Not because he was one of the said 'charity friends', but because he'd never considered his friendships a contest in the first place. Grinding his teeth together, he stepped forward and nudged Peter's shoulder supportively. “Can’t believe you used to be friends with this dick, Pete. Seems like he’s got sawdust where a brain should be.”

Mickey stood, along with his friends. “I don’t gotta answer to you, Lupin. I know you’re not as dangerous as everyone else says. As if anyone would ever let you into a real gang—go ahead and take your ponce-arse somewhere else.”

“Okay, run your mouth,” Peter squeaked, enlived by his friend's show of support, “but you’re gonna apologise to Lottie for whatever it is you said.”

Mickey smirked and stepped down the stands until he was directly in front of them. “You gonna make me, you fat bastard?”

Mary gasped for all of them, but Peter didn't falter. “Y-yeah! I will!” He shot back.

“You and this crummy lot?”

“Careful, Mick,” Sirius said lowly, “we tend to fight dirty. You might lose an eye.”

“You’re the asshole here,” Mary shouted, “not Peter! Who fucking cheats on their girlfriend at *sixteen?* You barely got a cock to wet, you bloody pansy!"

One of Mickey's friends snorted at the jab and Mickey whirled on him with a scowl, instantly shutting him up. Then, because he hadn't already been nasty enough, he look back at Mary with a sneer; “Well if his sister weren’t so frigid—”

Before Mary could so much as gasp a second time, Peter stepped forward and drove his fist forwards and upwards. He hit Mickey straight-on in the cheek and his head snapped back, leaving him blinking and slightly dazed, while Peter just stared at his own fist in shock.

"Oh fuck! That's it, Pete! Now it's the one-two, you got this!" Sirius howled, clearly delighted.

Recovered, Mickey wiped his thumb beneath his nose. "You actually hit me, Pete?"

Peter blinked. "Er—"

Wham!

Mickey returned the punch with twice the force and Peter dropped like a bag of bricks on the gym floor. Unfortunately for Mickey, he had little time to revel in the victory. Before Remus realised what he was doing, he'd stepped forward and swung, catching the bulky boy in the jaw and snapping his teeth together with a sickening snap as he collapsed back against the gym's stands.

"Holy fuck!" One of Mickey's friends gasped, while Remus swallowed a horrendous string of curse-words and spun away, clutching his hand. The punch had been instinctive—*you couldn't just let someone sock your mate without some retaliation!*—but it'd been so long since he'd hit anyone for real. He'd be lucky if he hadn't dislocated a finger.

"Oh my god," he grunted. "Fuck me. Shit—augh!"

"Oh, Remus," Mary winced, crowding after him before ultimately descending into a fit of ruffled giggles. "That was *so* hot."

Instantly Sirius was laughing, and James finally broke free of his shock to bend down and help Peter up. "Alright, up you go, you utter ledge," he said as Peter cupped his hands to his face. Mickey stood too, holding his bruised jaw as he turned on them.

"What was that about our Lupin not being dangerous?" Sirius crowed smugly.

Mickey scowled bitterly, but Mary only raised a hand to point at him. "You deserved that, ugly twat!" She barked. "You deserved ten times that!"

“Fucking rights, he did!” Lottie shouted, appearing from behind with Lily in tow, red-faced as though they’d been running. Lottie turned to Remus and beamed, before throwing her arms around his middle. “That was brilliant,” she gushed, and he was left to awkwardly pat her on the back while he held his injured hand aloft. Peter watched them, looking less dazed but just as sore.

“Lot—” Mickey moaned, slurring as though he’d bit his tongue.

“Shut up!” She snapped, releasing Remus to whirl on her ex-boyfriend. “There’s nothing you can say to make this better! And as it turns out, I’m thankful—I was tired of pretending as though I liked hearing you talk about your dad’s shitty car dealership and seeing your skid-marked underwear. It’s fucking disgusting.”

About a dozen jaws dropped and Mickey sputtered; “Lot!”

“Oh, and I totally believe you by the way—it’s absolutely plausible that those knickers belonged to your sister. Your parents always did seem a bit inbred. Now go on, I’m done with you, you walking-talking piece of shit.”

Lottie waved her hand and Mary and Sirius burst into laughter. Mickey gave a scowl that could’ve rivalled Snape’s, but turned and together, he and his friends slunk off toward the gym showers.

“That was fucking amazing,” Sirius said. "Oh man, I wish I'd recorded that."

Lottie turned to Peter, who stared back like a scolded child. “I told you I didn’t need your help.”

“Well, I don’t have to always listen to you, do I?” He shot back.

“You do when it’s *my* business. All you did was get yourself punched, you idiot. What would you have done if you were on your own? You can’t use people like Remus to finish your fights for you—next time leave it alone.” Lottie grabbed Lily and Mary’s hands. “C’mon, we’re late for class.”

The girls strode away—Mary just looking thankful to be forgiven—and Peter stared after them until Ms. Hooch entered the gym from the other side and blew her whistle to start her gym class.

“Pete…” Remus tried, “I’m real sorry.”

“S’fine Moony, don’t worry about it.”

“Aw Pete, c’mere.” James made to grab Peter’s shoulder, but he only pulled away and left them there. Feeling more than just the ache in his hand, Remus flexed his fingers and winced. Nothing seemed broken at least, though Sirius did catch the gesture. He leaned over and tapped Remus’ shoulder with a smirk.

“Hey, want me to kiss that better?”

“… Shut up, tosser.”

* * *

Despite his insistence that nothing was wrong, Peter was not the same after the incident with Mickey. He and Lottie had effectively begun a Cold War and all but turned their noses up whenever the other would enter the same room. Lottie remained distinctly under the impression that her twin brother had nothing to do with her romantic relationships, an underlying issue that had been following the pair ever since Mickey and Lottie had gotten together in the first place. Peter on the other hand, refused to apologise for his brash actions. According to him, he’d done what any good brother would’ve, and if Lottie had a problem with it she was the one screwed in the head.

The issue wouldn’t have felt nearly so dire, had Remus not come under the impression that he was also somehow partly to blame for the argument. Where Peter had been rebuffed and insulted for his attempts to punish Mickey, he had only been praised. Lottie now regarded him as some sort of champion of her virtue, and had started telling anyone who could be bothered to listen that he’d personally defended her honour by cracking Mickey in the face. Remus had tried insisting that he was not the saviour Lottie was making him out to be, but that hardly mattered. Peter had heard it, and that was enough to drive a wedge between them.

“Don’t feel too bad,” Sirius told him, “if you hadn’t punched Mickey he would’ve just stood there gloating, and Pete wouldn’t have felt any better for it.”

“You still shouldn’t have done it,” Marlene said.

“It was a reflex,” Remus answered honestly.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t get it McKinnon,” Sirius said, “fighting’s bloke stuff. Plus, you're just mad you missed it.”

“I do *not* care that I missed it. All I’m saying is that violence is *not* the answer."

Scoffing, Sirius snatched away the book she was reading. “Hypocrite—you’re reading about the American Civil War.”

Marlene punched him in the arm and took her book back. “It’s historical *fiction.”*

“I see violence is allowed only in small doses,” Sirius grumbled, rubbing his shoulder.

To their credit, James and Sirius did try and reason on Remus’ behalf, but whenever they brought the incident up, Peter would pretend as though there was nothing wrong at all. This was especially worrisome to James, who had grown up with him and was always the first one Peter would listen to. Remus couldn't help but think that hoping that Peter would continue to 'follow the leader' was not a very sensitive response, but still, nothing else seemed to get through either.

“I’m not mad at Remus,” Peter would say. “It was nothing. Lottie’s fault really, stupid sister…”

No matter what was said or promised though, Peter only hung around them for sleep or lessons. The rest of the time he was off with Moira, who appeared more than happy to finally have her boyfriend’s undivided attention. Moira's indifference toward the other Marauders had never been an issue before then, but suddenly it seemed as though her enchantment with the youngest Pettigrew sibling had grown to be an all-out declaration of war.

"Did you hear what she said to me yesterday?" Sirius whinged. "Crazy bird told me to stuff it where the sun don't shine—and as for *what* she told me to stuff, well let’s just say the girl’s more creative than I gave her credit for.”

”Try not harassing her, maybe?” Offered James.

“All I did was ask her to hang out and bring Pete along! S’nothing you haven’t already done!”

"Just because she's Peter's girlfriend doesn't mean she has to want to hang out with you guys," Lily pointed out amicably. "Moira's perfectly

pleasant on her own."

"I think you mean perfectly *boring,"* Sirius scoffed.

In the end, Remus found himself stuck somewhere in the middle. Peter was Peter, Moira was Moira, and he was just himself. But he supposed that if there was any hope of getting through to his friend, Sirius' train of thought wasn't entirely wrong. So, after nearly a week of being unable to get anywhere with Peter beyond basic pleasantries, Remus finally decided to corner the Dorset House girl on her on her way to study hour.

“I’m telling you Remus, Peter’s said nothing about you,” Moira tried, while attempting to out-pace him down the hall. Remus chased her, acting desperate.

“We had to do a partner sketch together yesterday in art and he wouldn’t even look at me! I’m pretty sure he just drew my face from memory, please!” He neglected to add how Peter’s sketch had turned out twice as good as his own without even so much as a single glance. Not that Moira would've cared.

"This has got nothing to do with me!" She insisted, coming up short as he finally stepped into her path.

“Moira,” Remus said gently, “please just tell me what he’s said.”

Reluctantly, Moira sighed and looked up at him with a slight glower, clutching her books tightly to her chest. “Peter is not boring,” she said firmly.

Remus hesitated; “I-I never—”

“Don’t bother, you may be new, but I’ve known Peter and the other boys since we were kids, and it’s always been this way. Not everyone can just be a James Potter or a Sirius Black—not everyone wants to be larger than life! Some of us are just happy being average, but when you’re around people like them it’s impossible not to seem bland or boring. And even if Peter was boring, there’d be nothing wrong with that—boring is *safe.* Peter may not be much of a fighter, but I like him how he is and he never asked for your help either!”

Surprised by her suddenly outburst, Remus swallowed. “Alright…”

“Lottie shouldn’t have been so nasty to him,” Moira continued. "What she said—bringing up Simeon and throwing it in Peter's face? That

was vicious. He was just trying to help."

"You're right."

"—And he doesn't have to forgive her!"

"I agree."

Moira deflated slightly. "I should go. I'm going to be late meeting him."

"Okay," Remus said, "but can you do me one favour, Moira, please? Can you tell him I didn't mean for any of this, and that we… James, Sirius, and I, we don't think he's boring."

Moira looked up at him through her blunt, straight-across fringe. "Fine." Then she turned and marched away, leaving Remus to wring out the back of his neck with his hands.

Moira's confession did not lead to a miraculous breakthrough with Peter, though he wasn't as quick to flee the room every morning anymore, at least. The first time he ate breakfast with them again James and Sirius were careful with their words, offering to refill Peter's tea mug or share the bits of their meal they knew he loved under the guise of not being very hungry. Their efforts were obvious, but Peter accepted naturally and when the forms bell went he stood up on his own and left the dining hall hand-in-hand with Moira.

"He's coming around," Sirius said, as James sighed. "Just needs a little time. A little push—or something."

That push—or an idea for it—came to Remus later that very same morning in forms. Sheila had allowed the class to mess around with some instruments and Barty sent a drumstick flying through the air so hard it stuck into the wall by Remus' head, making a shocked hush come over the entire class. Ready for his own fight, Remus had yanked it out and was about to throw it right back before Sheila appeared to give Barty hell and he'd hidden the stick behind his back. It was then that he remembered the conversation and Peter had shared all those months ago on Sirius' birthday, and the light bulb finally went off inside his mind.

It took some serious self-control, but Remus managed to wrangle the idea into something substantial by midday. He waited until history to bridge the idea to Peter, and poked him with a pencil the moment Professor Binns turned his back to set up the classroom's shotty

projector.

“Hey, Pete.”

“Mm?”

“Do you have a few minutes after class? I wanted to show you something.”

Peter leaned his chin on his hand. “I’m meeting Moira for study hour.”

“I know, but it’ll only take a little bit. And I promise it’ll be worth it.”

“… Fine.”

It was a small win, but a win nonetheless. After class he told James and Sirius that he was meeting Marlene—not wanting them to appear and ruin his chances of mending things with Peter—and together the two of them crossed campus toward the Bellchant building, where he knew music room #2 would be empty.

“Why are we in your music room?” Peter asked, looking around sceptically.

“I wanted to show you something,” Remus answered, dropping his bag and heavy winter coat on a stray chair and making a beeline for the back of the room. “C’mon over here.”

Peter obediently set his own school bag aside and followed, only slowing when he realised what Remus was gesturing to. “You brought me all the way out here to show me some drum kit?”

“Yeah!” Remus dropped down on the stool behind the five-piece drum set and tapped his fingers against the cymbal. “It’s a Ludwig Classic. Everyone from John Bonham to Ginger Baker uses drums like these.”

“That’s cool,” Peter said, “but I still don’t understand what we’re doing here.”

“Well…” Remus bent down and picked up a pair of drumsticks, awkwardly smacking them into the centre of his palm, “I thought that you could try them out actually.”

Peter’s eyes widened. “What? Are you crazy—I can’t.”

“Sure you can, Sheila won’t mind.”

“No, I mean I *can’t*—as in, I can’t play the drums.”

“But you mentioned last term that you knew a little.”

“With a *tenor* drum.”

“Well there!” Remus pressed, pointing at Peter with one of the drumsticks. “A marching band’s tenor drums aren’t that much different from a kit, you just got a snare and a cymbal—and—and you get to sit down!”

Peter shook his head. “No, it’s been too long. I’m not a musician.”

“What’s a musician?” Remus scoffed. “I say it’s anyone who makes sound with an instrument. Who says everyone’s got to be a Tchaikovsky or a Rachmaninoff.” Those were Tonya's words, he remembered. They felt right then, suddenly.

“I’m sorry, ‘rach-min-toff’?" Peter said. "Did you just have a stroke?”

Remus grinned. “Yup, and the only way you can save me is by coming over here and beating the shit out of these old cow-skins.”

He jumped up and skipped over to Peter, forcing the sticks into his hands and turning him by the shoulders. Peter sighed but allowed himself to be pushed down behind the tiny drum kit, looking around as though Remus had just dropped him in front of the schematics of a space rocket.

“I don’t know what to do with this,” Peter said, holding a drumstick in each hand.

“Here.” Remus set up a music stand with a simple beginners tablature next to the kit and Peter squinted at it while he gestured to the first bar. “I know you know the notes. This is beat one and it’s a crotchet falling on the bass drum and the hi-hat—the hi-hat's got a pedal there, but you're supposed to tap it with the sticks. Then beat two’s the snare and hi-hat, and beat three’s—!”

“A quaver on snare," Peter finished.

“Yeah!” Remus exclaimed. “You already got it, see! You know what you're doing.”

Peter began wringing out the drumsticks in his hands. “Yeah but… it’s not the same as playing.”

“Well, we won’t know that until you try, yeah?”

Peter breathed out nervously and Remus backed away, grabbing a chair for himself.

“Pete,” he said softly, “no one else is here. You don’t need to impress me—it’s just for fun. If you want I can even turn away.” He spun the chair around and sat down. “See?” He held out his arms. “Now it’s like you’re all alone, just tryin' out something new. No need to be cool or perfect.”

Biting his lip, Remus waited in silence, and for a while it seemed as though none of it had worked and he’d just pushed Peter into something he had no real interest in—but then the faintest sound of a bass pedal thumped from the kit, and Remus suddenly found himself holding his breath.

Peter played and no, it wasn’t good. Any rhythm he might’ve had was sacrificed for nerves, and he had that same stilted playing that came with paying too much attention to the music sheet and not enough to the instrument, but it wasn’t about sounding good anyway. It was never about sounding *good,* not really. They were rewarded when the drums got louder, and the longer Peter played, the more the sound filled up the space; just up and up, building and building. Like a hot air balloon rising into the sky, or a sunrise cresting the very tops of the trees.

Nearly off his arse with happiness, Remus was left to stare up at the ceiling with a dopey smile on his face. When Peter finally stopped he waited a moment before turning around, and when he did he found his friend still staring nervously at the kit as though it was a monster ready to swallow him whole.

“I sounded horrible,” Peter said.

“Yup,” Remus agreed, standing, “and it was bloody *brilliant.”*

“It’s brilliant to be horrible?”

“You’ll get better,” he shrugged, “and eventually you could be horribly brilliant.”

Peter set both drumsticks on the music stand. “Right. Peter ‘horribly brilliant’ Pettigrew. Dad’ll be so proud.”

Peter sighed again and Remus bit his lip. “Pete, did you know not a

single member of The Beatles could read or write music?"

"None of them?"

"Nope, not one. But *you* can—so you know what that means right? That you're already on your way to being a better musician than any of 'em."

Peter looked down and smiled and Remus felt warm victory rise in his chest.

"You're not boring Peter," he said quickly. "I just wanted you to know that."

Glancing down at himself, Peter palmed his stomach anxiously. Finally, he raised his head.

"Thanks, Remus."

"Don't mention it. Now I know I should probably let you go find Moira. Sorry this took a bit longer than expected."

Peter stood up and stretched a bit. "Well actually, Moira's meeting her roommate Candace for a project, and I was just really going to tag-along. I don't think she'd miss me for one study hour, so… would you maybe want to go smoke a spliff or something?"

Remus' eyes widened in surprise. Then he smiled. "Yeah, absolutely. Let's go get baked."

Peter grinned again and together they crossed the room, back to their things. Tossing on their jackets, they left the music room and made their way back outside. It was snowing again, but the sun had finally come out, lighting up the gold in Peter's hair and leaving their cheeks and noses warm.

"Hey, Remus?" Peter asked as they skirted the pavement. "Are you serious about this music stuff? About being better than the Beatles?"

Remus looked down at his boots. "Well, you know Pete, crazier things have happened."

Chapter End Notes

'Take the mick/[mickey]' is slang for teasing someone.
'Ledge' is slang for 'you're a legend'.
John Bonham was the drummer for Led Zeppelin until his death

in 1980. Ginger Baker was a legendary drummer and the co-founder of the band Cream.

A ‘crotchet’ is the UK term for a quarter note.
A ‘quaver’ is the UK term for an eighth note.
A ‘hi-hat’ is a type of cymbal on a drum kit.

This chapter feels like a deviant from the 'wolfstar' romance plotline, but in the best way :') It has a special place in my heart, yk? xo loves.

And PS: Next chapter, Valentine’s chapter, hehe.

Chapter 49: Well Fitted in Arts, Glorious in Arms

Chapter Summary

Valentine's Day has come to Hawkings. Remus struggles with more than one kind of relationship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A teenager's romance is fickled or true,
A teenager's romance is red hot or blue;
You're either in misery or high on a crest,
A teenager's romance is like all the rest…
- "A Teenager's Romance" Ricky Nelson, 1957

Saturday 12th February 1977

Getting a girlfriend was supposed to solve everything. It was supposed to help things make sense, and most of all, it was supposed to take his mind off of Sirius Black's bloody stomach. *Stomach, stomach, stomach —ugh!* WHY *stomachs?!* He had no clue. And yet, all it had taken was for Sirius to roll out of bed all bleary-eyed and shaggy-haired with his pyjama shirt unbuttoned to his navel to cause another incident. Remus had stayed up late with a regular bout of restlessness and forgotten to close his curtains again, so when James' alarm clock went off early that Saturday morning he turned over to throw a pillow at him, only to catch Sirius upside the head with it as he crossed the room.

"Woah, bit early to be declaring war innit, Moony?" Sirius moaned, tossing the pillow back with a grunt. Remus caught it and didn't miss the way Sirius casually reached beneath the hem of his shirt to scratch his stomach, yawning as he continued on to the bathroom.

James turned over in his bed and smacked his hand over the alarm before fumbling for his glasses. "What's this about war, lads?"

"How dare you set an alarm on a Saturday," Remus hissed, as James popped up from bed with all of his usual vigour.

“Sorry, Lupin, got practice early today. Snow’s finally melting some so I’m taking the team on a run.”

“Bet they’ll love that.” Remus flopped back into his pillows.

“I’d say you should join us,” James said, tugging off his nightshirt and tossing a towel over his neck, “but it looks like you’ve already got your hands full this morning.”

Remus raised his head in question and James shyly pointed to the tent in the front of his night pants. Instantly mortified, he reached for his bed curtains and yanked them back while James quietly sniggered.

It wasn’t that he was terrified of his *own nob* or anything—living with three other blokes meant you got used to waking up every now and then to find your friend had popped a woody—it was just the ridiculousness of it all. If you’d have told a girl you got off on seeing her bare stomach you’d certainly be branded a freak, and it wasn’t even the only instance he’d found himself indisposed in front of others either—Marlene had once put her hand on his inner thigh while snogging and that had been enough to leave them both blushing. But why *stomachs?* They were just skin! Really he was lucky Sirius wasn’t the exhibitionist James was, though now he supposed he knew why.

Sirius had not bridged the topic of his scars since that night in the bathroom and Remus figured that if he wanted to talk about them he would. It wasn’t his place to push him into anything, and a part of him was almost afraid to do it. No normal injury left scars that deep. The only thing that brought comfort was that the burns seemed old, and he could only hope that whatever had happened, had truly been an accident.

“Oh, Remus,” James called through the bed curtains, “I don’t mean to interrupt—”

“Piss off!”

“—But did you happen to ask Xeno about that sherry last time you saw him?”

“Potter—*Piss. Off.”*

“C’mon Moony, it’s for Valentine’s! I need it to impress Lily.”

“…"

"Moony...?"

"... Yeah, s'fine, he can get it."

"You're amazing, you are! Say hi to lil' Lupin for me."

Remus punched him through the curtains and heard James grunt, though he was not all that satisfied. Both James and Peter had been yammering about the shallow holiday since the beginning of the month—under the impression that if they didn't make a *good* impression, they'd both be very single come the 15th. Remus had tried being optimistic, but their anxiety had only turned him more off from the idea. Sirius was always claiming that James was a romantic—and Peter had to have had his moments too, if Moira's loyalty to him was anything to go by—but Remus had never so much as given a valentine himself, let alone planned a date. He considered saying as much to Marlene, but luckily her frankness seemed to solve the problem.

"Valentine's?" She echoed, staring out across the indoor pitch at her team. "That's what Potter's having such a fit over?"

"Him and Pete," Remus amended, while unfolding and refolding the clean towels on the football bench. "Apparently there's not much romance to be had so far from the nearest flower shop."

"You'd think that'd give everyone an excuse to forget about it. I mean, it's just another day—NICOLE! WE'RE DOING HIGH-KNEES NOT MEDIUM-SHINS! TRY AGAIN!"

"Tell me about it." Remus glanced up to see Nicole flop forward dramatically before rejoining the rest of the girls in warm-up. "Wait, does this mean you don't want to do anything?"

Marlene shrugged. "Not really. I mean, it's on a Monday this year, innit? And I never really got why we needed some special day to celebrate 'love' and all that. Shouldn't people be doing that all the time? Seems silly."

"So you don't want to do anything? At all?"

"Nope. I mean we could study for that biology test."

"Oh... Brilliant! Two birds with one stone then."

Finished with their warm-up, Marlene's team of girls rushed the bench together and flopped down among their water bottles.

“How come you’re the only one who gets to slack when Remus comes around?” Nicole pouted. “I want to sit on the bench and shoot the bird with my pals.”

“I think it’s ‘shoot the shit’ actually,” Remus said.

“Well there, maybe I’d know that if I got to participate in some conversation every once in a while.”

“Try participating in practice first,” Marlene said, playfully shoving Nicole by the shoulder. Nicole grinned back and snatched Marlene’s hand out of the air, kissing it lightly before giving a playful shriek and shooting away across the pitch.

“Honestly, where do you get off being so *cheeky?!”* Marlene lashed, streaking after her. Content to watch, Remus leaned back against the bench as Anna sat down next to him.

“They’ll never change,” she sighed wistfully. “I swear, if one of them had been born a boy—”

“I wouldn’t have a chance in the world,” Remus finished for her. Anna instantly perked up, eyes wide.

“Oh! I didn’t mean anything by that, Remus…”

He chuckled. “No, it’s okay.” There was a level of girl-friendship that Remus was never going to be able to understand. And frankly, that was just fine with him.

Beyond the pitch-line Marlene had given up the chase and was now being taunted by Nicole as she ran backwards around her in circles. Finally, Marlene stuck her foot out and Nicole sprawled, grabbing onto her at the last second and taking them both to the ground. They came up laughing and Remus couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy, but as he sat there observing them, he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was he was so jealous of.

* * *

Remus could’ve sworn he’d avoided the whole Valentine’s debacle, and had been quite content to join his friends for dinner that evening only to learn that he wasn’t out of the woods at all. In fact, James and

Peter had just about lost their minds the moment he told them of Marlene's reaction.

"Are you insane?" James demanded.

"What?! She said it was fine."

"Moony," Peter gasped, "please don't tell me you actually believed her!"

"Why wouldn't I? Why would she lie?"

"Girls always lie—especially about holidays!" James dropped his head onto the dining hall table hopelessly. "I can't believe you've made it this far in life without a semblance of sense!"

"It's like when a girl says she isn't angry," Peter explained, "she's just *saying* she ain't angry, but in reality she wants to rip your balls off."

Remus looked down at his dinner, confused. "So she… wants to do something for Valentine's Day?"

"Yes!" James gasped. "She's just trying to make it seem like it isn't a big deal—but it *is* a big deal! If you don't do something she's going to think you don't really like her."

"But I do… like her."

"Well, you gotta show her then!"

"Show her what?" Sirius asked, sitting down next to James with his dinner tray in hand. James turned to him immediately.

"Marlene told Remus she didn't want to do anything for Valentine's."

"Oh, yeah I know." Sirius began spooning potatoes into his mouth. "Moony told me earlier—while we were practising."

"And you didn't tell him he was mental for believing her?!"

Sirius swallowed. "Why would I? It's not like McKinnon's the romantic type. Outside of her books, anyway. Heh."

Sirius look down at his dinner, indifferent, but the comment struck a sour note with Remus. He might've said something, were James not already several blazing steps ahead;

“Everyone knows that when a woman says one thing she really means the opposite! Any girl who says she doesn’t want something romantic on Valentine’s is lying!”

“What about if she says she *does* want something romantic? Is she lying then?” Asked Remus.

“Er—No, they all want something on cupid’s day. It’s just, like—part of being a girl.”

“Well there’s your answer then,” Sirius chuckled, “McKinnon’s barely a girl, so no Valentine’s distress for Moony.”

“What are you talking about?” Remus asked lowly.

Sirius shook his head with a smile. “Nothing, don’t worry about it.”

“No, you think you’re so funny so why don’t you just spit it out.”

James and Peter exchanged a careful glance but Sirius just looked up from his dinner, appearing almost confused, and pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek before continuing; “Oh come off it, I know it’s not your fault the blokiest-gal in school started making eyes at you. But if that’s your type then, hey, who are we to judge?”

Remus coughed out a laugh of disbelief. “You dick. What the hell are you going on about?"

“Aw, don’t be so uptight, Moony, I was just having a laugh.”

“Does it look like I’m laughing? That’s my *girlfriend.”*

“We’ve noticed.”

Remus couldn't believe it. “What’s your problem?”

“Nothing.” Sirius said this sharply; *Nuh-fin,* and Remus’ temper flared.

“Oh-kaay,” James started, nudging Sirius in the arm. “Joke’s not funny so it’ll stop now. Right, Sirius?”

Sirius dropped his gaze and bitterly turned back to his food, but Remus was too prickled. Sirius had poked the bear and he was going to learn just how short his stick was.

“You’ve been like this since the start of term,” Remus shot, making Sirius’ head snap up again. “Rude and ignorant and—”

Sirius laughed mockingly. “That’s gold coming from the guy who’d rather hang out with anyone other than his best mates.”

“What are you talking about, I’m here now aren’t I?!”

“For now.”

“You are such a prick! You know, we’ve been tip-toeing around you for over a month now, trying to make sure you’re fine and well and you’re *still* not done rocking the bloody boat! It’s not our job to nurse every hurt feeling—we’re not your damn mother!”

“Remus!” James gasped.

“No!” He snarled, standing. “You want to coddle him—fine, but I’m done. Find someone else.”

Dinner in hand, Remus strode away from the table to where the girls were sitting, huddled together.

“Hey,” Marlene said, as he dropped down next to her. He grumbled a response and she furrowed her brow. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, jus' fine.”

“You bicker with Black again?”

“Wha—? *No!* Not everything’s got to do with him you know.”

Marlene laughed a bit. “Alright.”

Sweetly, she took his hand under the table before returning to her conversation with the other girls. More irked than he'd been in a long time, Remus began shovelling dinner into his mouth, but he couldn’t help but let his eyes drift back to his friends’ table. Sirius was now sitting with his back to him, engrossed in a heated conversation with James and Peter. Just watching boiled his blood enough to make him want to avoid talking to all three of them. Luckily, the girls did not mind another tag-along.

After dinner he returned to Rowena with them and they snuck him in through their bedroom window like usual. He spent the rest of the evening draped out across Marlene’s bed, correcting an essay for Lottie while she checked over his maths. Mary was attempting to teach Lily how to French braid and was using Marlene as a model, though every time Lily gave it a try Marlene’s hair would always end

up droopy on one side.

“It’s just not working,” Lily sighed. “Petunia never lets me practice on her and my fingers aren’t dexterous enough. You might as well teach Remus.”

“Okay,” Mary shrugged. “Remus get over here and show Lily it’s not actually that hard.”

He looked up from the paper; “I can’t braid hair. I’m a guy.”

“Shove the sexism. I’m gonna teach you, numpty. Then you can braid your girlfriend’s hair yourself.”

“That’s so cute,” Lottie moaned.

He cast an unsympathetic glance at Lottie, but Marlene just waved him over. “C’mon, afterwards I’ll do yours in little pigtails so we can match.”

“Ha—ha,” he scoffed, before rolling off the bed and handing Lottie back her essay. “Here Lot, it was pretty good but mind your thesis and careful you don’t mix up ‘affect’ and ‘effect’.”

“There’s a difference?” She asked, before shaking her head and tossing the essay aside to pick up a magazine.

He crossed the room to Mary’s bed and squeezed in next to her with Marlene sitting on the floor in front of them. “Here,” Mary said, handing him a brush, “you gotta get all the knots out first.”

Gently, Remus began guiding the hairbrush down through Marlene’s hair. The fine strands fell apart like silk and she leaned back to smile up at him until Mary shoved her head down again. “The first bit’s always the hardest,” she instructed, taking her polished fingers and gathering up the hair at the front of Marlene’s head. “Three pieces—you’re just crossing them over one another and picking up more hair as you go. Like braiding a rope.”

“This might be a bad time to tell you I was never in scouts, so—braiding a rope? Not my forte either.”

“Honestly, why do we even keep you men around for these days?”

“Remus is the exception,” Lily said from her own bed. “We should just recycle the rest.”

“I’m telling James you said that,” he smirked.

Lily winked. “I’m counting on it. Maybe then he’ll find it in him to pick a fight. You don’t know how hard it is dating the embodiment of a modern saint.”

“Nope, I don’t.”

Marlene elbowed him in the shin. “I heard that!”

Mary elbowed him in the gut. “Remus, pay attention!”

Rubbing both, he did his best to follow Mary’s instructions but when it finally came to his turn all he was able to manage was a loose homage to a braid that was more akin to a loopy ponytail. Still, Marlene kept it in.

He left before they could start putting rainbow elastics in his hair—that would be going too far, surely—and loped back to Godric in the dark. The dorm was quiet and when he walked back into his bedroom he found Sirius tucked up on James’ bed, while James was folding laundry next to it. James nodded politely to Remus, who returned it before crossing back to his own bed and stripping out of his winter clothes. James and Sirius began to whisper behind him *(“do it!” and “I can’t—” and “don’t be a—”)* but he ignored all of it.

“Well,” James announced just as Remus was hanging his jacket and scarf on his wall peg, “Pete’s really taking his time with the tea, so… I should probably go check on him.” He promptly crossed the room to the door, but just before he left he looked to Remus and smiled ruefully. “Lupin—”

“Four sugars,” Remus said sarcastically. James’ face instantly turned into a scoff and he shook his head, though he was smiling as the door eventually fell shut behind him.

“I feel bad for your teeth…” Sirius called finally. “Having to acquiesce to those tastebuds of yours.”

“I feel bad for your ears,” Remus said without turning around, “having to listen to you all the time.”

Sirius whistled. “That was a good one.”

With a sigh, Remus turned around. “What are you doing? I’m still pissed off at you.”

“That’s okay, I’m still pissed off at you too.”

He threw his hands up. “You’re impossible.”

“Not impossible—just an arse.”

“You know, self-deprecational humour doesn’t really work for you.”

Sirius cracked a smile. “I know. Can’t have everything I guess.”

He hated himself for it, but he smiled, squeezing his eyes shut as he kicked his boots under his bed.

“So where were you?” Sirius asked, swinging his legs off the edge of James’ bed and casually leaning back on his hands.

“With the girls.” Remus looked up, almost daring him to say something about it, but Sirius only nodded.

“Doing what?”

“Studying, mostly.”

“That it?” The word ‘boring’ seemed to hang in the air.

“No,” Remus said quickly, “we had tea and well, Mary she—er—nghnn..."

"What's that?"

He sighed. "She taught me how to braid hair.”

Sirius’ mouth quirked like he wanted to make a joke but again he swallowed it. “You any good?”

“Terrible.”

Sirius dropped his head down to hide a smile. “Well—uh—hey, I got you something. Just a little peace offering to, you know, say sorry and all that.” Jumping up, he crossed the aisle to his bed and lifted up his winter jacket he’d obviously neglected to hang up, revealing a limp bouquet of purple flowers that looked as though they’d been plucked right off a bush. Looking slightly abashed, Sirius brought them over and held them out to him, leaving Remus slightly stunned.

“You got me flowers?” He said. “How kind…?”

“They’re not for *you,”* Sirius scoffed, “they’re to give Marlene for Valentine’s Day.”

“Oh.” Remus took the flowers and looked them over before realising that it was February in the north of Scotland. He hadn’t seen a flower in months. “Where’d you get them?”

“Let’s just say Professor Arbor needs to up the security on her greenhouse.”

“You stole them?”

“You can tell McKinnon you stole them yourself if you’re worried about your reputation.”

Remus smirked and stroked the soft petals. “Thanks.”

“I have a few ideas for Valentine's if you want to hear them,” Sirius said, biting his lip. “I mean, I was going to use them on Darcy from chem but it hurts to see an unromantic sod like you flail so miserably.”

“Do you mean Darcy Adamson? She's already dating Mike Young.”

“I thought they broke up?”

“And got back together.”

“Oh. Buggar.” Sirius clicked his tongue. “Well, I guess that means it would be a waste not to help you.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” Remus said. “The flowers are enough I think.”

“Oh don’t be such a toff—what girl doesn’t want to be serenaded on Valentine’s?”

“I am *not* singing.”

“You are so boring.”

“And you’re insane.” Half-chuckling, Remus turned away and set the flowers on his nightstand, scattering little purple petals everywhere. He could still feel Sirius’ eyes on his back, and as he stood there he found himself remembering the final entry on his list from the beginning of term; ‘apologise to Sirius’.

He licked his lips. “Hey—”

“I never thanked you, you know,” Sirius said very suddenly.

Remus spun around. “For what?”

“For letting me…” Sirius stopped halfway and held up a finger before retreating back to his side of the room. He came back, shyly holding an album in front of himself. It was *Blue Train* by John Coltrane, one of Hope’s favourite jazz records.

“I listened to this the other day,” Sirius said, licking his lips. “It was really good. Your mum did have good taste.”

“Yeah, she liked all sorts of music,” Remus said, just as shyly.

“I know it must’ve sucked—playing these. You must've kept them shut away for a reason and I... I’m sorry I spent so long trying to push you into it.”

“I’m not,” Remus said honestly. “Sure, it did sort of suck—but not because I didn’t want you to hear them. Always knew I was gonna have to do something with them eventually, and mixing them in with your collection seems better than throwing them out, or setting them on fire or something.” Leaning back a bit, he drummed his hands on the top of his thighs. “It’s kinda nice to see them mixed together, too. Now I don’t know which ones yours and which ones were hers.”

“You should call them ours,” Sirius said. “It can be our collection. Prongs and Wormtail too, if they contribute a little more.”

“Good, I want James’ copy of ‘Revolver’.”

Sirius smiled. “Thank you, Moony… for trusting me with something that meant so much to you.”

Remus matched it. “Thank you for enjoying them.”

Glancing down bashfully, Sirius hugged the jazz album to his chest a little tighter. “So, you wanna maybe… listen to it together?”

“Yeah,” Remus said eagerly, “but actually, I think I can do us one better.” Leaning off the side of his bed, he reached behind his wardrobe hutch for *A Day at the Races,* the album he’d been most wanting to share with Sirius but could never seem to find the right time. He held it up like a trophy and Sirius sighed happily.

“You’re always holding out on me, Moony.”

They put the record on and listened to it as they had its predecessor the year before; laid out on the bedroom floor, staring up at the ceiling. Just like that, Remus felt himself melt into the music. It was like being at the cinema and having the edges of the screen disappear as you lost yourself in the story—only when Sirius finally said something halfway through “Millionaire Waltz”, it was not the rude awakening one got when they realised they were actually just sitting in a dark room surrounded by strangers. Instead Remus found he’d been secretly waiting for Sirius to say something—anticipating hearing his opinion on the music he’d come to covet so closely.

“I’ve been trying to find the right word for this feeling,” Sirius said softly. He shifted a bit and Remus felt the top of his head brush his own. “But I don’t think I can quite capture it with words, really.”

“Four languages and you can’t come up with a single word to describe some music?”

“It’s not just the music, dafty."

“What is it then?”

Sirius was quiet for a moment. “It’s something like… *astre,* in French, maybe. And then, *struggimento,* in Italian. And perhaps… *vorfreude,* in German.”

Remus tilted his head back. “And in English?”

“Not sure yet, but maybe… glorious?”

“Well... That didn’t seem so hard.”

Sirius tilted his head back too, until they were looking at one another. “You’re sort of glorious too, you know.”

Remus’ lips parted. Sirius just watched him with those cool grey eyes, and when his cheeks began to burn he sat up, scratching the back of his head. “Don’t be stupid.”

Sirius turned over onto his stomach. “But I’m not—”

The bedroom door creaked open and a hand slipped in, waving a white dish rag in surrender. “Is it safe to come in?”

“Don’t be idiots,” Remus answered and both James and Peter appeared in the doorway, grinning and holding a tea tray between

them.

“Oh good, you’re listening to music!” Peter said. “Must mean you’re done fighting.”

“Never,” Sirius announced, shooting a smirk in Remus’ direction.

James and Peter came forward, abandoning the tea by the door and squeezing in between the two beds beside them. “What we listening to?”

“Queen,” Remus and Sirius said together.

“Great,” James said, tucking his hands behind his head. “S’pose we should tuck in then, Pete—those guys never write a song shorter than six minutes.”

* * *

Monday 14th February 1977

Marlene took the flowers with a slightly furrowed brow. They were a bit droopy after having been picked nearly two days before, but still better than nothing.

“Thank you?” She said, looking them over with a small smile. “Where’d you even get them?”

“Er—Xeno.”

“Xeno fences flowers now too?”

“It was a special order.”

Her smile broadened and she held them up to her nose. “They smell wonderful. Will you wait for a moment while I go put them in some water?”

“Sure.”

Watching as Marlene slipped back inside her dorm, Remus shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped down onto the lawn to wait. The morning frost crunched under his boots and the cold was making his nose run but the chilly air was a welcome aid to his warm cheeks. “Thanks for waiting,” Marlene said once she'd finally emerged.

She held out her hand and he helped her down the icy steps before tucking both his and hers back into his pocket for some warmth. Together they made their way up House Lane, toward the dining hall.

“How are your friends back home doing?” Marlene asked. “You heard from them much?”

Marlene's curiosity over Tomny and the others had been piqued ever since the beginning of their relationship, when he’d called her from the flat. At first Remus had been sceptical—he’d hardly even talked to the boys about them—but eventually he began to realise how easy it was to avoid the big stuff. Marlene wasn’t expecting him to regale her with stories of drugs or cops or gangs, she just wanted to know what they were like and why he liked them so much.

“They’re good,” Remus said. “I talked to them the other day. A few of them had this nasty cold but they’re still good.”

“That’s nice. Maybe I should meet them when we go home for Easter. Could be fun?"

“Ha. Maybe.”

“Lily told me the boys ragged on you about today,” she said as they walked.

“Guess James told her.”

“Mm. But I’m glad you didn’t make Valentine’s into this big thing. It’s just another day.”

“You mean that?”

Marlene looked up. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Knew those fuckers were lying,” he grumbled. “You still want to study for that biology test?”

“Yup.”

“Cool.”

They kept on, until a voice called out to them from across the berm and Michelle, Marlene’s vice-captain, raced up to them, half-panting. “Oh my gosh, you two! I can’t believe it—did you actually do that Remus?!”

“Do what, Michelle?” Marlene started.

“Castle Hall—the sign! Did you hang it? *Oh*—did you say *yes?”*

“What are you talking about—what sign?” Remus babbled.

“So it wasn’t you? Oh my—still! You gotta see it!”

They exchanged a look, before abruptly changing course and heading toward the campus’s main building. Michelle went with them, refusing to say anything until they saw it for themselves. As they approached the building from behind they both realised a small crowd had begun to form. Frankie Vasili, president of the photography club, had his camera out and turned just in time to snap their picture, momentarily blinding the both of them with its flash.

“Bleeding hell, Frankie,” Remus cursed, rubbing his eyes, “when they say ‘take a picture’ they don’t actually mean—”

“Sorry Lupin, just needed a photo of the happy couple,” Frankie snorted.

“Wha—”

“Oh my god,” Marlene moaned, and Remus dropped his hands to blink in the daylight. Hanging from the roof of the hall and at least thirty feet across was a ginormous white banner bearing the words;

MY DEAREST MARLENE, WILL YOU MARRY ME?
- YOURS IN UNEQUIVOCAL ADORATION, REMUS LUPIN

“I’m gonna fucking kill him,” Remus promised.

“Not if I do it first,” Marlene ground out.

“Now, now, shouldn’t you be giving all your firsts to each other?” Sirius asked.

They spun around to find him grinning proudly.

“You made a mistake coming back to the scene of the crime, Black!” Marlene bellowed. She made to grab him but Sirius only danced away, weaving through the other kids who had begun to huddle around and laugh.

“What are you talking about—it wasn’t me! Besides, you have more pressing matters, don’t you McKinnon—have you even given poor Lupin your answer?”

“You spelt ‘unequivocal’ wrong!” Remus shouted. Sirius stopped immediately and held a hand over his eyes to squint up at the banner.

“No I didn’t.”

“I knew it was you!” With a sudden cry, he took off after him and Sirius whooped before dashing away.

“I know love makes people do crazy things—but I think you’re chasing the wrong person, Moony!”

“Get back here you idiot so I can hang you with your own marriage proposal!”

“There are worse ways to die—*OOF!”*

Remus slammed on the breaks just short of Sirius, who had sprawled on the ground after running head-long into Professor McGonagall. Like a brick wall, the Headmistress had hardly flinched even as Sirius bounced off of her, and afterwards simply crossed both hands ahead of herself, thin mouth drawn into a tight line.

“Good morning, Mr. Black,” she said lightly. “Glad to see you appreciating the holiday. Though I fail to see how such a display is conducive to a proper learning environment.”

“It can’t be helped, Professor,” Sirius said, recovered as he leaned up on his elbows with a leering expression. “I had to help Lupin get his feelings out before he went insane.” He popped up to his feet and held a hand to the side of his mouth. “And between you and me, McKinnon’s lucky—I hear he’s a real animal in the sack.”

Every kid around them burst into stilted laughter and Remus wailed, reaching over to grab Sirius by the back of his jacket and yank him away; “You did *NOT* just say that to the Headmistress!”

Before he could completely throttle him, McGonagall cleared her throat and everyone puckered. “I expect the banner to be down by the end of breakfast hour,” she said calmly. “By *whomever* put it there. Otherwise I will be forced to take action with all those present.”

Every one of the students let out a moan of protest and Sirius looked

away to feign innocence before Remus pinched him hard on the back of the neck.

"Ow! Okay, fine! Jeez."

"Good. Now, unless anyone else would like to have a chat in my office?" Professor McGonagall glanced around and several people shook their heads adamantly. "Then I suppose I'll see you all at breakfast. Happy Valentine's Day."

The Headmistress turned and proceeded up the pavement, her heels clicking on the cement. Remus turned away along with the other kids only to have Sirius grab his jacket sleeve. "You gotta help me," he said.

"Why? You put it up there, you get it down."

"The roof door locked behind me. Can't get it open."

"You're such a liar," Remus grumbled.

Sirius only grinned.

Sighing, he turned to Marlene, who was already shaking her head, face still red. "You wanna come, Cherry?"

"Not a chance," she scoffed. "Something tells me if I go up there Black'll end up taking the fast way down off the roof."

"Love you too, Mrs. Moony," Sirius cheesed.

"Okay," Remus said, "I'll meet you at breakfast then."

Marlene nodded and shot Sirius the bird for good measure before starting back toward the dining hall with Michelle and several other kids.

" 'Marlene Lupin' doesn't sound all that bad actually," he heard Michelle murmur.

"Michelle, I will bench you!"

Sirius flew at him, locking his arms around his shoulders from behind. "C'mon, let's get this over with! I'm hungry and they're serving drop scones."

Shoving him off, Remus looked back up to the banner once more.

“How did you even fit so many letters on one bloody sign?”

“Oh you’d be amazed what you can do with neat handwriting, Lupin. Want me to give you some lessons in that too?”

“Marlene’s right—maybe you should take the fast way down.”

“I’ll do it if you catch me.”

“… Tosser.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's title comes from a quote from Act II of Shakespeare’s "Love’s Labour’s Lost". The full quote essentially translates to 'he's perfect—but he's got a mouth on him'. Hehe.

Sherry is like a brandied wine.
Drop scones are like pancakes? Lol.

I just love making wolfstar spicy without actually doing something about it. Communication? At sixteen? Never knew 'er.

Chapter 50: Game of Détente

Chapter Summary

> The Marauders venture out, plotting a night of maraud-er-ing... lol. A game of questions follows, then another, both possibly leaving Remus with fewer answers than before.

Chapter Notes

> C/W: For 'f' slur used in a smoking context, references to sexual content, and references to child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wouldn't it be nice if we were older?
Then we wouldn't have to wait so long;
And wouldn't it be nice to live together,
In the kind of world where we belong?

- "Wouldn't It Be Nice" The Beach Boys, 1966

Friday 18 th February 1977

How—oh *how*—had he failed so spectacularly to learn his lesson? James had repeated it like a mantra their first year; *never underestimate a Black.* Remus could've socked himself in the face; either he had gotten complacent, or he was still somehow under the impression that Sirius cared less for his own relationships than he did for teasing him for his. He wasn't entirely sure why Sirius' fascination with the sleepy village of Craigtyre had suddenly hit a new height, but if he'd known what it would kick off, he might've been more opposed to the idea of sneaking out.

"I'm telling you," Sirius announced in the middle of their Literacy silent study; "it's a solid plan. There's this pub—Xeno says they'll serve us booze if we don't wear our uniforms, and there's a corner shop! Just think, Lupin—real cigs with real filters, no more hand-rolls!"

Not bothering to take his eyes off his book, Remus lifted an indifferent brow. He still had most of his Embassys leftover from Christmas, courtsey of Tomny, and wasn't all that bothered to get more as long as

Xeno was still padding their stash. Clearly Sirius was more desperate.

“Why does it feel like you’ve suddenly become extra stir-crazy?” James whispered. “Is the end of winter really getting to you that badly?”

“Kenny said ‘no parties for no reason’,” Sirius grumbled sourly. “Git of a dorm monitor finally agrees to let us throw one in the common room and then goes and ruins it by saying we gotta wait for some tosser’s birthday or something.”

“It’s so he doesn’t get in shit,” Remus mumbled out of the corner of his mouth.

“That is so boring. Does no one take risks anymore?”

“Does it have to be one of our birthdays?” Peter reasoned. “Why not just find a random kid and throw one for him?”

“Shhh!” Remus hissed, as Professor Bilshen passed by their table, looking down his nose at them sceptically. Only pretending to be engrossed in his school work, Sirius waited until he’d moved on before continuing.

“Tried that. But the next kid in our dorm having a birthday is some puny seventh year named Alfred, and Kenny wouldn't believe that a group of sixth form students would throw a party for someone who looks like he’d cry the moment you held a spliff in front of his nose.”

“So naturally we skip town instead,” James sniggered.

“Just for the evening,” Sirius smirked. “We can go tonight.”

“So, what then—” Peter started, “We just walk?”

“Why not?”

“It’ll be dark out.”

“You have a torch.”

“It’ll be cold out.”

“Bring Moira then—she’s always breathing down your neck anyway, maybe that’ll keep you warm enough.”

“Oh, so it’s like a group thing?” James added, sounding even more

enthusiastic.

“Small group thing,” Sirius clarified. “Bring whoever you want but remember we gotta be stealthy or we’ll never make it to Moony’s glory hole.”

Remus snapped his book shut. “If you *ever* call it that again, I will dig your eyes out with a grapefruit spoon.”

They all started laughing but Peter’s guffaw cut through it all and their teacher immediately had him in a verbal chokehold; “Mr. Pettigrew! The thing about silent study—it’s supposed to be *silent.* Do not let me hear you again!”

“Sorry, Professor Bilshin,” Peter mumbled, ducking his head in shame. James just winked at him before nudging Sirius.

“I’m on board.”

“Me too,” Peter agreed in a hush.

They all looked at Remus pointedly.

“Don’t let me ruin your fun,” he said simply.

Sirius leaned over the table toward him. “Are you saying you *don’t* want to go to the village?”

“Are you saying you *want* to be caught? You’ve basically broadcasted this insane expedition of yours to the entire room.”

“This better, princess?” Sirius asked, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper.

Ignoring him, Remus looked to James. “Do you really think Lily will agree to breaking curfew *and* breaking out?”

James looked down and innocently began tracing his finger on the table top. “Well, we don’t have to tell her exactly…”

“I think she’ll figure it out the moment she sees the hole in the school wall.”

“Then he can just rugby carry her the rest of the way,” Sirius amended.

“Yeah!” James said. “And she won’t care once we’re on the outside,

right?"

Remus held up his hands. "Don't ask me, she's your girlfriend. For how long though, who knows…"

James dropped his mouth open, sorely wounded, and Sirius swallowed a smile. "Moony, do you need a time out, or are you just feeling more cranky than usual?"

"Yeah, what about Marlene?" James prompted with a pout. "You think it's gonna be any easier to convince her?"

"Who said I was gonna ask her?"

"So you're not going to take her along?" Sirius asked.

Remus raised an eyebrow. "Since when do you care? I would've thought you'd have been gutted playing seventh wheel again."

"Who says I'm gonna be playing seventh wheel?"

"You're dating someone, Sirius?" Peter asked very quickly.

"No—but that don't mean anything."

Remus gave a satisfied 'hmph' and opened his book again, leaning his face on one hand. He'd just found his page again when Sirius covered it with his hand.

"What was that?" Sirius demanded.

"What was what?"

"That—the 'hmph'."

"It was nothing." Remus tried pulling the book away, but Sirius snatched it and held it out of reach.

"Wasn't nothing. C'mon, big man, spit it out."

"As if it's actually that easy to find someone to date," Remus replied hotly. "Only you would be so smug."

"Oh? Reckon I can't do it?"

"I didn't say that, now give me—"

“He thinks I can’t do it!” Sirius announced, tossing the book to Peter, who scrambled to catch it.

“Mr. Black!”

Sirius jumped and waved at their teacher, who’d gone slightly red-faced. “Sorry, Bill, my bad!” Turning to James, he dropped his voice to a whisper; “Prongs, can you believe this tosser? He thinks I can’t find myself a bloody date.”

James shrugged. “It has been a while.”

“A while since what?”

“Since you were on the bloody pull,” Remus finished, taking his book back from Peter. Instantly, Sirius made a face while James gave a snort.

“He’s right, you know,” he said. “It’s almost a new record. Is it your heart, Sirius? Did someone break it while we weren’t paying attention?”

“No one’s broken anything! I was alone on Valentine’s by choice, I'll have you know.”

Remus smiled smugly. “Oh, so it’s *not* just a dry spell?”

“Christ, leave me some benefit of the doubt, won’t you, Lupin?” Sirius groaned.

“Never said it was a bad thing,” Remus said casually, “s’good even—reduces the risk of teenage pregnancy. The world couldn’t tolerate another one of you running around anyway. We don’t have the space for another head of that size.”

“Ha—ha. Suppose we don’t have to worry about that with *you.* Bet you’ve carried the same crusty condom in your wallet since you were in year eight, you bitter virgin.”

“Oh make up your mind—am I a filthy slag who gets it in every other day or am I a bitter virgin?”

“Knowing you, you’d find a way to be both. Maybe you’re just a dirty voyeur.”

“The only thing I’m observing is your daily show of stupidity.”

“Getting too repetitive for you, is it? Maybe I should switch it up—fancy knife throwing? But I’ll need a volunteer for target practice. How ‘bout you?”

“What’s the prize?”

Sirius smirked, entirely riled up. “A big—*FAT*—”

“Mr. Black!”

They all froze, even Peter and James, who’d just been watching the back and forth as though it were a primetime drama. Professor Bilshin stood up from his desk and marched over to their table, scribbling on his pad of pink slips and slapping one down in front of Sirius.

“Detention, Sirius. My office—Saturday.”

All their other classmates started giggling as Sirius scowled down at the slip and Bilshin walked away. He flipped the teacher’s back off angrily before turning back to shoot a nasty glare at Remus, who'd only just swallowed a smug expression of his own. ‘Fuck you’ Sirius mouthed, and Remus felt the corners of his mouth twitch again before he simply shrugged and opened his book once more.

* * *

Surprisingly, the girls were not at all that adverse to making a trip down to the village. Lily was sceptical of course, and after they’d led them through the bushes and revealed their hidden escape route, she spent several minutes inspecting the wall as though it were a magical trap door that would disappear at any moment.

“So this is how you guys got out last year?” Lottie asked, slipping through the hole to the other side and bouncing back, flipping the torch light up onto her face and turning her amused grin into a ghoulish mask. They’d confessed to attending the concert last June on the walk over, which had only ended up making the girls more envious and excited to break the rules themselves; though Mary couldn't seem to help but point out the stark differences between sneaking out for a rock concert and sneaking out for a mediocre pint from the local pub.

“Yup,” James announced proudly. “Moony found it.”

“How’d you manage that?” Marlene asked, looking up at Remus in the dark.

“Oh, you know. Walking.”

She smiled and tugged his cap down over his eyes playfully.

“Ugh—where is Sirius?” Mary moaned, blowing out a hazy breath and tucking her hands into her armpits. “I’m going to freeze to death before we even leave school.”

“He said he needed to stop and get something,” Remus said, fixing his cap.

“Get what?” Lily asked.

“Dunno,” James answered, “but he said it’d be quick. Figured it was something to do with Xeno.”

“So he wants to break curfew, sneak off grounds, *and* get high? What’s he trying to do—set the record for longest detention ever?”

“Doubt it,” Peter said, “he already holds that record.” Holding onto his arm, Moira giggled and covered her mouth with a gloved hand.

“If he doesn’t show up soon he’s also going to hold the record for worst slap in Hawkings history,” Mary grumbled. “It’s bad enough I’m tugged out into the cold by a group of love-sick twosomes—”

“You didn’t have to come,” Lily laughed.

“Of course I had to come, but I'm still going to complain! Without Sirius here I’m the only single one, it’s pathetic!”

“I’m standing right here,” Lottie snapped.

Mary sighed. “Alright fine, you and I will hold hands, but you know we’ve let you whine over Mickey for weeks. It’s my turn now.”

“I’m allowed to be upset, Mary. Mickey and I dated for nearly two years!”

“Yes, yes, and we understand that, but you’ve had one shit boyfriend in two years—I’ve had four in *five months.* Lance, Bryan, Victor, Nick —all of them shit.”

“Maybe you should take it easy then,” Marlene said. “Find a way to

enjoy some alone time."

"Why, so you can get me to try and read one of those romance books of yours? No thanks, not my idea of fun. I prefer my affairs to be of the tangible variety."

Marlene rolled her eyes and turned back to Remus. He smiled reassuringly and nudged her arm. "You finish that book I gave you yet?"

"You mean 'Carrie'? No, it's taking me a while," she shuddered.

"Why, you're a fast reader."

Marlene gave him a pouty smile and mumbled something he couldn't hear.

Remus leaned in closer; "What?"

"We've been busy with school," she quietly, "and I... well, I can't read it at night."

"So you're... scared?"

"Remus. It's a *horror* novel."

"I didn't think it was that bad."

"Then I'd hate to see what your nightmares are made of!"

Remus leaned back. "Don't really get nightmares."

"Oh. Never?"

He shook his head. Nightmares required a certain level of deep sleep, which he was half sure he never got, and besides, no nightmare could be as shitty as the things he couldn't forget during the daytime anyway. He'd take a zombie or a murderous prom queen over one of those any day.

The sound of rustling bushes came from behind them and Remus and all his friends turned just as Sirius strode into their small clearing, holding branches aside to make way for himself. "Hey!" He breathed, eyes alight in the darkness. "Sorry I'm late."

"What took you so long?" Mary snapped.

“Had to make a pit stop,” Sirius replied, looking back and reaching his arm out. Just then Chastity Bell stepped through the bushes, flipping her dark hair over one shoulder.

“Hey,” she smiled.

The silence was abrupt and startling. Sirius had apparently succeeded in surprising every one of them, and as Chastity plucked a small twig from his hair and stepped up to take his arm, Remus felt his insides twinge. He’d been questioning all along why Sirius hadn’t been more adverse allowing girlfriends in on a plot, but suddenly things made much more sense.

“You… brought a friend,” Lily said, “and it’s… Chastity. Wow.”

Chastity grinned and looked to Sirius, who appeared pleased enough. “Yeah, well, figured it would be fun to show Chas the village.”

“I’ve already been before,” Chastity confessed, “and it is a bit, you know, dull and mucky, but Sirius said we’re sneaking out so that definitely makes up for things, yeah?”

“Must make up for something…” Marlene murmured.

“So, you lot already look chilly,” Sirius beamed; “Should we get going?”

They did, making their way outside the wall and skipping across the road until they'd made it into the endless pastures and some of the giddiness that came with sneaking out had been replaced with the crisp reality of the chilly night air. In the dark, and with only three torches to split amongst the ten of them they were risking twisted ankles and the occasional cowpat, so they walked behind one another in pairs. Everywhere they stepped was damp and spongy since it was still that part of the year where the ground melted during the day only to refreeze at night. It took them nearly forty-five minutes of trekking, but finally they managed to crest the top of the last hill and spotted Craigtyre from above, the only thing lit up for miles in every direction.

“Finally!” Mary sighed, as they skirted down into town where they traded dirt roads for cobbled pavement. “I thought it was never gonna end.”

“I told you we knew the way!” Sirius said. “You lot have so little faith.”

“Yeah? Then why’d you feel the need to drag us straight through a field of cow shit?”

“Thought I smelled something funny. Don’t tell me it’s you, Macdonald?”

“No!”

“Can we get on with this?” Remus said, feeling as haggard as the rest of them. “Where’s this pub?”

“It’s this way,” James said, taking a shivering Lily by the arm and shooting off down the street. It only took a short while longer for the little brick cottages to give way to shut-up shops and quiet street corners. Along the way they passed a closed corner shop (“Sorry, Moony. I’ll ask Xeno to bring you some brand-name fags next time.”) and a small bakery that still smelt mouth-watering despite its darkened windows. They didn’t spot their first local until they’d turned a corner and the yellow lights of the tiny village pub drifted into view.

Tired and half-frozen, they made their way inside The Three Broomsticks and took a seat at one of the big round booths near the back where they could avoid any curious eyes. It was a tight squeeze with ten of them, but James was able to pull up a few extra chairs and they all settled in. It didn’t take long for the pub's landlady to notice. She strolled over to the table, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Hello there. Don’t think I recognize you lot.”

“We’re from out of town,” Mary replied boldly.

“If you say so.”

“Say, I remember you,” Sirius said, flourishing his hand as if to flatter. “Madam Rosetta, wasn’t it?”

“Rosmerta,” she corrected, “but everyone just calls me Rosie. This is my pub, so what’ll it be?”

“A round of pints,” Sirius said.

“And some tea,” Marlene added. Sirius looked at her, appalled.

“What? It’s freezing.”

“How about some warm ciders then?” Rosmerta offered. “I’ve got

some steaming wassail in the back."

"That sounds great," James nodded, and she tossed a few napkins on the table and strode away.

"That was too easy," Lily said.

"I told you," Sirius said smugly, "they don't care that we're here as long as we can pay up afterwards."

After the landlady had returned with their tray of drinks, they distributed the pints and cider amongst themselves and drank deeply until their insides were warm and a light flush had come to each of their cheeks. The last of them had just finished shrugging out of their winter coats when Mary pointed across the room.

"Oh my god, is that Greyson Kent?"

All ten of them strained their heads to get a look. On the other side of the pub, a group of year 13 boys were crowded into a corner.

"Yep, it is," James said. He and Greyson were on the football team together. After some prodding from Mary, he called Greyson's name and they exchanged a friendly wave.

"Over there, it's Holly," Lily said, pointing to another small group of students. "I can't believe she's here. She's a prefect, you know."

"Oh good. Now you're not the only one breaking the rules," Chastity said. James nodded as if to agree with her, making Lily scoff while pinching him on the arm.

"Right, that's enough then," Mary said, before unceremoniously downing half her pint. "I'm going to say hello."

"To Greyson?" Marlene said. "But we just got here."

"Exactly, which means I won't be buying any more of my own drinks. C'mon, Lot, let's go."

Eagerly the two girls wiggled out from the booth and strolled across the room, stopping behind Greyson and his friends and smiling until the boys ultimately pulled up a few chairs for them.

"Gotta hand it to her. She knows what she wants and she goes for it," Chastity said.

“Reminds me of someone else I know,” Sirius added keenly. He and Chastity exchanged a flirtatious look, while Remus glared hard at the bottom of his pint glass.

“I see Rachelle. She lives next door,” Moira said, nudging her boyfriend. “I want to say hi too. Petey, are you coming?”

“Yeah, alright.” Peter gathered their drinks and together they got up from the table.

“Don’t let those girls eat you alive, Wormy,” Sirius called after them. Minus the four extra bums at the table, there was finally enough room to shimmy around the booth. Remus and Marlene found themselves at its centre, with James and Lily to their left and Sirius and Chastity across from them.

“I can’t believe there’s so many other students here,” Lily said.

“I can’t believe you’ve really never been,” Chastity replied.

Lily bristled. “Not everyone’s so keen on breaking the rules for a bit of fun.”

“Right.” Chastity sipped her pint. “So how’d Potter know the way?”

As if the thought hadn’t occurred to her, Lily turned to James, who quickly busied himself by swishing his drink around. Finally he caved.

“It was that time with Simeon. After the… you know… party.”

“You told us that the party was in some dirty old barn,” Marlene said.

“We came to the pub after,” Sirius amended. “Sim’s idea.”

A sudden consideration came over Lily, as though she’d suddenly found the bottom of her cider glass very interesting. “Oh. Well, that’s fine, I suppose.”

It was clear to the rest of them that she was merely swallowing her pride, and the sour memory that came with it. Too bad Chastity wasn't in the loop.

“You should’ve seen how sloshed Potter was,” she giggled. “Had to practically drag his arse out, didn’t you?”

“You were *there?”* Marlene gaped, while James looked very guilty.

“ ‘Course. I knew Simeon. He dated my cousin Bethany when they were our age.”

“I don’t actually remember seeing you,” Sirius said to her.

“I remember seeing you,” Chastity smirked. “I can see why you wouldn’t remember. You *were* pretty busy. You know, with that girl’s hand down—”

“Rosie!” Remus chirped, raising his glass as the barmaid passed. “Another round please!”

* * *

Remus didn’t know what time it was, but so far he’d downed two full pints, half of Marlene’s pale ale, and a warm cider. He’d been pushed and squeezed and shoved as other students came and went from their table, visiting and exchanging pleasantries like they weren’t all breaking over a dozen school rules just by being there. Unluckily for Remus, he’d found himself sucked into a conversation with Chastity that had no way out. Sirius was still planted starkly on her other side, while Marlene had slid over to Lily and was refusing to speak to him.

"Piss off, you called me drunk," she snubbed.

"I didn't," Remus tried reasoning. "I just said you were being a bit silly."

Marlene just stuck her tongue out at him.

So, he was left with Sirius and Chastity, and it occurred to Remus that never had he so strongly wished that women came with an off switch. Chastity talked like she was on a late-night talk show and everyone else was merely there to listen or entertain her. It frustrated Remus to no end, and not just because it was probably exactly what Sirius found so enamouring.

“Your fingers are so long,” Chastity giggled, busy holding her hand up against Sirius’ in comparison. “I guess what they say about musicians is true—you are mutants.”

“You should see Moony’s,” Sirius said. Face lighting up, Chasity turned eagerly and grabbed Remus’ wrist just as he was about to polish off his third ale. She pressed both his and Sirius’ hands together

in front of her, examining them as though she'd just discovered a new species.

"Wow, Sirius," she exclaimed, "your hand looks like a baby's next to his!"

"An elegant baby's!"

Remus pulled his hand back. It was clammy from holding Marlene's hand under the table and he didn't want Sirius to feel it.

"Remus' fingers totally dwarf yours," Chastity teased, but Sirius just leaned across her toward Remus.

"Your hands are so bloody soft, Moony," he said. "You gotta build up those calluses more."

"Why do you call him Moony?" Chastity asked suddenly, putting Remus instantly on edge.

"Oh, haven't you heard?" Sirius grinned, sitting back. They made eye contact over Chastity's head and Remus prepared himself for the incoming embarrassment, but Sirius only paused and ran his tongue over his top lip.

"Sometimes this guy has trouble sleeping," he said lowly, so only the three of them could hear, "and he sneaks over to my side of the room to listen to music." Sirius mimicked putting on headphones. "But I have the window, so when he's sitting down on the floor and we've forgotten to shut the curtains the moon comes through the glass and reflects off the top of his head like a little halo. So he's Moony."

Remus didn't know what to say, the story was so ridiculous, it was laughable. Not that Chastity minded.

"That's so cute," she declared. "I want a nickname."

"Stick around long enough and you'll get one," Sirius confirmed, before reaching across the table to nab Remus' hand again. "Though maybe we should be calling this one mutant fingers, ha!"

"Gerroff," Remus slurred, shaking himself free. Chastity giggled *(Christ, did she ever stop giggling?)* and turned her shoulder into Sirius' chest again—she'd been doing it all night, sidling closer to him until she was practically in his lap. Sirius didn't seem to mind. All it took was one sly upwards glance from her and they were kissing.

Instantly apprehensive, Remus slid toward Marlene. “I’m gonna go have a smoke.”

“Okay,” she said, “just don’t stay out long. We still gotta walk back and it’s cold out.”

He nodded, and she and Lily slid down to let him out of the booth. After a quick pit stop at the loo, Remus shrugged his jacket on and stepped out into the cool air.

Moving past the small crowd of local smokers, he skirted down the lane until he’d stopped beneath one of the pub’s windows. It was cracked slightly, allowing warm air and the faint sound of a radio to drift out into the night. Only slightly comforted, Remus lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He held that first golden puff inside, mind drifting to Sirius and Chastity. By then his lungs were screaming for air. When he finally exhaled, he coughed until his eyes watered.

“Need me to get you another pint to help wash that down?” Sirius asked, appearing beside him in the dark.

“Shit. What—you doing—out here?” Remus said, in between hacking.

“I came to join you.”

Recovered, Remus cleared his throat, refusing to meet Sirius' gaze. “You looked pretty busy before.”

Sirius didn’t rise to the bait. “It was getting stuffy inside anyway. Can I bum a fag?”

Remus handed him the pack of Embassys, which Sirius took and admired before popping a cigarette out and setting it between his lips. “Light?”

“Lost mine,” Remus lied, because he felt like it. The weak joke didn't seem to go over well with Sirius, who glanced up at him sharply before reaching out to grab the front of his jacket. In one deft move, he pulled Remus down to his level and held him steady as he lit the cigarette off the tip of Remus’ own. They were so close Remus could see the faint orange glow of the cigarettes reflected in Sirius’ eyes.

“You’re such an idiot,” Sirius sighed, releasing him and blowing out his nose.

Entirely rattled, Remus imagined himself grabbing Sirius by the front

of his coat and shaking him. *How does that not freak you out?* He'd demand. *How can you just* do *that?!*

Like this, the imaginary Sirius would say, and then he'd... Well, who knows what he would do. Sirius was weird like that. Entirely unexpected.

In an attempt to calm his frazzled nerves, Remus straightened the front of his jacket and nearly fumbled his own cigarette. “Grab someone like that in London and you’re likely to get slammed over the head with a bottle," he mumbled.

“Eh, I’ll try anything once,” Sirius shrugged.

“Like dating Chastity?”

“Never said we were dating. Just brought her along, s’all.”

“So you’re not gonna date her?”

“Never said that either.” Sirius looked up again and they shared a cool look.

“Is this because of what I said this morning?” Remus asked.

“No.”

“You don’t need to prove anything to me.”

“I ain’t trying to prove anything,” Sirius said sharply. “For your information, Chas asked me to hang out *last* week.”

“But you said yes *today.”*

“We were going somewhere today. Since when do you care so much anyway?”

“I don’t.”

“Fine, be that way then.”

“Fine.”

They both looked away, smoking side-by-side in silence and Remus turned his glare to the wall across the street. Someone had graffitied across its brick, but the paint was so faded he couldn’t make out what it said. It reminded him of his friends back home. How many hours

had he spent running around the End with the boys, tagging everything from cars doors to street signs? It'd been so long now, before he came to Hawkings, and Tomny didn't even bother with that stuff anymore anyway. Maybe their tags were faded now too.

"You've got that look in your eye again," Sirius said, snapping Remus out of his daze. "You always look so far away, like you're on autopilot."

"I'm only thinking."

"About…?"

"Stuff."

"Mm-hm." Sirius took a pull off his cigarette. "And does that 'stuff' have anything to do with what you get up to at home?"

Remus sucked in sharply and sent himself into another coughing fit; "Get out—" he wheezed; "How is it you're always in my fucking head?"

"So that's where you were then? Astral-projecting yourself all the way back to London?"

"Oh shut up. You don't want to hear about home anyway."

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

"Because I'm bored," Sirius said. "And because you're an enigma I want to crack. So, I'll trade you, a question for a question."

"What sort of question?"

"Any question. Multiple questions, provided we take turns of course." Sirius held his half-smoked cigarette aloft. "Let's say we have until this fag burns down to nothing."

Remus looked from the cigarette to Sirius. If it were anyone else he would've told them to stuff their stupid game, but it wasn't any else.

"Fine."

Sirius grinned victoriously and asked his question; "What's your friend's name—the one you're always talking to on the phone."

“Tom,” Remus answered, before scrambling for a question of his own. “Why… er—why do you insist on calling every teacher by their first name?”

“Because they’re human and one day they’re gonna die and decompose the same way as me. Who taught you to roll your spliffs?”

“Seesaw. Why’d you keep the letter I wrote you in the summer?”

“Because you wrote it for me. Who’s Seesaw?”

“A friend. Why don’t you ever call me Remus?”

“I like Moony better. Now what’s with the sudden fascination with James’ cuffed trousers?”

“There is no fascination, I only asked him why he did it the one time. Were you… Were you telling the truth about the ‘Moony’ thing?”

“Obviously. You get this little glow on the back of your head in the shape of a moon. Sort of makes you look bald actually.”

“Okay, smartass."

Sirius smiled. “How drunk are you right now?”

“Not drunk enough… Did you really tell Pete to cheat off of me during our last maths test?”

“No, I told him to cheat off of James. I told him to cheat off *you* in history. Where’d you get those fags? Xeno always says he only brings in loose baccy.”

“Tom—for Christmas. Why’d you bring Chastity tonight?”

“To check something. Is McKinnon a good kisser?”

“Yes—”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t… like tongue.”

Sirius snorted and Remus pushed him lightly. “Oi, careful,” he moaned, indicating to his cigarette, “don’t want to knock any extra ash off our timer.”

Remus shook his head. “To check what?”

“Huh?”

“You brought Chastity—to check what?”

“Oh.” Sirius sucked his lips. “If I liked her.”

“Do you?”

“It’s my turn. Where’d you get your height from—mum or dad?”

“Dunno. Dad, maybe. You actually like Lily, right?”

“What sort of question is that?”

“I dunno. You're always on her arse about something.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Of course I like her. Evans and I might not always see eye to eye on everything, but she makes James happy. And I like seeing James happy. Do *you* like Lily?”

“You know I do.”

“No, I mean like, did you ever ‘like her’ like her?”

“No! God, you’re bloody ruthless.”

“Maybe, but I had to check. Now go on, it’s your turn," Sirius smiled, patting him on the arm. The touch was gentle enough that Remus found himself staring down at his arm afterwards as his next question materialised in his mind.

Why is it so easy for you to touch me?

He almost said it out loud, but then it occurred to him that there was a chance Sirius would ask him to explain the question—which felt impossible, because he wasn't entire sure where it'd come from in the first place. They were a friendly group, them Marauders—especially James and Sirius—but Remus had always felt a bit on the outside. Touching Sirius never felt like it did with Tomny or Lee or Doss. It was always different somehow, like he was too aware of him. And that frightened him.

"Earth to space cadet," Sirius called. "I said it was your turn."

"I..." Remus sighed. "I can't think of anything. You go."

"Can't. S'against the rules. You gotta ask something."

"Fuckin' hell, fine. What's your... er... favourite colour?"

If he thought the question was stupid, Sirius didn't say it. Instead he just smiled, acting almost shy, and in a small voice he said, "Brown."

"Brown?" Remus echoed. "Why brown?" He'd expected Sirius' favourite colour to be something as loud and obnoxious as he was, like electric blue or fandango purple.

"Dunno," Sirius said, "I just like it."

"Oh. Er, alright. Your turn, I suppose."

"Do you trust me?"

"Blue—" Remus stopped himself, and Sirius' face began to crease with laughter.

"Did you think I was going to ask your favourite colour, Moony?"

"Shove off. That would be the normal thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"Ha, you're funny. I can ask your favourite colour anytime. What I want to know, is if you trust me."

Still a bit caught off guard, Remus' eyebrows knit together in puzzlement. "Yes," he said finally, "I think so. Do you trust me...?"

"Always." And then Sirius stared at him, hard and genuine. "How old were you the first time your dad hit you?"

Oh.

So it was like that then.

Remus shuffled awkwardly on the spot, rolling his cigarette between two fingers. "Lyall—or... My dad, he... He's never hit me."

"Never...?"

"No. How old were you?"

"Can't remember. How about your mum?"

Remus felt his jaw tighten. "Dunno, can't really remember either. She

probably didn't. At least I don't think she did. How'd you get your burn scars?"

Sirius took the question in stride. He'd been expecting it. "Boiling water. I was eleven. How'd you get yours?"

Almost immediately a phantom ache split across Remus' nose and he reached up to rub it. "Broke my face on some guy's fist. Do yours hurt?"

"Not anymore. At least yours sounds more badass. Why'd you lie about it?"

"It was easier. Why do you hide them?"

"It's easier. Do they scare you?"

Remus' expression turned resolute. He was still buzzed, but his answer would've been the same drunk or not. "No."

"Good," Sirius said, looking down. Still watching him—*as if he could do anything else*—Remus brought his cigarette back to his lips.

"Why'd you jump out that window—hurt your arm?" He asked, inhaling.

"Wanted to get away," Sirius exhaled. "Who told you I jumped out a window?"

He blew out the smoke. "Regulus. Why don't the two of you get along?"

"It's complicated."

"That's not an answer."

"Sure it is. What happened with your mum?"

"It's complicated."

Sirius sighed again. "Right."

"Right," Remus said. "Why won't you go near the piano?"

"I do go near it—"

"Why won't you *play* the piano?"

“You know why.”

“No, all I know is that it has something to do with your mum. Which is why I'm asking.”

“Fine. It’s ‘cause it’s always for her. Or for someone else,” Sirius said, voice tight. “The guitar’s for me. And for you.”

Remus glanced down, digging the toe of his boot into the pavement. “Your turn,” he mumbled.

“Why won’t you show us the songs you’ve been writing?” Sirius asked.

“Because they’re not finished.”

“Will you ever show us?”

“Maybe." He looked up again. "Will you ever play the piano again?”

“Maybe. Dunno what it’s gonna take.”

“You gotta find a new reason to play,” Remus said without thinking. “I mean—make it for you, right? Someone told me that.”

“Who?”

“Sheila,” he lied, surprising himself again. Tonya wasn't a secret... *right?*

“Huh,” Sirius said, biting his thumb as though lost in thought, before indicating for Remus to ask another question.

So, he did.

“What happened with Miles?”

Instantly Sirius’ lips parted in shock and he dropped his hand. “What?”

“I asked what happened with Miles.”

“I… how…?” As if suddenly lost on the spot, Sirius looked down but drew back slightly and raised his cigarette, which had burned down to nothing and gone cold in the night. “Damn,” he said quietly, “I guess time’s up. You’re pretty good at this game, Moony.”

Remus couldn't help it. The disappointment washed over him like a wave. "You cheated."

"No, I definitely played by the rules," Sirius said.

"So you're not gonna answer my question?"

"Can't. Time ran out. *That* would be cheating."

Bitterly, Remus flicked his cigarette stub away and Sirius did the same, before ultimately smiling and throwing an arm up around his shoulders. "Aw, don't be angry, Moons."

"You're a prick."

"Naturally, but still, it feels good to get some information out of you for once."

"That makes one of us," Remus grumbled. He let Sirius turn him around so they could make their way back toward the pub's entrance.

"I was perfectly forthcoming," Sirius said.

"You're a manipulative bastard, Black."

"Put that in a song and I'll believe it. Until then, good game."

And that was that. They walked back inside together as if nothing more than a cigarette had been exchanged between them.

But Remus could already feel the shift.

Sirius was now the keeper of the most secrets he'd ever revealed—maybe even more than Tomny—all because of some silly little game.

He wondered if it was the same for Sirius. Did Remus now carry more of him than James did? No, there was no way. Competing like that would only mean a loss, and Remus didn't feel like playing loser again. If he was alone he might've entertained the thought more, but that wasn't Sirius. Sirius lived like emotions were just part-time work. Like they were a simple nine-to-five, and could be shut off at the the end of the day in favour of easier, more light-hearted fun. It was a form of resilience, he knew, and one of the things Remus would always admire most about him. He envied it too, and very secretly, feared it.

But that was Sirius. Loved, feared, and envied.

* * *

“Count yourself lucky Bilshin had a meeting and was too busy to actually give you detention,” Remus said, as they were making their way up the path in front of their dorm the following evening.

“He gave me a bloody book report,” Sirius hissed.

“So read the book.”

“But it’s due Monday! Did you hear that? *Monday!* I can’t read an entire book and do a report on it in a day and a half!”

“You could if you actually tried focusing for longer than five minutes.”

“Impossible. It looks about as interesting as sawdust, plus I told Chas I’d hang out with her tomorrow."

"Guess you'll just have to postpone."

"She's gonna hate that." Sirius rubbed his forehead with a moan. "Oh! I got it—will you write it for me?”

“Ha!" Remus barked. "Nice try.”

“Oh why not, Moony?” Sirius whined. “You read sawdust for fun all the time.”

“I’m not doing your homework for you.”

“What if I pay you?”

“With what money?”

“Oh, you didn't hear? I got my stipend back from mum and dad.”

Remus' mouth dropped open. “How’d you swing that?”

“Told McGonagall I had holes in all my trousers and that I couldn’t afford to place an order at the commissary," Sirius replied smugly. "So she wrote home. Man, I wish I could've seen the looks on my parents’ faces when they heard that their precious Black heir was too poor to afford school slacks.”

“You *embarrassed* your parents into giving you an allowance?” Remus snorted.

“Yeah, and it totally worked. Should’ve thought of it sooner really. So, will you do it?”

Remus considered, hating himself for it. “Fine. Clear my debt with Xeno and I’ll write the bloody report. *And* you owe me two packs on top of it.”

“Deal.”

They went to shake on it just as another boy named Greg passed them coming down the front steps. “Oi, Lupin!” He called, turning around as he walked. “You got a call earlier!”

“Who from?” Asked Remus.

“Dunno, check the board.”

“Kay, thanks Greg.”

Greg held a hand up in a wave before turning away down the pavement. Remus turned back to Sirius, who had stopped on the top step to wait for him. “Is it those friends of yours from home again?”

“Maybe,” Remus shrugged, “or just Giles.”

They went inside and walked straight up to the message board, searching for his name amongst the notices. “Here, this one's got your name,” Sirius said, plucking a little yellow slip of paper off the board. “Hold on, who’s ‘Tonya’?”

“Don’t be nosey,” Remus said, snatching the paper.

“Moony, are you cheating on McKinnon?” Sirius asked, looking almost impressed.

“No! God, shout that louder would you? She’s just a friend. And she’s got a *boyfriend* already.”

“This is too juicy," Sirius said, looking him up and down. “I think it’s time you filled us in on these London friends of yours. Like, I wanna know how good the competition is—that way I get to be the one to tell James and Pete.”

“Considering I’m stuck with you lot for ten months out of the year I’d

say you have nothing to worry about," Remus quipped. "Now buzz off while I make my call."

"Alright, but we're just upstairs in case you start getting homesick and need a shoulder to cry on."

After dodging a sharp smack, Sirius gave a cheery thumbs up before starting for the staircase. Even with him gone Remus felt nervous. He strolled to the phones and dialled the flat, waiting impatiently as the tone went long-distance and then began to ring. The noise went on forever, drilling a hole in Remus' temple, but just as he'd given up hope someone on the other line picked up.

"Tonya?" He pressed the receiver tighter to his ear. "It's me, Remus."

"Oh hello, love." It was her; he could hear the smile in her voice.

"Sorry I missed your call. I was just out with some friends."

" 'Course you were," she said, "it's Saturday, you should be out having fun with your friends. I wasn't thinking."

"No, it's fine, don't worry," Remus replied hastily. "You sound better. You finally over that cold then? You sounded horrible last time you called."

"What? Oh—yeah, it's all gone now." Tonya punctuated the statement with another cough, cold and wet. "For the most part anyway."

"Tomny okay?"

"Yeah, you know him. Bounced back immediately, the tough shit."

Remus smiled. "Where is 'e now?"

"Oh, he's… sleeping. Had a late night, you know how it goes."

"Things are good though?"

"Mhm. Not much's new, sorry to say. Just wanted to hear your voice a bit."

"Don't let my friends hear you. All it took was seeing your name on the message board for Sirius to think I was cheating on Marlene."

"Oh yes, *him.* He around now?"

“No, went up to our room.”

“Pity. I would’ve liked to hear from the infamous Mr. Black just once. Bet the parties would be fun.”

“No way, I won’t ever let him and Tomny meet. Can’t risk the two of them banding together—you neither, only ‘cause you’d just fight over who chooses the music. Though I s’pose you’d actually be more dangerous paired up with James.”

“That’s the one who likes football and your Lily friend right?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Right, so now this is the part where you admit you lied ages ago about dating her.”

Remus sighed. He'd actually managed to forget that tiny, embarrassing detail.

“C'mon Ton, can’t I have anything?”

“You know what they say, ‘the truth will out’!”

“You sound like Sirius.”

“Hm. Maybe Sirius sounds like me.”

Remus bit his lip over a smile and suddenly the words were flowing out of him. “He got himself a girlfriend. Chastity. She’s… a handful. Better than his last but not by much. Lily and the other girls were fine with it mostly, but I don’t know how long it’ll last.”

“Why, he that popular?”

“The opposite actually—I think he chose the only girl in our entire year none of us can stand.”

“None of us, huh?” Tonya echoed. “You included.”

”Well, she *is* annoying.”

”Right. And… how does that make you feel? Sirius having a girlfriend, I mean.”

Remus huffed, annoyed at himself for bringing it up. “Chastity’s fine enough, I guess—a bit nosey but so’s Sirius.”

“So you’re fine with it? Him dating her?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No reason…” She hummed a bit, like she didn’t believe him. Remus chose not to notice. “So, tell me everything else that’s been going on. School, relationships, good marks, bad marks—I want to hear all of it.”

“Why? It’s so boring.”

“Just humour me.”

And so he did. He talked until the common room grew quiet behind him, other students emptying out and filing up to bed one by one. The hallway was drafty but Remus hardly felt the cold. Occasionally he heard his name called by a passing friend and would quickly wave only to turn back to the phone. Tonya continued to interrupt whenever a question or funny anecdote came to mind, but really she was just there to listen. More than once he had to stop to make sure she was still there, and each time Tonya would reply with a soft ‘mhm, go on, love’.

Around the thirty-minute mark the phone chimed a warning that meant it was about to sever the connection to save on charges, cutting him off mid-story and snapping Remus out of his daze.

“Oh uh, so I only meant to say that I guess Lily isn’t much of a hiker.”

“I think it’s funny that James took her on a hike for Valentine’s,” Tonya giggled lightly.

“In his defence it really was more of a really long walk—they stayed on school grounds and there aren't many mountains around here anyway.”

“Oh, you should see the mountains in Germany, they’re so beautiful—especially in the wintertime.”

“You mean you’ve been to Germany, Ton?”

“Oh sure! In fact, once when I—” The phone chimed again, and somehow managed to sound more angry this time around. “I guess I should let you go now…” Tonya said. “You ate right? You have to make sure you’re eating.”

“I eat. Nothing as good as your cooking though, promise.”

“How’d you know I was fishing for a compliment?”

“ ‘Cause I know you.”

“Ha. You’re so cute. It’s almost not fair.”

“What’s not fair?”

“You being so far.”

Tonya was quiet for a moment, before coughing again and clearing her throat.

“But listen to me whine—you’re getting an education! It’s good! Means you won’t end up in some tiny flat with creaky floorboards and odd stains leaking through the ceilings. I still haven't figured out what that spot is over the hob... But nah, you’re going to be a musician—if that’s what you still want of course! I mean, I suppose you could do something sensible like be a bank teller or go into real estate, but somehow sensible never really made for the most exciting stories. Hm… I wonder.”

Remus thumbed the phone cord. “I…” he sighed, rubbing his face. “I started writing in that journal you gave me, you know. Songs and all that.”

The phone let loose another irate chime, which Tonya just blazed through; “Really? Oh my—would you sing something for me?”

“I don’t—”

“Or don’t sing! Just read it to me!”

“It’s not finished,” Remus confessed, “nothing’s finished. Can’t read it yet. It’s mostly just words on a page—hardly a song, really. Sort of embarrassing…”

“Ah,” Tonya said, “that’s alright. I’m sure I’ll hear it someday.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be silly, you don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“If I… If anything turns out half good I promise I’ll share it with you.”

“That’d be nice.”

“Just you though.”

He heard Tonya give a little chuckle into the other end.

“Oh you… Best be careful, flatter me like that and it’ll just go to my head.”

“That’s fine. I won’t mind.”

“Ah. Sweet love.” She sighed. “Do you remember what I told you last time we saw each other, Remus?”

“You said goodbye, and then you started yelling at Tomny for listing off things that make girls go crazy in bed—”

“Ah—tat-tat-tat-taa… I meant before that. Your last night—New Years. I told you that I—”

“That you love me,” Remus finished for her.

“Yup. And that I’m not lying,” Tonya told him. “So I hope you write whatever you want, Remus. And if you don’t want to write, then I hope you find something you want for *you*—not for anyone else. But also, a little bit more advice if I have the time?"

"Yeah, go on."

"Don’t rush it. Take your time. We take everything one day at a time.”

“Okay, Ton.”

On the other end, Tonya gave a little sniffle. “God, this cold really is still mowing me down. Haa…” She breathed. “Okay. This is good. I’m going to go now.”

“Tomny’s not gonna be happy we ran up his phone bill,” he said, trying a smile. Tonya just coughed out her laughter before sniffling once more.

“I think he’ll understand. Eventually.”

“I’ll talk to you soon, then.”

“… Okay.”

Remus bit his lip. “Bye.”

“Goodbye, sweet love.”

He brought the receiver away from his ear, but for some reason couldn’t bring himself to set it down on the phone box. Instead he paused, waiting for that familiar click, but nothing happened. Tonya hadn’t hung up.

“Tonya…?” He whispered.

There was a hitch in her breath. “Yes?”

“I…” He gulped. *What had Sirius said?*

“You’re... glorious.”

“Ha,” Tonya laughed lightly, “I love you, too.”

He had a bad feeling—like an instinct—but he was already drawing the phone away from his ear. Remus set the receiver down, cutting the connection and leaving his fingers warm and tingly. His stomach hurt.

Why did his stomach hurt?

Chapter End Notes

> ‘On the pull’ means you’re trying to find someone to date/have sex with.
> Wassail is a hot drink that is made with wine, beer, or cider, and also spices, sugar, and apples. Close to what is thought of as ‘hot apple cider’ in North America.
>
> This chapter always gets my heart-rate up somehow. But wow—fifty chapters! Feels like another milestone. Thank you for sticking with me this far <3

Chapter 51: Make an Abortion of It

Chapter Summary

Sex-ed has come to Hawkings. Fervent teenage hormones plague the campus.

Chapter Notes

CW: Sexual references, sexual innuendoes, awkward teenage tension, and [undescriptive] heterosexual sex.
(Don't read too much into chapter title, no one gets an abortion.)

If you're curious about the video they watch in class, I've based it of this one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWEyjBT2I-I

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I can dim the lights and sing you songs full of sad things,
We can do the tango just for two;
I can serenade and gently play on your heart strings,
Be your Valentino just for you;

Ooh, love, ooh, lover boy,
What're you doin' tonight, hey, boy?
Set my alarm, turn on my charm,
That's because I'm a good old-fashioned lover boy...

- "Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy" Queen, 1976

Monday 21st February 1977

Remus set his pencil down and groaned, pressing his palms into his tired eye sockets. He couldn't do this. Tonya had so much faith but it was clearly misplaced.

Oh, could that be a lyric?

Faith? Misplaced?

He wrote it down, but the moment it appeared on paper he hated it. Every time he tried to add anything to the composition it felt wonky. 'Tonya's Song' was quickly becoming the bane of Remus' entire

existence. None of the verses seemed to fit together right, and the only parts he actually liked felt too weepy.

You can stay up all night,
Figuring out what to do next;
And everything seems alright,
'Til you run out of cigarettes;

Raven-haired,
Midnight dancer,
If I could give you everything,
Would you ask for me?

Star of those rainy nights,
Now night is through;
You've asked your questions,
I've asked for you.

Songwriting was definitely how musicians went insane, he'd decided that early on. It took all of Remus' brainpower just to place a few rhymes together until they fit—but they never fucking fit! They always felt like they were trying too hard or reaching too far. He needed a smoke, or a spliff, possibly both and a shot of vodka and rubbing alcohol to polish it off, but sadly it was Monday morning and he was sitting in the music room waiting for the bell signalling the start of forms to chime.

Oblivious to his turmoil, Sirius bounded up the music stands in front of him and Remus flipped the little journal shut. Sirius eyed it like he wanted to say something, but sat down next to him instead, lightly drumming his hands on his thighs.

"Do you want to practice tonight?" He asked. "I've been wanting your opinion on a few different licks. I want them to sound good but not like an exact replica of Clapton or Richards, you know? We need to leave room for some spice if we ever want to make our own music one day."

"Can't," Remus said over a yawn, "told Marlene I'd meet her."

"Oh. Tomorrow then?"

Remus considered. He wanted to call Tomny but that wouldn't take all night anyway. "Sure. But we gotta fit some studying in there somewhere."

Sirius sighed. “Why?”

“Because I gave up my Sunday to write your bloody book report, and I’m still determined to kick your ass come exams.”

“How about I just throw the tests again and we play ‘Stairway to Heaven’ in peace?”

“You do that and I’ll snap a guitar string on your face while you’re sleeping.”

“You’d rather risk the front man of your band going blind than miss an evening of studying?”

“So that’s it, you’re the front man?”

“Unless you wanted the job.”

“What about James?”

“A front man needs to be a sex symbol,” Sirius lectured. “Potter’s got the looks sure, but how’s he supposed to appeal to an audience when all he’s got is ginger-on-the-brain?”

“He’s a *romantic,”* Remus said snidely, “I thought chicks dug that?”

“They do, but I’m not playing in a pop band.”

Remus nudged him and Sirius nudged him back and then the morning bell was ringing. Sheila strode out of the tiny office in the room’s far corner, dressed head-to-toe in vibrant magenta, and organised all of them into their chairs before flipping through the list of morning announcements.

“Good morning, class. Lunch today is chicken korma with a side of rice or jacket potato. Dinner is braised beef and Yorkshire pudding with treacle for dessert. Headmistress McGonagall has asked all teachers to remind students that toilet paper is school property and must remain on its dispensers within the lavatories and *not* decorating the gym foyer.” Sheila paused as a few of the kids snickered, before carrying on; “The following list of students have outstanding work for various professors; George Kelley, Bartemius Crouch, Samantha Harold, Bradley Wilkens, Jacqueline Hobbs, and Sirius Black. If you’re unsure of what it is you are missing please see me after announcements.”

“It’s probably that stupid paper for Slughorn again,” Sirius muttered when Remus glanced at him. “I keep telling the bleeder, the statute of limitations for January’s homework has passed.”

Remus swallowed his smile as Sheila finished.

“Lastly, all year twelve boys will report to classroom 3C of the Galilei Block with Professor Loughty for period one, where you will have a mandatory health lesson. Girls will report to the same room during period two with Ms. Hooch. Do not worry over your first or second period classes, all of your professors have been informed.”

“You know what that means,” Sirius said loudly, “we get the age-old abstinence lecture!”

There was a chorus of laughter and moans, while Sheila tapped her papers straight on the podium. “Yes, Mr. Black,” she acquiesced, “Professor Loughty will be delivering a lecture on sexual and bodily health, and I implore you to take it seriously. While it may seem a little funny or awkward, it’s important information that might help all of you better understand how your body works.”

“Pretty sure Black already knows how everything works,” Barty announced from the other end of the music stands. “He’s so attuned with his body he’ll show it off for a ten pence.”

“Mr. Crouch!” Sheila snapped, but Sirius took the jab in stride.

“Oh yeah, and don’t you worry, Bartemius, I’ve asked Hooch to take you off the list for next year on account of your vow of celibacy and how well acquainted you are with your right hand. Wouldn’t want to break up such a beautiful relationship after all.”

While Barty scowled and everyone else snickered, Sheila raised a tambourine and shook it enthusiastically. “Alright, alright, you know what time it is, so who’s ready for Monday morning mash?”

After forms they made their way across campus and found James and Peter already camped out together at the back of the classroom. Mickey was turned around in his seat, too busy glaring daggers at them to be aware of his surroundings, and so when he passed Remus smacked his fist on his desk to make him jump and then carried on, perfectly pleasant.

“Hey, Moony,” James said as Remus dropped down next to him. “You in this block too? Suppose Black got stuck with another group then.”

“No, he’s right—” Remus turned around to find that Sirius hadn’t followed him into the room, despite walking the entire way with him. “Well, he was right here.”

“Maybe he went to the loo?”

“Nah,” Peter said, lifting his head off his desk, “here he comes.”

Sirius marched into the room, sporting a thick pen-moustache to match their biology teacher’s. Swinging his school tie around in one hand, he stopped to peer out over the group of boys with narrowed eyes. “Alright!” He announced, in the deepest voice he could manage. “File in you filthy little horn-dogs, we’ve got some serious terrain to cover today, and we’ve already filled our quota for coat-hanger abortions this term so you’s all better listen up!”

Another boy named John Kelly raised his hand; “But Professor, are you sure you’re qualified to be teaching us this stuff?”

“Absolutely!” Sirius announced. “I did my dissertation on the Kama Sutra. Any other stupid questions?”

Vince Wood raised his hand; “Uh, yeah, so I talked to your mum last night and she says I got all this stuff covered so can I be excused?”

Sirius slapped his thigh. “That’s funny Vince, ‘cause I was chatting *your* mum up last night and she said you’re still having trouble fitting a condom on a banana.”

“Will there be snacks?” James called. Sirius pointed to Vince.

“Well, Wood? Care to share your banana?”

The whole class laughed and Sirius snatched up a piece of chalk. With it he wrote the letters *‘S E X’* across the entire board, before dropping it and dusting his hands. “Get ready to pop a nob lads because you’re about to get up and close with some real anatomy.”

“Please keep your anatomy to yourself, Mr. Black,” Professor Loughty said, sounding already exhausted as he strode in and set his briefcase down on the podium. “And have a seat, before I ask you to tell me the function of the epididymis and you’re forced to crack what I’m sure will be another completely inappropriate joke.”

Taking a little bow, Sirius skipped to the back of the class and dropped down next to Remus, turning to wiggle his pen ‘stache at all

of them.

“Right,” Loughty continued, walking to the corner of the classroom and rolling a mounted telly into the centre of the room. “Today we will be going through the male reproductive system and its functions. I will also be addressing the issue of underage copulation, the importance of abstinence, as well as the measures that can be taken to prevent contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as genital herpes and yes,” he glanced around lazily as most of the boys snickered, “it is a serious issue. 'Better to protect than regret'.”

Loughty turned to the television and hit the power switch. “The school has organised two films for today, the first being a short little skit on the importance of contraception when engaging in sexual intercourse. Please remember to be mature, as this could very well be you one day.”

“Or tomorrow,” Sirius said, elbowing Remus.

Their teacher hit play and turned off the lights, plunging the classroom into darkness as he took a seat at his desk and picked up a book of crossword puzzles. Remus leaned forward on his desk, using one hand to prop his head up as the film’s title intro rolled across the screen and the credits turned into a couple romping beneath their bed covers.

'Hold it, hold it a minute,” the narrator said, *“I think there are a few facts you should know. Did you know that in 1969 there were ten-thousand legal abortions? And that last year, over twenty-thousand teenage girls had illegitimate children? Did you know that one in every three happy teenage brides is pregnant?’*

“Hey Frankie, is your girlfriend up the duff yet?” Someone heckled.

“Yeah, but she ain’t happy about it!”

“Quiet,” Loughty called lazily.

The film went on, ending with a title card bearing the words, *‘There’s no need to make an abortion of it!’* that felt a lot cheerier than it should've, and from there they continued on with the video on reproductive organs and so forth. By the end both Sirius and James had their heads down on the table, most likely asleep, and Peter had busied himself by drawing and erasing little stick figures on the desktop. They left class feeling tired and world-weary, with slogans like ‘it’s never too late to wait!’ and ‘don’t be a louse, wait for your

spouse!' stuck in their heads like a bad holiday jingle.

"That was almost as bad as the puberty video they showed us in year eight," James sighed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as they crossed the grassy quad, heading away from the science building.

"But not as bad as the one from year ten with the guy in the condom costume," Peter added.

"They didn't show us anything last year, did they?" Sirius said. James looked at him and they matched smiles; "Budget cuts," they said in unison. Snickering, they clapped each other's hand lightly and James suddenly perked up.

"Did you see Andrew pop a nob during the girl bits?" He said.

"Oh yeah," Sirius sniggered. "Tried hiding it with his bag like no one would notice. Amateur."

"Like you've never been publicly compromised," Remus shot.

"Oh, got a personal stake in this, do you, Lupin? Okay then, where's the craziest place you've ever got a stalk-on?"

Remus suddenly felt very grey. "Piss off."

"Ho, ho," Sirius laughed. "That bad, huh?"

"Leave Remus alone," James grinned knowingly.

"I already know yours, Pot," Sirius said. "Christmas dinner when you were twelve and your cousin's girlfriend wore that top so low the potato mash went right down her shirt."

"I've seen you get one in church, Sirius," Peter added.

"Well of course! Gotta show Christ my love somehow! Oh and hey, look what I snagged from that basket on Loughty's desk." One handful at a time, Sirius produced dozens of condoms from his pockets, shoving them into his friends hands as they stared in shock.

"What are all these for?" James demanded.

"What else? For your alone time with Evans! Remember, 'don't be silly, wrap your—' "

"You're absolutely insane," Remus said, cradling the condoms to his

chest and half-terrified that Marlene would just appear out of thin air and spot them.

“Oh c’mon,” Sirius blagged, “enough of the innocent maiden acts—we’re all mates so time to fess up. Especially you, Potter. I know you’re just dying to spill the beans.”

“Lily and I haven’t done anything actually,” James said simply, and Sirius’ mouth dropped open in shock.

“Nothing?”

“No, not past snogging anyway. Why, got a problem?”

“No,” Sirius said dumbly, “I just thought that after—what, six months—that surely something must’ve happened?”

“Well, it hasn’t,” James said firmly, “and it’s also no one else’s business.”

Sirius put his hands up and looked at Remus. “Just surprised s’all, aren’t you, Moony?”

“No,” Remus said, “Marlene and I haven’t done anything either.”

“What? But you’re always sneaking off together!”

“Yeah, to study or read.”

“To *read?”* Sirius sputtered. “Oh my god. Fine—cool—whatever. Guess that just leaves Pete and me.”

“Actually Moira’s family’s really religious,” Peter said lamely.

“You *dirty little liar*. You told us that you and Moira had already bunked up before!”

“Well we’ve done other stuff!”

“What about you two then?” Sirius demanded, rounding on James and Remus. “What other stuff have you done?”

“Our ‘stuff’ is none of your business,” Remus scoffed.

“So you’re all total virgins then?”

“Sorry to disappoint you. Not all of us need to be promiscuous to

prove a point, you know."

Sirius pulled back as though he were genuinely offended. "Don't tell me you're jealous, Lupin."

"Of what—*you?"*

"Yeah, and the fact that I've put a condom on more than just a banana. At least I've done the stuff I say I have."

"In that case you can keep these," Remus said huffed, passing the handful of condoms back and clapping Sirius on the shoulder. "And hey, if Chastity's not interested in all that 'stuff' then I'm sure you'll find something else to do with them. Maybe you can blow balloons—throw a party—*no virgins allowed."*

Striding past him, Remus started across the rest of the berm with his hands in his pockets.

"Oi, don't walk away, you coward!" Sirius called. "I want to know what sort of 'stuff' you've done! *Augh!* Potter, did you just throw a condom at me? *Ngh—Ow!"*

The health class shenanigans persisted through the rest of the day, only emphasized by other students' engagement with the class content. By lunch, several of the school signs had been decorated with limp condoms—which Sirius had nothing to do with, he assured them—and Professor Loughty's portrait in the science hall had been defaced with a speech bubble reading, *'Can't spell underage copulation without abortion!'* only whoever had done it had misspelled 'copulation'. By dinner the 'sex on the brain' attitude had spread to almost all upper-secondary years, and a betting war had started over which teachers were getting it on after hours.

"My bet's on Ms. Pince," Mary said as they all met after class and headed for dinner. "I mean nobody could be as uptight as her without letting off some steam somehow, right? I'll bet she wears an entire get-up under those old-maid dresses of hers."

"Ooh, maybe she's a dominatrix," Lottie suggested.

"A what?" Marlene echoed.

"Oh, you know, Marls," Mary preened; "Means she gets off by dominating men. Sadomasochism and all that. Maybe you and Remus should give it a go."

Marlene's jaw dropped open, horrified, and she looked to Remus, who just shook his head in desperation.

"Or maybe Ms. Pince just takes bubble baths at the end of a long day," Lily cut-in mercifully. "Really, you guys are insane."

Mary pushed her playfully. "We're nothing compared to Black, Lils. You should've heard him in history. He started talking about the Egyptians and how they used to—"

"I *don't* want to know." With a sigh, Lily looked up at James, who was walking next to her in guilty silence. He smiled, and she just took his arm, leaning her head on his shoulder.

As Mary and Lottie fell back into more scandalous chat, Marlene drifted back to walk alongside Remus. He almost wished she hadn't—the awkwardness was nearly palpable—but at least once they made it to the dining hall, the rest of their friends broke off on their own, leaving them in relative peace.

“I don’t know why everyone loses their minds after a health lesson, it’s just basic biology," Marlene tutted. "Completely natural—it’s existed the same way for thousands of years."

“The exact same?” Asked Remus.

“Well, I’m sure there’s been *some* variation, but I mean, what’s so funny about the word ‘penis’? If anything it sounds a bit ugly.”

“I’m so glad we’re about to eat dinner."

“Sorry.” Marlene continued down the dinner line, examining the canteen’s food tables while Remus carried both meal trays and meandered after her. “It really shouldn't be so embarrassing. You want gravy?” He nodded, and she spooned gravy onto both their Yorkshire puddings. “Does it not bother you then, Remus? The ‘sex’ stuff?”

“Haven’t given it much thought.”

“Really?”

Remus raised an eyebrow. “Do you want the truth, Cherry, or should we just eat?”

Marlene shook her head and dropped several sausages onto their trays with a pair of tongs. “Okay, sassy-pants. You get the silverware, I’ll get

the drinks."

He nodded and left her at the end of the canteen line, crossing the dining hall to scoop a few napkins and two sets of utensils onto their trays. As he did, he noticed Chastity and Sirius sitting a few tables down. Reaching across the table, Chastity spoon-fed Sirius a bite and he stole her fork before holding it out of her reach and making her come around to his side to get it back. She slid onto the bench beside him and they kissed for a bit, before Sirius noticed him watching and tried to flag him down.

"Ready?" Marlene asked, appearing at his side with two cups in hand.

"Yeah," he mumbled, flashing a weak wave in Sirius' direction before following Marlene out of the dining hall. Trays in hand, they made their way one building over, to their secret spot on the second floor of the Flamel Block. It'd become a habit of theirs to sit at the window and eat, and they always did so while reading or else talking about their day. Today though, Marlene did not bring a book, nor did she seem very talkative. Instead they sat together, staring out their window as the late-winter sun dipped down over the trees.

"We could you know," Marlene said eventually. "I mean, just to get it over with. It doesn't have to be a big deal."

Remus didn't have to ask what she meant. "Wasn't it a big deal to you before?"

Marlene puckered a bit. "I'm not a little kid."

"I wasn't saying that."

"I know." She sighed, biting down on her fork. "It's just, I do like you, Remus. I do."

"I like you, too."

"And I would rather it be you than anyone else."

Remus pressed his lips together. "I've never done anything either," he confessed. This seemed to be the correct thing to say, because Marlene nodded earnestly.

"So we'd be each other's firsts then?"

He nearly winced—*how did people just talk about this stuff?*—but

Marlene was staring at him expectantly, and Remus didn't want to seem lame.

“Alright," he swallowed. "We’ll just do it then.”

“Okay," Marlene agreed. "I mean, the first time should be a little—you know—but all first times are, right? At least this way we could stop worrying about it. I’d rather get it over with and move on.”

“Yeah… get it over with.”

“Brilliant. It’ll have to be when the others are…”

“Yup.”

She reddened slightly. “Wednesdays the girls are always busy after dinner. Lily’s got prefect stuff and Lottie took up dance as her spare this term so she’s got practice. Plus Mary’s already got a date.”

"She has a date every Wednesday?"

Marlene's blush deepened. "Normally I'm the one who has to the leave. Why do you reckon we're here right now? Mary called dibs on the room after dinner."

Suddenly wishing he hadn't asked, Remus scratched his head. “So, I’ll just come over Wednesday then?”

“Yeah… Is this weird—planning it?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed. “Does it feel weird?”

“A bit.”

“Well… we don’t have to tell anybody.”

“That’s right!” She straightened up. “It’s just for us anyway. And everyone does it, right?”

“Er… yeah.”

Marlene nodded. “Brilliant, then.”

* * *

To their credit, they did not fold under sheer nerves. The air felt awkward, and without even realising it they'd spent the days before avoiding being alone together, probably because that would mean having to talk about it. Remus had half-expected Marlene to show up at any given moment and tell him that she'd changed her mind, but as always her will was resolute, and come Wednesday evening he told all his friends they were studying and that he'd see them later. On his way out he'd secretly raided the small trove of condoms Sirius had piled into their bathroom cabinet as a joke. He wasn't sure how many to take so he ended up stuffing a handful in his back pocket and shooting out of the room as though he'd just lifted from a corner shop.

When he got to the girls' room Remus found Marlene waiting for him in a pretty skirt she'd borrowed from Lily. She'd even put on some make-up, which he nearly said she didn't need before realising that that was probably not the smartest move. He called her pretty instead, and Marlene seemed pleased. There were candles lit that left the entire room smelling of vanilla and also made Remus' nose itch, but it went away when Marlene broke out a small bottle of rum, which they downed to calm their frenzied nerves. Remus kissed her first, because that was what he thought he should do, and thankfully Marlene followed his lead, curling into him on her Rowena-blue covers with slow and anxious fingers.

The beginning bit was really what took some finessing. He'd never seen a bra before—at least not one being worn—and the little hooks were really the bitches Lee was always saying they were. Up until that moment the most he'd ever felt of Marlene was her hands, neck, and face, and it surprised him how soft she was all over. But that was just girls. It was exciting—of course it was exciting—even if Remus spent the entire time feeling like his head was in an oven. When they finally started ridding themselves of the rest of their clothes, he pulled his shirt over his head and Marlene eyed the necklace Sirius had given him, thumbing it lightly before kissing him again. She was good at not dwelling on the awkward, at least, and eventually they got the motions down.

Sometime during the middle of it all, Marlene tapped him on the back lightly; "Um, Remus?"

He froze. "Are you okay? I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"I'm fine, but you're leaning on my hair."

"Oh, sorry!"

Afterwards they sort of just laid there, staring up at the top of Marlene's four-poster. He didn't think either of them had been good at it—really 'it' was just a jumble of sweaty limbs that'd only lasted for about fifteen minutes from start to finish—but the whole thing still made his heart race in an umcomfortable sort of way. Remus kept waiting for the feeling to disappate, but when it didn't he just accepted that that was how things went your first time. It felt easier.

"Well…" Marlene said finally; "that was…"

"Sweaty," Remus finished.

She laughed—thank *god*—and took his hand, bringing it up to her mouth. "I'm sure next time'll be better, right?" She whispered, lips just barely grazing his knuckles.

"Yeah. Next time."

And so Remus dressed, kissed his girlfriend goodbye, and made the trek home. His stomach still felt funny, and the entire way all he could think of was how badly he wanted to talk to Tomny, but when he made it back to Godric and dialled the flat, there was no answer. Frustrated, Remus slammed the receiver down on the machine, and turned for the stairs. It made him bitter to be ignored; enough so that he didn't even notice he wasn't alone when he walked into his own dorm room. It took until someone deliberately cleared their throat for him to whirl around, where he got an eye-full of Chastity's bare back as she straddled a half-naked Sirius over the covers.

"Augh—!" Remus covered his eyes; "You've got to be fucking kidding me!"

Chastity let out a girlish shriek and fell off of Sirius, sliding under the covers to preserve her modesty.

"Oh hey, Moony," Sirius said, slightly out of breath as he sat up in bed. Peeking through his fingers, Remus was relieved to find he still had pants on, though Chastity had the covers up to her chin. "Potter told me you'd be out today. Said McKinnon needed help with biology, yeah?"

"Marlene helps me with *my* biology homework," Remus said before he could stop himself.

"Well, I didn't actually mean 'homework', you dimbo," Sirius said cheekily, making Chastity giggle. "But don't worry, it's a natural

progression after health class. Even Evans has seemed more frisky lately."

"I'm leaving," Remus said quickly, reaching for the door.

"C'mon, don't be too angry, I'm pretty sure she and Potter got stuck with the sports equipment room."

"Leaving!"

"Can you at least bring a light when you come back?" Sirius called after him. "Can't find mine!"

He escaped down to the common room, where everyone else was mercifully going about the rest of their evening in complete and utter normalcy. After his heart had stopped hammering—he'd already given up on trying to eject the image of Sirius and Chasity in bed together from his mind—Remus pulled a random book from the common room's shelves and slumped down on one of the empty couches. Did it bother him that Sirius and Chastity had been dating for less than a week and already she'd seen his scars, while Sirius had felt the need to hide them from him for over a year? Probably. But that was normal, right? It was normal to be worried about his friend and also annoyed with him when he invited girls back to their room without saying anything.

So why was it Remus couldn't bring himself to concentrate long enough to read more than a page in his book?

It was agony, actually, just trying, and eventually he gave up entirely, leaving the book open over his face as he slouched back on one of the common room sofas. He was almost asleep when he felt a nudge on the bottom of his foot. Lifting the book, Remus found Sirius standing at the end of the settee, smiling shyly.

"You can come up now," he said. "Chas's gone home."

"You sure? Might want to air out the room first."

Sirius snorted and stepped up, snatching up the book and tossing it aside. "Come upstairs with me. I've got the stereo going, and there's weed and tea. We can snuggle too, if that's still not enough."

"You know," Remus started, sitting up, "you think you're so bold, but really you're just foul."

Sirius' eyes glittered. “Am I?”

”Yeah, you are. And I'm getting real sick of your shit.”

“Aw, Moony,” he grinned, “you're so cute when you lie. Now c'mon, tea's getting cold."

Taking a moment to lean down and pat him on the thigh, Sirius turned and strolled away with his hands in his pockets. Conflicted by his anger and the desire to follow him, Remus paused long enough to watch him go. His mouth had suddenly gone dry, and his heart was racing again as though he were back in Marlene's bedroom. But he wasn't in Marlene's bedroom at all, and as Sirius stopped in the common room's doorway to beckon him forward with another one of his cheeky smiles, Remus began to feel nervous all over again.

Chapter End Notes

A jacket potato is like a baked potato.
Idk if it's necessary to add, but 'outstanding work' just means overdue homework.
'Up the duff' is slang for pregnant.

Sommmmmme people might disagree with me, but I believe in stories like this that it's really important that Remus and Sirius find love and intimacy outside of one another too. In my experience, couples who've only ever had each other lack that quintessential portion of comparison when it comes to physical and emotional issues. If you've only ever been with one person (at whatever capacity), who do you have to compare yourselves to when things go awry? How do you know when things HAVE gone awry?
Anyway, that's just my explanation for this chapter. I hope you can see the tension I'm trying to build here, hehe. 'Til next time, loves! <3

Chapter 52: Mondegreen

Chapter Summary

Sirius asks for a surprising favour.

Chapter Notes

CW: Smoking.

A sort of continuation from last chapter; picks up a few days later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I was in a trance,
When I kissed the teacher;
Suddenly I took the chance,
When I kissed the teacher;

Leaning over me,
He was trying to explain the laws of geometry;
And I couldn't help it,
I just had to kiss the teacher!

- "When I Kissed the Teacher" ABBA, 1976

Friday 25th February 1977

Remus was astounded. Not once had Marlene ever hated a book he'd recommended. Maybe she wasn't in love with all of them, but never had she flat-out refused to finish a book she'd already started.

"But the ending is the best part!" He pleaded, gesturing wildly to *Carrie*'s cover, tattered from the amount of times he'd read it and re-read it. Tonya had opened a door for him over Christmas, introducing him to the gruesome genre he had no hope of satisfying among Hawkings' bland library pickings.

Marlene just turned her nose up. "The opening was traumatic. I felt so bad for the poor girl!"

Remus winced. "I know—but she gets revenge!"

"Doesn't her own mother try to kill her?"

“Yeah, but she kills her first.”

“How is that any better? It’s just miserable.”

“It’s horror.”

“Oh yeah, hor—ri—ble!”

Half-smiling, Remus shook his head with a tired sigh. “You’re killing me here, Cherry.”

“Better me than Carrie.”

Marlene tossed the book back across the outdoor picnic table and Remus caught it in the gut, letting out a long sigh. At least they were outside. The weather hadn't been so nice in weeks, and he was more than done with winter.

"Ah, finally! Someone else you can torture with chat of homicidal teenagers," Marlene said out of the blue. Perking up, Remus looked around and spotted Sirius just as he slid in next to him on the bench.

“Hey-up," Sirius smiled. "What are you two up to? Are you skiving off together? I'm not interrupting a snog-sesh, am I?” Sirius leaned into Remus, lips puckered, and Remus quickly pushed him away by the face.

"We're just having lunch, you lunatic."

“And we’re talking about Remus’ terrible new favourite book,” Marlene finished.

“It’s not terrible,” Remus insisted.

“Sorry, terribly *gruesome.”*

“It’s actually written really well. You might find it interesting if you actually gave it a chance.”

“Oh, I will. Just as soon as you read a book about the horrors of *male* puberty.”

“I have," he snarked. " ‘Lord of the Flies’ was a great read.”

Marlene scoffed at him while Sirius reached over, taking the book and turning over the cover. “ ‘Carrie’? Is it anything like ‘Emma’? How about ‘Heidi’?”

“It’s a horror novel,” Remus told him.

“Oh? So that’s what she’s contending with, then—the terrors of puberty...?”

“And also telepathy and mass-murder.”

“Sounds romantic,” Sirius said. "Maybe I should give it a go?"

Remus smiled, trying not to appear too pleased. "If you'd like. They actually just released it as a film last year.”

“And that’s my cue,” Marlene said, grabbing her bag and standing up from the table. “I’ll see you at dinner.” She reached across to give Remus' hand a little squeeze before turning and leaving them alone under the oak trees. Remus watched her go, keenly aware of how little they’d touched one another since that day in her room. He thought he should’ve been more disgruntled, but the bit of distance was somehow comforting. He’d grown weary of always being on hyper-alert around Marlene and questioning if he should be sitting closer or holding her hand or kissing her on the cheek or the lips.

“You two totally bunked up,” Sirius said plainly. Remus shot upright on the bench and whirled on him.

“What? Who told you?!”

"You did, just now," Sirius said, passing the book back. Remus took it, grumbling under his breath, but Sirius never missed a beat. He simply started twirling a lock of hair between his fingers. “And there were like half a dozen condoms missing from the bathroom. Seems a bit tenacious but I admire your ambition.”

Remus scowled and Sirius dropped the piece of hair, looking sly. “Haven’t seen you two kiss much recently, does that mean the whole thing went badly?”

“No,” Remus lashed, “it went fine, thank you. Don’t you have any other relationships to worry about—like your *own,* maybe?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about actually.”

Remus’ eyes widened. “Oh? You breaking up with Chastity then?”

“No. Way to jump the gun,” Sirius scoffed, looking up at him with a funny expression. “She's just been bugging me over something for a

little while.”

"What's so bad about that? You bug me all the time," Remus said, opting to hide his embarrassment with a jab. Again, Sirius took it in stride and leaned his head against one hand, looking up as though he were a cat and Remus was his favourite ball of yarn.

“She wants to get to know my friends better,” He explained. “So we can all—you know—get along and stuff.”

“She does?” Remus found it hard to believe Chastity cared all that much about getting along with anyone.

“Yeah," Sirius nodded. "And so Chas mentioned this idea of like, a double-date or something."

"A double-date?"

"It's a thing—they do it on the telly programs all the time."

“Uh-uh. Well, have you asked James?”

“Oh, you know Prongs," Sirius dismissed immediately; "always busy with this or that. Evans is even worse.”

Yes well, Remus imagined asking Lily to hang out with Chastity outside of class or prefect duties would’ve gone over like a ton of bricks anyway.

At his silence, Sirius leaned in. “We could do it tomorrow—just you and me, Chas and McKinnon.”

“Marlene and I are supposed to study tomorrow.”

“Well, that works. Call it a study date then.”

“You, Sirius Black? On a date with actual books, and actual studying?”

“Yes, numpty, I can concentrate when I feel the need,” Sirius snorted. “So whaddya say?”

Remus rubbed his neck, feeling a chill in the late winter air. “I dunno, Marlene’s sorta…”

“She’s a big girl,” Sirius supplied. “C’mon, it’ll be fun. And we haven’t studied together in so long.”

“Okay,” Remus caved almost immediately. “But not in the dorm—we'll never get anything done. We’re studying in one of the library rooms.”

“Oh… Now I see why you were so reluctant. Wanted some privacy, did ya?”

“No! God, I already said you could come, idiot.”

Sirius grinned. “Brilliant. Can’t wait to be taught by Professor Lupin.”

“Keep it up and I’ll fail you,” Remus said, gathering his things. Sirius popped up next to him, biting his lip, and snagged his copy of *Carrie* from the picnic table again.

“Mind if I borrow this?” He asked.

Remus felt a warm feeling rise in his chest. “No, go ahead. It’s really thrilling.”

“Tell me about it on the walk back to class?” Sirius turned to go, looking handsome in the early-afternoon sun, and Remus hurried after him.

“Okay, so I won’t spoil it but there’s this girl Carrie, and she’s being bullied in school but she finds out she has these crazy psychic powers and…”

* * *

Saturday 26th February 1977

Giving Marlene a decent head’s up about the double-study-date probably would’ve been the safe thing to do, but as they made their way toward the library that Saturday morning, Remus found himself growing more and more reluctant to fess up. Maybe Sirius and Chastity could stumble by and just casually join them, as if the whole thing was some big coincidence. He might’ve felt better about that plan, had he not also been troubled over another matter. Remus had tried ringing the flat again before he’d left Godric and still nothing. Just an empty dial tone and a crackling message box. Marlene was at least good to talk about it with, she always kept a level head about these things.

“It sounds like they’re just busy, Remus,” she reasoned, as they made their way into the private library study room and flicked on the lights. “You said they work a lot, right? Well, my dad says things haven’t been going well for a lot of businesses lately. Lots of lay-offs and trouble with the unions. What if they’re just worried about losing their jobs?”

“Yeah, maybe that’s it,” he said, though he doubted lay-offs would mean bad business. If anything, the more down-and-out the general population seemed to be, the easier it was to siphon drugs and other narcotics around the streets. People had to curb their depression and hopelessness somehow.

Marlene began spreading her school things out on the table. “Don't be too worried. I'm sure they're fine."

"Yeah. You're probably right..."

She smiled at him kindly before plopping down in her seat. "Right, so I figured we could cover the geography stuff first, and then those short answer questions for modern languages, and afterwards we could maybe read over each other’s essays? I promise not to nitpick your punctuation again but—”

“Sirius and Chastity are gonna study with us,” Remus confessed suddenly. Hearing Marlene list off their itinerary had apparently ignited that crucial bit of honesty within him, but it only left her open-mouthed and put-out.

“Why?”

“Apparently Chastity wants to… get to know us. She suggested to Sirius that we should double-date, and I told him we were studying today so…”

Marlene threw her arms up. “So nothing’s going to get done then. Brilliant.”

“We can still study,” he promised.

“With those two in the room? We’re as likely to get all our work done as being hit by an asteroid.”

“Well technically an asteroid is only an asteroid as long as it’s orbiting the sun. If it hits the earth it becomes a meteor.”

“Glad to see you paid attention during the space unit at least,” Marlene quipped. “Remind me to name a star after you someday. I’ll call it, ‘the most gullible boyfriend under the sun’.”

“The name might not fit on the certificate.”

“Oh sit down, you twat.”

He did so, and a few minutes later Sirius and Chastity appeared in the doorway, Sirius looking distinctly chipper, with Chastity clutched tightly onto his arm, more sceptical.

“Hi ya!” Sirius said, shutting the door and sitting down across from them.

“Hey,” Remus said, while Marlene answered with an apathetic; “Morning.”

“Moony you’ll never guess what James told me earlier,” Sirius started as he threw himself down into the chair; “One of the blokes on the team told him that a few ninth year kids heard about the church-weed thing, and they snuck in and nabbed a shit-ton of incense and were caught trying to smoke it behind their dorm.”

Remus split into a laugh. “Incense? You can’t get high off of that crap, I’m pretty sure it’s just perfume and sage.”

“Apparently no one told them that—they thought we actually put the weed in it!”

“Maybe Sheila’s right, it would’ve been a waste—” Remus paused his snickering as Marlene touched his arm, looking at him pointedly. “Oh,” he swallowed, “right, well, we were gonna start with geography, since Durrin assigned that workbook.”

“You mean we’re actually doing homework?” Chastity asked. She hadn’t so much as pulled out a pencil and had only been examining her nails.

“What else?” Marlene said. “You asked to study with us.”

“I asked?” Chastity echoed, and Sirius immediately put an arm around her.

“It’s okay, we can do some homework now and when it’s finished, something fun. Right, Moony?”

“Er—yeah, ‘course.”

Chastity huffed daintily. “Fine. But I don’t take geography so I’ll just wait for you to finish.”

“You didn’t bring anything?” Marlene raised a brow.

“No, I didn’t think we’d actually be studying on a Saturday, to be honest.”

Marlene looked at Remus, who looked at Sirius, who just looked happy.

“Here, Chas,” Remus said, passing along the rubric for their foreign language homework, “you take languages right?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, “cheers.”

It at least took care of Chastity. Remus already knew ahead of time, but like with most things, Sirius was a chatty studier and it instantly clashed with Marlene’s preferred method of stringent silence. Not even one page into the workbook, Sirius looked up and began peppering them with questions on this or that. Remus did his best to field most of them while Marlene turned away like a dog with its hackles raised.

“How’d you do the diagram, Moony?” Sirius asked, standing up to get a view of his work from the other side of the table.

“Like this.” Remus turned his workbook around to show him, and Sirius squinted at it before scoffing.

“Can’t see. Hold on, I’ll come to you.” He grabbed his own book and stood up, coming around to the other side of the table and pulling his chair directly up next to Remus’, peering down over his shoulder at his poorly drawn diagram of the hydrological cycle. “Oh I see, that makes perfect sense. But why did you draw a little Christmas elf in the middle of your page?”

“It’s supposed to be a guy holding a shovel,” Remus said, slightly red-faced.

“Oh. Thought it was a hat.”

“It’s still a library you know,” Marlene muttered, and Sirius looked up at Remus, wiggling his eyebrows. They set back to work, elbows resting against one another’s, before Chastity leaned back in her chair

with a heavy sigh.

“This is stupid. It’s the first beautiful day we’ve had all term and here we are shut up inside like a band of recluses.”

“You could go,” Marlene said. Chastity smiled and rolled her eyes at her like she was a hopeless dandy. Then she also got up, only she went to Marlene’s side and immediately grabbed her hand, lifting it to examine her nails.

“Oh my—Marlene, do you bite your fingernails?”

Marlene ripped her hand away, red-faced herself. “Don’t!”

“I bet you’d have really beautiful nail beds if you stopped.”

“Just mind your own nail beds!”

Chastity flipped her hair back and lifted one of Marlene’s pale braids next. “You have nice hair too. Don’t you ever think of doing anything with it? I see it’s a little thin around the top but enough mousse and no one’ll notice.”

Marlene snatched her braid back and snapped at her; “Do you always have to be so pushy?”

“I’m not pushy,” Chastity retorted; “I’m just trying to give you some pointers.”

“Who asked?”

“I bet Remus would appreciate it if you took a little more pride in your appearance, wouldn’t you, Remus?”

Remus balked; “Er… I think Marlene looks fine.”

“Well ‘fine’ never won any awards.”

“Why’d you even come today?” Marlene demanded. Her face had gone extremely red now, and she leaned away from Chastity as though she were afraid her callousness was contagious.

“You asked us to," Chastity answered scornfully.

“No, we didn’t! Remus and I would have twice as much work done already if we weren’t catering to you.”

Chastity scoffed and put up a hand. “God, this is why I hate you people. It’s all about school and marks—you think you’re so much better than everyone else because you’d rather be enslaved by homework than do something even moderately cool or fun.”

“You’re such a cow!”

“Wow, creative much? I think that might’ve hurt my grandmother’s feelings.”

“Okay,” Remus said, putting a hand on Marlene’s shoulder. “I think we should just stop and reevaluate for a second.”

Marlene just shook him off. “We do plenty of cool things, *for your information.”*

“Like what?” Chastity drawled.

“Well—we don’t have to explain ourselves to you!"

“Aw, is the swot running out of steam?”

“Just admit you can’t do the homework then,” Marlene snarled. “It’s too hard for you so you pretend like it’s uncool rather than ask for help from some ‘swot’.”

“You calling me stupid?”

“If the high-heel fits.”

“Fine,” Chastity growled, “but *you* have to admit to rejecting beauty only because you think it’s unattainable! You’re just afraid that if you try acting like a girl for once, you’ll fail at it and everyone’ll make fun of you! You’re just as fragile as the rest of us, princess. Don’t pretend.”

“Ooh, I knew we shouldn’t have let you come!” Marlene barked.

“As if I ever wanted to!” Chastity lashed back.

Half afraid that Chastity was going to end up with a broken nose or Marlene was going to lose an eye to one of her perfect fingernails, Remus stood and pulled his girlfriend’s chair backward. Marlene jumped up immediately, but Sirius came between them, hands up.

“Woah, woah, I don’t think I like this ‘cat-fight’ thing as much as I thought I would, so how ‘bout we just calm down, yeah?”

Marlene thrust a finger in Sirius' face, making his eyes bulge. "Next time your girlfriend has the bright idea of a double-date, read the audience first, Black!"

"For the last time, this was not my bloody idea!" Chastity snapped, standing up behind Sirius and grabbing his arm. "And I'll have to be out of my mind to ever hang around you people again! Sirius, let's go, we're leaving."

Chastity tugged him back sharply, and Sirius deflated before looking to Remus. "Moony...?"

Remus shifted uncomfortably while Marlene spun away and tossed her hands in the air. "Maybe you should just… you know, go…" He said.

Sirius frowned and Chastity shoved his bag and jacket into his arms, before taking his hand and throwing the study room door open.

"O-okay, see you guys later?" Sirius tried.

He waved lightly in answer and Sirius finally shut the door. Sorry to see him go, Remus dropped his hand to awkwardly rub the back of his head. "Well, that was…"

"The worst," Marlene huffed; "Absolutely fucking horrific."

"I was gonna say—"

"That it was awful? Horrendous? Harrowing?!"

Remus cracked a faint smile. "Well, I did learn one thing from this study session at least."

"And what was that?"

"That you're definitely scarier than Carrie when you're angry."

"… Not funny."

"… It's a little funny."

Marlene sighed again and leaned her forehead against his shoulder. "I just can't handle people like her."

"Me neither."

She was quiet for a moment. "Do you think I don't look like a girl?"

“Marlene, as someone who has seen you with your clothes off, I assure you, you’re no bloke.”

Marlene pulled back sharply and punched him in the shoulder. “Cheeky git,” she grinned. Remus matched it for a moment, before dragging her chair back to the table.

“Do you want to try and get some of this work done? For real this time.”

She nodded and they sat down together, drawn close to putter over each other’s notes as they always did. Despite the girls’ nasty row, it didn’t take them long to find their groove again, but the entire time Remus held Chastity’s words in the back of his mind.

When they finally broke for the afternoon, he walked back to his dorm to find Sirius lying upside down on his bed. He had Remus’ teashades on, with a spliff between his lips. The stereo was going—T. Rex to match his mopey mood—but he turned it down when Remus walked in.

“Wanna smoke?” Sirius asked, offering the half-finished joint. Glancing at it, Remus dropped his bag by his bed and walked over, before sitting down on the floor next to James’ bed and accepting the weed. He took a long draw, exhaling and resting his head back against James’ maroon bed covers.

“Why’d you say the study-date was Chastity’s idea?”

Sirius visibly winced, like he was hoping Remus would avoid the jugular for more than thirty seconds. “Dunno,” he muttered lightly, eyes hidden behind the sunglasses.

“Did you want them to fight?”

“No! I just, dunno… Wasn’t thinking, I guess.”

Remus examined the joint. “Liar.”

Sirius huffed and turned over onto his front, lifting the shades up onto his head. “So what do you want me to say?”

“How ‘bout the truth?”

“The truth?” He echoed. “The truth was, was that you’re spending all of your damn time studying and reading, and reading and studying—

and it's always with your bloody girlfriend!"

Remus was partly stunned. "That's what you're supposed to do with a girlfriend, innit?"

"No—well, yeah—but not all the time! Not so much that you forget your friends!"

"I haven't forgotten anyone!"

"James and Pete have noticed it too. You know, they wanted to tell you that story with the incense themselves, but you were nowhere to be found."

"I was just eating breakfast with—"

"With Marlene!"

Remus ground his teeth together, feeling heat spark in his cheeks. Had he really been avoiding his friends? No, not consciously of course, but between the need to beat Sirius in school and prove to himself that he was good enough to have a girlfriend it'd just been easier to play pretend-study with Marlene. They were so alike, but had enough differences to keep it interesting. Just like him and Sirius, he supposed.

Seemingly irritated by his silence, Sirius sat up and reached across the gap, plucking the joint from his fingers. Remus watched as he inhaled, those sharp cheekbones turning concave before he blew the smoke out the corner of his mouth and reached up and behind himself to tap the ash out into an ashtray he'd left on top of the stereo.

"Why didn't you just tell me all this?" Remus asked.

Sirius thumbed the joint's paper filter. "I don't know. Felt weird."

"It isn't."

Sirius glanced at him, eyes scanning him from head to toe. "It isn't...?"

"No. I didn't mean to ignore you, Sirius."

"I know." Sirius dropped the teashades down over his eyes and took a drag. "Don't flatter yourself—you're incapable of ignoring me on purpose."

He could've shot back a witty retort, he always had one, but instead

Remus just smiled, because Sirius was right. “Next time you want to hang out, just tell me.”

Sirius lifted the shades again; “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, I want to hang out.”

Remus blinked. “Like… right now?”

“Yeah!”

“O-okay. What do you want to do?”

Sirius stopped, like he hadn’t considered getting this far. Finally he flopped back onto his stomach and held his hands out, waving them as he spoke; “You know that book thing with McKinnon that you're always doing?”

It took Remus a moment to understand; he'd forgotten he'd told Sirius about it. “The chapter-reading thing?”

“Yeah! I want to do that.”

“Oh, you’d probably just find it boring though.”

“No, I want to, really!”

“Okay… got a book?”

Sirius grinned and held *Carrie* aloft. “I’ve already read the first few chapters. It’s… interesting.”

Remus smiled and stood, crossing to his side of the room to pick up a book of his own from the ever-growing pile next to his bed. “You’re going to have to apologise to Marlene, too, by the way.”

Sirius slid down onto the floor and stretched his legs out. “Yeah, I know. Chas was a bit out of line.”

“A bit? Anyway, it’s not just that. Pince overheard the two of them arguing. We’re banned from using the study rooms for a month.”

“Aw, fuck. Reckon she’s likely to beat me now.”

“You do sort of deserve it.” Remus dropped down across from him,

placing his legs just on the outside of Sirius'.

"So, what now?" Sirius asked, smacking his book on the ground lightly.

"Well, we read a chapter and then summarise it in twenty words or less, and then we trade and read the next chapter."

"Doesn't that get confusing?"

"You get the hang of it. It's really only something Marlene and I do for fun."

Sirius smirked. "Swot."

"Git."

They matched grins and each opened their books. It only took about ten pages for Remus to come to the conclusion that the book he'd picked, which had seemed a promising horror story, turned out to be a mere mash-up of cheap clichés and the odd sexual taboo or two, but he didn't get much further than that anyway. Two minutes in Sirius had begun to bob his leg incessantly, and Remus ended up staring at it more often than he did the page.

"Are you done yet?" Sirius asked eventually.

"You've finished the chapter already?"

"No, but… 'Pops' is showing a rerun tonight. Supposed to be Jethro Tull, 10cc, and Smokie."

Remus squinted at him, before shutting his book. "Okay, go on then."

"Yes!" Sirius jumped up, setting the book aside and gently tapping out the second spliff they'd lit before grabbing his jumper. "Say," he chirped, just as Remus got his boots on, "so long as we're being honest, I have got this other question."

"Shoot."

"Why is it McKinnon's always calling you 'Rem'? I just mean, what's that about?"

Remus stood up and shrugged innocently. "It's a sports thing, I think. Like how the guys sometimes call James 'Pot'?"

“It’s weird.”

“That’s rich, coming from the guy who came up with ‘Moony’, ‘Wormtail’, and ‘Prongs’.”

Sirius threw the door open and clicked his tongue. “Aw, it’s cute of you to pretend you don’t totally love it. Now c’mon, I’ve been missing you and we’re not going to waste this evening by sitting together in utter fucking silence.”

“Heaven forbid.”

Chapter End Notes

> Short, innocent little chapter, mostly because I've been so busy! Hope you guys still liked it, and happy Halloween. I think it's actually so fitting that Remus is a horror fan, even if I'm a big wuss myself, hehe.
>
> In case you were unaware, a 'mondegreen' is a misunderstood or misinterpreted word or phrase resulting from mishearing of the lyrics of a song. Felt fitting somehow, since Remus and Sirius keep misunderstanding one another. (Things change soon though, I swear it!)
> Next chapter's gonna rock some socks, but the one after that is... hmm :) <3

Chapter 53: People's Parties

Chapter Summary

March passes. Remus' comfort comes with a surprising confession.

Chapter Notes

CW: Allusions to child abuse, mostly manipulation and neglect. Smoking and drinking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the dry and dusty road,
The nights we spend apart alone;
I need to get back home to cool, cool rain,
I can't sleep, and I lay, and I think;
The night is hot and black as ink,
Woo, oh God, I need a drink of cool, cool, rain…

- "Love Reign O'er Me" The Who, 1973

March 1977

Remus knew his friends meant well, but his birthday had never really been of much interest to him. In fact, he loathed it. The whole thing made his stomach twist with uneasy memories and having to pretend that he was having an even-moderately good time was exhausting. The year before the girls had all but tricked him into having a party, but even then it was more about James and Lily getting over their spat. And seeing as how the pair were only more in love than ever, a sudden break up seemed unlikely.

Stubbornly, Remus had already flat-out refused to let Sirius use his birthday as an excuse to throw a party in the common room, which he acquiesced to—bitterly—perhaps only because James' seventeenth was a few weeks away and on a weekend anyway. It was a small mercy, and afterwards even the girls gave up pestering him. Suddenly all talk of his birthday became null. Remus could hardly believe it—they were actually listening to him.

Ha, complete bullshit. Sure, Remus didn't want to hear about any chatter over his birthday, so what did his namby, over-achieving

friends do? They planned a surprise party of course.

Now, with surprise parties, the ‘surprise’ bit tended to be crucial; but none of his friends were known for being particularly proficient at lying, and they all talked too much anyway. The real shock came when Lily was the first one to give up the ghost. Her agenda had mysteriously disappeared (it turned up later in James’ bag) and she was scrambling to remember her meticulously planned school week on a piece of scrap paper.

“When did we say we were going to compare history essays again?” She asked, her face flushed with worry.

“Wednesday night?” Remus supplied.

"Uh-uh, I've prefect stuff!"

"Thursday?"

“No, that’s the night of your party!”

Lily had immediately shot upright and Remus sighed, already tired. “Party?”

“Oh, don’t tell anyone I told you!" She moaned. "It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“I thought we agreed no parties.”

“It’s just a small one! We were gonna do it in your guys’ room. We have to do something, Remus, it’s your birthday!”

He was irritated, but Lily just batted those big green eyes of hers and he caved. “Fine, but I’m not going to pretend to be surprised or anything.”

Lily had to accept that, but her accidental confession got the gears turning in his head. If it was that easy to get Lily Evans to fess up, how would his other friends fare?

Peter and Lottie were easy of course. Neither of the twins could keep a secret to save their life, but James had been slightly tougher. He’d finally broken when Remus turned the tables, making it sound as though he was sad his friends were willing to forget his birthday all together.

“Yeah, I dunno. I guess I’m just a little bummed, but my birthday is on

a Thursday and we're all so busy, so I get it."

"No, Moony!" James tried. "I swear we haven't forgotten!"

"Oh I know, it's just…" he sighed, "but it's okay, we'll do something real grand for your birthday."

"We're doing something for yours too!"

"Oh… really?"

"Yeah! It was supposed to be a surprise, I swear!"

"A surprise?"

"Mhm! So you don't have to… worry…" James stopped, because he'd noticed the evil grin on Remus' face. "You dick," he hissed immediately. "Who told you?"

"You did, just now."

James put his head in his hands. "Don't tell Lily," he mumbled.

And he didn't, because it was so funny that they all thought they'd spilled the beans on their own. The last one he managed to get to fess up was Mary, who did so with little effort on his behalf, as she was too busy defending her favourite pop group to notice.

"There's an ABBA song for everything," she'd declared.

"Even funerals?" Remus had sassed.

"Sure. Send off your grandma with 'Hasta Mañana' and I guarantee there won't be a dry eye in the room."

"And yet I remain unconvinced."

"Fine, I'll just have to prove it to you tomorrow."

"Hmm, can't. I'm busy tomorrow actually."

"No you're not, you'll be with us celebrating your—fuck."

It was funny, but the only ones who refused to crack were Sirius and Marlene. They'd been considerably good at dancing around the subject of his birthday, even when he got weepy over it like he had with James. Remus was fully prepared to call them on their icy hearts, only

he hadn't planned for the significant derailment. If he had, things would've gone a lot differently.

On the morning of his seventeenth birthday Remus woke up to a friendly dog-pile and a delicious breakfast organised by James and his favourite lunch lady. He was sung to, congratulated, and then afterwards, guided around by an unsuspecting Marlene.

"I still don't see why I can't go back to my room and get my other coat," he pushed cheekily. "It's freezing out here."

"Here, you can have mine," she offered quickly, shrugging off her oversized leather jacket and draping it around his shoulders. She did her best not to look chilly without it, but they were on a walk around the lake to undoubtedly kill time and it was already getting dark.

"I know, you know," Remus said, taking off the jacket and passing it back. Marlene took it, her mouth dropping open into a sour 'o'.

"How—who told you?"

"All of them," he smirked. " 'Cept Sirius."

Marlene moaned and checked her watch. "Fine, whatever, it's about time we got back anyway."

"I promise to act surprised," he told her as they turned around.

"You'd better!" Marlene said, jabbing him in the arm with her finger. "I was counting on it being funny, Lily was going to snap a picture!"

"Well how's this?" He threw up his hands. *" 'Oh my god, I had no idea —you guys really got me'!"*

"Try for a little less sarcasm."

"Now you're just asking for the impossible."

They took the evening trolley back to the dorms, where Marlene stopped him, checking her watch once more. "Just do us a favour and hang out in the common room for a bit. Black's got detention and he wanted to be there when you came up, and considering he's the only one who didn't blow the gaff, I think he deserves to be in on it."

"Of course he does," Remus smiled. "It's fine, I was gonna make a call anyway."

She beamed. “To your friends back home? Say hi for me.”

“Kay.”

Stretching up onto her tiptoes, Marlene gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before escaping up the stairs to their dorm, shrugging off her jacket as she went. Remus watched her go before he crossed the hall to the phones, where he picked up the receiver and pounded the flat’s number. It’d been over two weeks since he’d heard from Tomny or Tonya, but today was his birthday, *dammit!* And he was determined to keep calling until someone bloody well picked up.

The phone rang once in his ear, then clicked on and Remus huffed, ready to give his friend a piece of his mind.

“Tom! Hey! Why you been ignoring—”

‘We’re sorry, the number you have reached is not in service, or is temporarily disconnected. The number you have reached is not in service at this time. This is a recording.’

Remus’ stomach dropped to the floor as the intercept message droned on in his ear.

‘If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again. Goodbye.'

The line clicked dead, and Remus faltered. It was a mistake, had to be —he’d just entered the number wrong. The number he’d had memorised ever since Tomny had given it to him. He'd just entered it too fast. That was it. He dialled again.

‘We’re sorry, the number you have reached is not—’

His hands were shaky that time. Again.

‘We’re sorry, the number—’

Again.

‘We’re sorry—’

“No!” Remus wailed, slamming his fist against the wall beside the phone. He couldn’t listen to the message anymore, so finally he set the receiver down, jaw clenched so tightly his teeth ached. There were plenty of reasons why the phone wasn’t working; maybe Tomny had forgotten to pay the bill—he did that sometimes with the gas or

electric, but it hadn't happened since Tonya had come. Maybe they'd gotten drunk and busted the phone, or maybe they were having issues with the telephone company. There were so many unexciting, mundane reasons why he shouldn't be worrying, and yet, there were just as many horrible excuses to do just that. Problems with money, a fallout with Burrin, a break-in at the flat, a fight amongst themselves. All were just as probable as the mundane, but none scared him as much as the thought that they were all gone—that the flat was sitting empty or now had new tenants. That they'd said nothing and left him behind. That someone had...

Marlene would've told him he was jumping to conclusions—worrying himself for no reason, but at least she knew something about it—not a lot, but *something.* She and her family understood what it was like to live near the bottom. They'd struggled to make ends meet before, followed the politics that affected the little people. She'd understand. He just needed to talk to Marlene.

Practically running, Remus threw himself up the stairs to the fourth floor, arriving wide-eyed and out of breath. He only stopped—right before his bedroom door—when it occurred to him that six of his friends were just on the other side, waiting to shout and cheer and have a good time. He could hear the girls' laughter as ABBA seeped out from beneath the door like a poor joke;

'Knowing me, knowing you,
There is nothing we can do;
Knowing me, knowing you,
We just have to face it, this time we're through;
Breaking up is never easy, I know but I have to go,
Knowing me, knowing you,
It's the best I can do …'

Remus was instantly sobered. Mary was right; there *was* an ABBA song for everything.

"You gonna stand there all day or are you going in?" Sirius asked, a merry ring in his voice. Remus looked up to see him walking toward him, hands in his pockets and a happy smile on his face. "Did ya lose your key? I got mine right here, just say the word."

Deadly quiet, Remus stepped back from the door and marched down the hallway, blazing past Sirius and reaching the stairs in an instant.

"Woah," Sirius called; "Where are you going? We—there's something

__”

“I know about the party, and I’m not going in there,” Remus snapped, slamming to a halt on the top stair.

“A-Alright…” Sirius pulled his hands out of his pockets, “but you know we didn’t mean to upset you or anything.”

“You didn’t!”

“So you’re pissed off for no reason…?”

“No!” Remus grunted. He felt like he might explode if he stayed any longer. “I just can’t go in there.”

Sirius bit his lip. “Okay… What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know—*go.* I need to get out of here.”

“Well, do you mind if I come with you? You just… no one should be alone on their birthday, right?”

Remus was a little stunned, but he turned away sharply and took a few more stairs down. Finally he looked back. Sirius was still standing in the middle of the hall, rubbing the back of his neck sorely. “Well?” He demanded. “You coming or not?”

Eyes wide, Sirius sprung forward. Together they wordlessly continued down and out, marching across campus one behind the other. They walked aimlessly at first, Remus sharply changing directions every few minutes to keep his mind from wandering back to the flat. Sirius never questioned it, and didn’t speak either, which he was grateful for. Finally, Remus figured out where it was he wanted to be, and started toward the right building with long, purposeful strides. Sirius had no trouble keeping up.

When they made it to the astronomy building, Remus popped the lock. The cool air inside was a relief. He’d felt stifled in the dorm, but the openness of the night sky had made him feel as though he were going to drift right up into open space. He needed something to ground him, and the dark, wide space of the telescope hub did just that.

Sirius gawked up at the domed ceiling of the circular room. “Bloody hell, Moony, you’ve really scoped out every hiding spot on campus, haven’t you? I never saw this place on that map of yours.”

Partly ignoring him, Remus crossed the room to the far wall and collapsed against it. “Shut the door,” he said, and Sirius did so, leaving them in near-complete darkness apart from the faint glow of a single desk lamp spilling through the glass window of the research room next door. Remus withdrew the couple of spliffs he’d been keeping in his pocket for the party and lit one. A moment later Sirius came to join him against the wall and after a long drag, he passed the joint along.

“That’s a big telescope,” Sirius said, observing the ginormous device that took up most of the centre of the room. He held the spliff to his lips before speaking around it; “Maybe I should take astronomy next year.”

“Would’a thought you Blacks knew enough about stars,” Remus quipped. There was no humour behind it, but Sirius laughed anyway.

“You’re probably right. Every time I cracked a book to study I’d be reminded of some horrible second cousin or something.”

“As if you study.”

“Touché.” Sirius passed the joint back. “So do you want to talk about what’s got you so wound up?”

“No,” Remus answered, leaning his head back against the wall. “I just… want to be quiet for a bit.”

“Alright then.” Sirius leaned his chin on his hand and began bobbing one foot, but he was quiet.

“Tell me a story,” Remus said suddenly.

“Thought you wanted quiet? You’re being contradictory.”

“I’m a contradictory guy.”

Sirius sat up a bit. “Do you want to ask each other questions again?”

“No, I just want to hear you talk.”

“Okay,” Sirius breathed, taking a second to think. “Did I ever tell you about Gisela?”

“Who’s she, another girlfriend?”

Sirius chuckled. “No, she was mine and Reg’s governess when we were

kids. She watched us before we went away for school and again whenever we came home for holiday. We adored her. She would always hide sweets under our pillows for when we woke up and sometimes in the summer they'd melt and just make this horrible mess but she still did it. And she used to let us use the maps in the drawing room as play mats and we'd make little army men out of sticks and bits of rubbish and argue over who took over what country. Mum hated it of course, but Gisela thought it was 'good for our development'. Made us resourceful or whatever."

"And what happened to her?"

"Dunno." Sirius pulled his knees up to his chest. "When I was about seven or eight she and the gardener disappeared."

"It's always the gardener."

"Yeah," Sirius chuckled. "And they took with them the twenty-thousand pounds they'd stolen from my father's safe."

Remus paused, joint halfway to his lips. "She robbed you?"

Sirius shrugged. "Didn't feel like she was robbing me. Dad maybe, but Dad's pockets always felt like black holes. I was smart but I didn't have any real concept of money."

"Wow. Just when you think you know someone…"

"Oh, I knew. I was the one who gave her the code."

Remus blinked. "Hold on, you *helped* her rob you?"

"Guess it was a big thing back then, but obviously it didn't put much of a dent in the Black family fortune. And I didn't care. I just wanted to make her happy." Pausing, Sirius bit his lip. "You know, I've never told anyone that…"

Sirius began scratching at the floor with his fingernails and Remus stared down at the joint, before offering it. "I used to go on these treasure hunts for my mum," he said quietly. "That's what she called 'em anyway."

Looking up, Sirius raised a brow and took the spliff. "Treasure hunts? What sort of treasure?"

"Not the kind that would excite a kid. It was medicine—pills mostly. I

don't think Dad wanted her to have 'em. These men—sometimes they were 'doctors' other times they were other 'buccaneers'—they'd come 'round the house when he was away and leave packages in the mailbox or hide them in the bushes." Remus chuckled darkly, shaking his head at the ridiculousness of it all. "I'd go down and get them and sneak them back inside for her. Eventually I had to start hiding them under my shirt or Giles would take them. I didn't always know what was inside but I didn't really care."

"So why'd you do it then?"

"I guess... because I wanted to make her happy."

Sirius took a deep breath. "It's fucked up, man."

"Yeah. But we turned out alright in the end, right? You're a genius, albeit a lazy one—"

Sirius' arm shot out, wagging a finger at him. "And you're the only person on planet earth, Remus Lupin, that can make someone feel better about themselves by making them feel worse!"

Smirking, Remus lit another spliff and held it aloft. "Cheers to that, Black."

Sirius shook his head. "Oi, toss your lighter here."

He did so and Sirius stuck his hand in his pocket, withdrawing something. Remus had to squint in the low light to see what it was, but when he realised he couldn't help his surprise. "Is that one of Bob's firecrackers?"

"Yup," Sirius smirked. "I was gonna freak the girls out by playing at putting it on top of your cake, but guess since we don't have one of those around…"

He jumped up to his feet and Remus followed suit, stepping in close as Sirius lit the fuse and it sputtered to life. "Make a wish," he said, before chucking the little firework across the room. It cleared the whole space and bounced off the other side of the circular walls at least twenty feet from them before going off with a noise so loud it reverberated around the room like trapped thunder. Sirius whooped, punching the air as dots of light covered Remus' vision.

"Yes!" He shouted. "Fuck silence!"

Remus coughed out his laughter and Sirius was right there, pushing a second firecracker into his palm. “Do it, Moony,” he said. He passed him the lighter, their fingers fumbling against one another in the dark, and Remus flicked the flame to life, bringing the fuse toward it. He held the firecracker for a few long seconds, entranced by the way the flame desperately licked down the wick toward its inevitable doom. In it he pictured Tomny, running in a life that would only lead to rougher and rougher landscapes. He pictured Tonya, a born traveller who’d willingly locked herself up inside a flat she hated and for what —love? He saw his father and the misery he’d embraced as his everyday, and his mother who’d gone and left him instead.

Remus threw the firecracker. It exploded above their heads, without even making it to the other-side of the room. The noise was deafening and wonderful.

“Fuck yeah!” Sirius screamed.

“Fuck!” Remus wailed. “Fuck you!”

“Yeah, fuck you!”

“FUCK YOU!”

Sirius clapped him on the back, grinning sadly. “Fuck them.”

“Do you have another?” Remus breathed.

“No, sorry. That’s it, mate.”

He sagged against the wall, half in disappointment and half in relief. “It’s alright. I just… I needed that.”

“I know.” Sirius came to join him at the wall, tucking his hands behind him. Remus scooped the joint he’d dropped up off the floor and relit it, sucking in and passing it along to him. Sirius held it to his lips, before pausing; “Have you ever just wanted to get something off your chest so desperately it feels as though you’re drowning?”

“Yes,” Remus said, truthfully.

“Do you remember the last question you asked me outside the pub?”

Remus’ heart jumped. “ ‘What happened with Miles’.”

“He was... sick,” Sirius said after a long pause; “That wasn’t a lie, but there was other stuff too. He and I… we used to write each other these

letters. We'd write all the things we couldn't bring ourselves to say out loud and then trade. It was like a game at first. 'You couldn't say it but you could write it down'. It made stuff feel… I don't know—safer."

"Like Gisela."

"Yeah, and other stuff too. Anyway, one day when he was home for Christmas I guess his grandparents found one of the letters or something. They almost didn't let him come back to school, but he did and we… man, I really liked Miles."

Sirius brought the spliff to his lips sharply and breathed in. His hand—his perfectly steady musician's hand—was trembling.

"I get it," Remus said.

"You do?" Sirius' gaze snapped to him.

"Well, yeah. He was your friend."

Sirius deflated. "Then you don't get it. I *liked* him—and he liked me too. That was the problem, don't you see?"

Remus felt something twist in his gut. "So that means you… oh."

"Yeah."

"With… boys?"

"And girls." Sirius crossed his arms haughtily. "So you get it now, why I couldn't tell the others?"

Remus was stunned into silence. Never before had he considered… Sirius was a boy, and Miles was a boy, and… *Jesus.*

"Well say something!" Sirius pushed.

Remus scrambled; "I… Wow. I just didn't expect that… I mean, you date a lot of girls, Sirius."

Sirius scoffed. "What about you? You mean to say that there's nothing going on between you and that 'Tom' guy?"

"What? Tomny—no! He's dating Tonya."

"You're always on the phone with him."

“Not *always.”*

Sirius knocked the ash off the end of the spliff. He handed it back, not looking at him. “Oh.”

Remus stared down at the weed before taking it. Sirius’ fingers were warm.

“Their phone’s down,” he confessed. “I was… I *am* worried. It’s never happened before and they’re—they’re not like you and me. I think they’re part of a gang now.”

Sirius’ mouth pinched together like he wasn’t sure if he should be impressed or apologetic. “A gang? That’s who you’re friends with?”

“They weren’t into all of it when we met. It was just fun, then.”

“Well, guess that explains a lot about you,” Sirius said. Remus looked at him questioningly and he tapped his own nose so he understood.

“Oh, yeah." Remus reached up to run his fingers across his scar. "It was awful. Tomny blamed himself for it.”

“I hope he at least killed the guy who did it. It’s such a shame—marking up your face like that.”

“You saying I’m ugly now?”

“Nope, not saying that at all. Handsomest Lupin around.”

“I’m the only Lupin around.”

“That’s convienent, isn’t it?”

Remus tipped his head forward to hide a smile. Sirius watched him and when their eyes met again he bit his lip. “I won’t tell anyone about you and Miles. I swear.”

“Didn’t think you would, but thanks,” Sirius said, crossing his ankles. “I mean it’s cool right? You’re with McKinnon and I’ve got Chas, so… it’s cool. All of it.”

“Yeah… cool.”

“And I trust you, you know,” Sirius said, knocking him on the thigh, “I do.”

“I trust you too.”

“Good. Oh, and Remus?”

He looked up in earnest. “Yeah?”

“Happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Sirius.”

They sat together for a long time and when they’d run out of weed and the darkness began to feel stifling they walked. All over the campus they went, killing time until midnight had come and gone and rather than being Remus' birthday, it was just any other early morning in late winter. When they finally returned to the dorm during those wee hours, they found their friends waiting for them. None of them were happy, but his and Sirius’ quiet moods were enough to cue in on, and each of the girls simply kissed him on the cheek and left.

"Sorry guys. Didn't mean to ruin the night," Remus said, while his friends slipped into bed. James turned around, shaking his head kindly.

"Don't be. We're just glad you're okay."

"Yeah," Peter yawned. "Besides, we got to eat all your cake."

Everyone snorted, and James took off his glasses while Peter pulled his bed curtains shut. Sirius, who had been reclining on his bed, sat up and reached for his own curtains. Catching Remus' eye, he raised his chin and winked before shutting out the light. A second later a chorus went up; "Happy birthday, Moons."

"Yeah, happy birthday to Moony."

"Happy birthday, mate!"

Remus laid down in his bed. His voice was a whisper; "Thanks guys."

He tried the flat several more times after that. The line was never reconnected.

Eventually Remus stopped calling.

* * *

On the day of James Potter's seventeenth birthday, the sky over Hawkings opened up and poured like the heavens themselves were in mourning. The water came down in sheets so heavy that the moment you stepped outside you were soaked to the bone. And it just kept coming. All day it rained, battering the windows of their dorm with the ferocity of a thousand Big Bad Wolves. The rain was so incessant that it would end up washing out the bit of road behind the science building, forcing the trolley routes to change for the remainder of term while also flooding the football pitch so badly players were slipping around in mud for weeks afterwards. It was a Sunday, which meant no classes at least, but the trek to breakfast was miserable and by the time they reached the hall their wellies were filled up from the top down.

"If April showers bring May flowers, what do bloody March downpours bring?" Peter asked dolefully.

"Good luck," James answered, shaking out his soaked curls and beaming all the while.

James truly was brilliant, Remus knew. The rain would've ruined anyone else's mood—and it did—but not his. No rain could dampen James Potter's tenor, not even on his own birthday.

Like the rest of them, Sirius had been less excited about the weather, thinking mostly about how it would dull the affairs they had planned for the evening, but by the time they were loping back across campus after class, he'd given up the bad mood and tipped his head back to feel the water spatter him on his cheeks and eyelids. He'd waited until they were outside Godric to stop and do this, and each of his friends yelled at him from the front steps to come inside.

"No!" He called. "You have to feel this! It's like—like rebirth! This is what it means to start over, I know it! To get another chance!"

"The only thing you're gonna get is a cold!" Remus reasoned.

"I don't believe in coincidences! What song were we just playing yesterday—'The Rain Song'! 'Upon us all a little rain must fall—just a little rain'!"

"He's finally gone mental," Peter moaned over the noise of the rain. "He's quoting Zeppelin in the middle of a storm."

"No, I think I get it," James said, shucking off his coat and skipping down the dorm's steps to join his best friend in the rain. Sirius jumped

when he saw him, throwing his own jacket aside and taking James' hand as he let loose a war-cry of pure exhilaration. James matched it, and they swung each other around through the lawn's grassy puddles until they were both sprawling and laughing.

"Oi," Kenny said, sticking his head out the front door; "What are they doing? They're not drunk already are they?"

"No," Remus answered, "they're being reborn."

Kenny shook his head like they were all crazy and ducked back inside as a shivering Peter did the same. Remus stayed, and eventually he sat down on the steps, pulling off his jacket hood and leaning his chin on his arms. They probably were mental, but if Remus understood anything, it was that what Sirius and James were experiencing at that very moment was as close as any of them would ever get to feeling like gods.

So he watched, and he thought the same thought he'd been thinking for the past three weeks, because it was impossible *not* to think about. It was a revelation that he hadn't seen coming and yet after a month of thinking, he was still unable to comprehend how he'd missed it. Sirius must've done it on purpose just to mess with him. Just to make it so the few hours of sleep he got a night were plagued with wild thoughts and even wilder dreams. So that wherever he went, whether it be alone or in the company of others, he was *always* thinking about him. And it worked.

Sirius Black liked girls.

And boys.

And apart from the mysterious roommate who'd disappeared late their tenth year, he was the only person on earth who knew.

Fucking hell.

Remus had never put much stock in being gay. He'd never known anyone who was—probably. It was an out-of-sight, out-of-mind sort of thing, wasn't it? He'd thought once that maybe Lyall was a bit buggered, after all he'd never remarried, but at the time it was just another way to slander his father in his head. Now it made him feel guilty—he would never have said anything like that to Sirius, though he supposed that Sirius wasn't gay, not as long as he liked both guys and girls. He wondered if there was a way you could be both, but he couldn't fathom how that would work. Tomny had had a girlfriend

once named Viola who claimed to go both ways, but she only ever kissed other girls while drunk. It seemed to him at the time that she only did it to show off to other guys, but Tomny never seemed to care and he'd only dated Viola for a few months anyway.

Remus tried not to think about Tomny much. He'd told himself after the third week of zero contact that Tomny had moved on, or was gone —anything to keep from dwelling, but that too, was impossible. There were too many unanswered questions, too many unknown variables. Several times he'd almost considered just up and leaving—hitch-hike to the nearest train station and catch a ride back to London to see for himself what had happened, but eventually he'd started confessing these ideas to Sirius who was always somehow able to talk him down. Perhaps it was because Sirius claimed they were moments of strength.

"They should be grateful for your loyalty," he'd always say. And afterwards Remus would be able to sleep, for a little while.

It was a strange dynamic. By day Sirius was his worst nightmare—a plague of cheeky remarks and grudgingly handsome looks—and by night he was his saviour. He'd tell more stories about Gisela or things that had happened to him and the boys as they grew up at school, and for once he did not dance around the mention of Miles. Remus learned that things between them hadn't changed until their tenth year. Before then they'd been best friends like anyone else, but unlike James or Pete, Miles understood what it was like to not enjoy going home for the holidays. Sirius had grappled onto that.

In exchange for his honesty, Remus told him bits of what it was like living at the flat. Sometimes it was hard—just getting the words out felt like he was regurgitating glass—but other times it was easy. He mostly talked about Lee and Doss and Seesaw, and also Flacky who'd died too young. He mentioned little about Tomny or Tonya, perhaps only because they confused him the most now, but also because he blamed them more than the others.

Soon it became clear that they'd unintentionally become each other's secret-keepers. It wasn't as though James, Lily, Marlene, or any of the rest of them weren't trustworthy, but in the early hours of the morning when he couldn't sleep, the only one he wanted to talk to was Sirius. Because, as he was coming to realise, Sirius understood. He knew what it was like to be left behind, to ache in the absence of someone. But where he now had Sirius, Sirius had had no one. It made Remus want to swear undying loyalty to him, and so he did—silently. He promised himself that girls or boys, he would always be there for

Sirius, because that's what a good friend would do.

"C'mon, Moony! You have to feel this!" Sirius shouted. His voice carried across the heavy rain, aided thanks to James, who had lifted him onto his shoulders in a great hurrah. Seeing them so happy together didn't require much more convincing, and a moment later Remus had peeled out of his coat (it was already soaked through anyway) and joined them on the squelching grass. James high-fived him and Sirius tipped forward, sprawling off his friend's shoulders and forcing Remus to catch him, which he did, badly. They went down onto the muddy lawn in a heap and James piled on top of them. It was exhilarating.

It made him wonder if maybe he didn't hate the rain so much after all.

* * *

Walking into their room, Remus found James adjusting their waterlogged shoes over the radiator to ensure that they were all drying as efficiently as possible. He'd been confined to the bedroom since they'd returned from breakfast while the rest of them set up downstairs. They'd done a spectacular job, if Remus said so himself. Red and white streamers in honour of James' favourite football team had been taped to every surface and various banners had been constructed bearing the words *'Congratulations on completing rehab!'* and *'So glad you beat the blow!'* There were a few obligatory happy birthday's too, but those were much smaller.

The girls on the other hand had enlisted the help of the baking club to bake not one, not two, but *seventeen* birthday cakes—which was just as well, really, since Sirius seemed to have invited half the school. Remus had taken it upon himself to organise the music, hauling Sirius' stereo down to the common room along with his vinyls and impressive collection of 8-track tapes. He'd meticulously organised the albums in order of playability—starting off strong with *Exile on Main St.* and following it up with James' favourite, the Kinks' *Face to Face* . After that he'd allowed himself a little wiggle room to read the crowd's vibes, but all in all it was a strong lineup.

"Can I bloody well come down now?" James grinned when he spotted him. "We all know today's just an excuse to party."

“No, we’re celebrating the birth of our dearest friend,” Remus said, feigning distress.

“Well this ‘dearest friend’ is going stir-crazy. All I can hear is rain pattering the roof and you took all the music.”

“Alright, you can come down, but there’s one more thing.” From behind his back Remus pulled a party hat, lovingly constructed by Peter with a pair of paper antlers extending from either side. James looked at the thing with a mixture of shock and disappointment before sighing and holding out his hand.

“You really are such a good sport, Prongs,” Remus snorted, coming forward and looping the hat and string around James’ chin himself. He reached up to bat playfully at one of his antlers, a joke he knew no one else apart from the four of them would get, and James shook his head hopelessly.

When they made their way downstairs, past the tower of rain boots and coats, everyone was waiting. They exploded with a huge rally of ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY JAMES!’ to which James responded by throwing his arms up in the air and screaming back with equal amounts of energy. Sirius bounded forward, punching him in the arm affectionately and everyone else followed up with pats and congratulations of their own. The record player started, and Marlene appeared at Remus’ side with a drink for him and they cheersed before downing the entire thing in one go. Marlene belched immediately, embarrassed, but Remus only pulled her close and blew a raspberry on her cheek.

If the rain did anything, it dulled the noise. From the outside the dorm looked almost average, with hardly any indication that there were over a hundred kids inside, smoking, drinking, and behaving in a rather non-religious manner. A dance floor had opened up in the middle of the common room and at one point Sirius and Peter began aggressively shaking a beer can each, before cracking the tabs to let the foam spray out over the heads of everyone within ten feet of them. Lottie, who’d supposedly spent hours taming her curls against the humid rain, just about throttled her brother in the middle of the dance floor. Around them people cracked windows to let out the smoke and younger kids weaved in and out, stealing booze and smokes as though they were pick-pockets on the street. When the girls brought out the cakes James nearly passed out at the sheer number of them, each one decorated with seventeen candles each. He blew them out one by one and everyone cheered, crowding around to get a slice.

“Remus!” Lily called over the guffaw. “We have something for you!”

He turned to find her and Marlene standing together, holding a chocolate cake between them. “Another cake?” He asked. “I think you’re immensely overestimating James’ sweet tooth.”

“This one’s not for James,” Marlene amended. “It’s yours, to make up for the birthday you skipped out on.”

Remus laughed awkwardly. “Oh, thanks. You didn't have to do that.”

"We know," Marlene grinned.

“And don’t thank us just yet,” Lily said. It sounded like a warning, but before anything could be done, she and Marlene grabbed hold of the back of his head and yanked him forward, slamming the cake into his face. Remus moaned, temporarily blinded by icing while plenty of people turned to laugh.

“So how’s it taste?” Marlene sniggered. Remus dug the chocolate from his eyes and sighed before sucking even more off of his thumb.

“Delicious. Want to try some?” He surged forward for a kiss and Marlene shrieked, shooting away with Lily.

“Need a towel?” A high-voice chimed, and Remus turned to find Pandora of all people. The towel in question was in fact not a towel, but a crochet doily, which he took anyway and thanked her for. She smiled and handed him a drink, knocking her own against it before flouncing back to a set of maroon couches where Xeno was sitting amongst a group of kids, looking even more hippy-ish than normal in an open-chested poet’s shirt.

As he cleaned himself up best he could, Mary passed him on the arm of some guy—Grayson Kent, he realised. “Oi, Remus, your tape’s skippin’!” She shouted, and he strained his ears to find that she was right. Picking his away across the room, he finished his drink and passed off the empty cup before crouching down in front of the hi-fi. He found, irritatingly, that his carefully curated album piles had been messed with, throwing everything out of whack. Unable and unwilling to reorganise everything in his inebriated state, he instead began searching for one of the LPs Andy had gotten Sirius for Christmas, but couldn’t find anything among the mess anyway.

“MOONY! PSST—OI, MOONY!” Sirius wailed from the corner of the room, where he and Chastity were tucked up against an open window,

sharing a cigarette. “PLAY SOME RAINBOW!” Sirius continued, making Chastity giggle and whisper something in his ear. “S’a rock band!” He slurred back. “Their guitarist was in Deep Purple!”

Suddenly disinterested, Remus grabbed a random tape from the piles that he thought belonged to the Doors, and slammed it into the stereo, hitting play. He was about four steps away when the first moan cut through the air, making him and everyone around him slam to an utter halt.

“What in the Black Sabbath insanity is this?” Another kid said aloud, but it was too late, the sex tape picked up mid-shag—exactly where it’d left off all those months ago in their eleventh year, when they’d discovered it inside the borrowed hi-fi while hiding away within the guts of the church’s organ balcony.

Remus scrambled back to the stereo as the whole room burst into staggered laughter and slammed his finger on the eject button, yanking out the tape like it was a bomb about to go off.

“Blimey!” Sirius announced. “I thought I’d lost that!”

Chastity gaped; “That’s *yours?”*

“What? No! I just—Moony tell her!”

Remus threw the tape at him and Sirius scrambled to catch it.

“C’mon Black, if you’re going to engage in such filthy hobbies you should really keep them to yourself.”

Remus turned away, cuing up another album while feeling mightily pleased with himself. As Sirius did his best to convince Chastity that it wasn’t *his* sex tape (“Look at the tape’s date, Chas—1972!”) Remus scanned the room for Marlene. He spotted her on one of the sofas, tucked up between Nicole and Anna. The entire team had been invited —James’ orders—and Remus was glad for it as he bent over the back of the sofa and dangled a joint between the girls’ heads.

“Ladies, care to partake in some of the 'devil's lettuce'?”

“Oooh, yes please,” Nicole said eagerly. Marlene looked sceptical—she wasn’t usually one for weed—but nodded along with Anna and the four of them stood, making their way out into the hall. Remus realised halfway to the back door that he’d leant Sirius his lighter and turned around to get it, only to come to an abrupt halt as a drunken James

stood up on a chair, shouting over the crowd.

“HELLO! YES! EVER’ONE SHUT UP I HAVE SUMTHIN’ I WANNA SAY!”

The record scratched off, courtesy of Sirius, and James cleared his throat; “Firs' of all, thank yeh to my idiot friends, wherever you may be, for the wonderful decor. I’m sure my mum's so proud I kicked that nasty blow habit—and I know nunn'of yeh will tell 'er about the drinkin' problem because we all got one!”

Plenty of kids snickered and held up drinks—*'Hear! Hear!’*

“Thank yeh to the girls for the many, many cakes! And of course thank you tah ever’one for showin’ up!” James continued, nearly tripping off the chair. “Now n'gonna play you all a song, and I want to dedicate it to my beautiful girlfriend, Lily!”

“Oh my god,” someone nearby moaned. Remus looked to his left to find Lily, a drink in one hand and the other pressed to her pink cheek. She was wearing James’ party hat.

He smirked and sidled up next to her, bending over to obstruct her view. “You’re looking a little redder than usual, Evans.”

“Buzz off,” Lily chuckled weakly.

“Maestro, the music please!” James called.

“Yes, sir!” Sirius announced, before hitting play on the hi-fi. Remus wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t “Let’s Get It On”.

“WRONG SONG, SIRIUS!” James threw himself down from the chair while everyone laughed and Remus put his arm around Lily as she just about folded in on herself from embarrassment.

“Those idiots,” she moaned.

“Could always be worse,” Remus reasoned; “He could be playing you a song on the guitar himself in front of everyone.”

Lily dropped her hand from her cheek and held her heart instead. “Oh thank Lord he’s not. I couldn’t take it. I’m already so embarrassed, I knew I should’ve waited to tell him.”

“Tell him what?”

Lily pressed her lips together before blurting out; “I told him I loved him.”

Remus gasped. “You did not!”

“He was so happy—and I wanted it to be special so I thought I’d do it on his birthday—*ah!* It’s so embarrassing.”

The song shifted and James got back up onto his chair, holding a hand over his eyes and scanning the room until he ultimately spotted the two of them. “DAISY! This one’s for you!” He pointed at Lily with his beer. “I love you too, babe!”

James had chosen a Fleetwood Mac song, and it floated out around the room;

‘Sweet wonderful you,
You make me happy with the things you do;
Oh, can it be so,
This feeling follows me wherever I go…’

Listening like the rest of them, Lily sighed, too happy and too embarrassed.

“You’re gonna marry him, right?” Remus asked teasingly. “ ‘Cause he might die of heartbreak if you don’t.”

“Only if I don’t kill him first. It’s a good thing he’s cute.”

They shared a cheeky look while Sirius raised his drink in the air; “To Daisy!” He shouted. James did the same and everyone cheered; *“TO DAISY!”*

Sportingly, Lily held her drink aloft before downing it all as Fleetwood Mac sang directly to her;

‘I never did believe in miracles,
But I’ve a feeling it’s time to try;
I never did believe in the ways of magic,
But I’m beginning to wonder why…’

James launched himself off the chair, streaking toward them. Other kids parted automatically to let him through and when he made it to Lily he scooped her up so she could wrap her legs around his waist and kiss him.

Lifting his fingers to his mouth, Remus whistled and Lily broke apart from James to swat the air in front of his face. Undeterred, James peppered her cheek with kisses instead, the complete and utter embodiment of a man in love.

The rest of the night went off without a hitch. The rain continued to pour, and Remus did not think of Tomny or London even once.

Chapter End Notes

> To ‘give up the ghost’ means to give up or stop working.
> ‘Blow the gaff’ means to reveal a secret.
>
> Sorry if it feels like I'm teasing you, but I did say this chapter would rock your socks. Next one is gonna be... fun :^)

Chapter 54: Charity Case

Chapter Summary

Baby cows! Bad friends! unBelievable realisations!

Chapter Notes

CW: Discussions of classism and bullying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh, you're the best friend that I ever had,
I've been with you such a long time;
You're my sunshine and I want you to know,
That my feelings are true;
I really love you,
Oh, you're my best friend…

- "You're My Best Friend" Queen, 1975

Monday 4th April 1977

Calving season had come early to Hawkings. Just a few days before they were all scheduled to head home for the week-long Easter holiday, it was announced that Professor Kettleburn had invited all the twelfth year biology classes down to the Agricultural barn for the chance to witness a calf being born.

"I think Loughty just wants to push us off onto someone else for an entire afternoon," Mary commented, as she, Remus, and Marlene marched across campus to collect their packed lunches from the dining hall and then down to the school farm. As they got close the smell of manure wafted up on the spring breeze and Mary covered her nose, lining up behind a row of students while an older student wrote a number on the back of their hands in marker.

"That's your group," he explained. "You'll be going into the barn only a few at a time so the animals don't get spooked."

"Wonderful," Mary grumbled, examining the crudely drawn '4' on her hand.

They found their other friends waiting by one of the fences, all scattered around a flattened patch of grass. Lottie, Peter, and Moira were a few feet away, petting a goat through the fence, while Sirius and James sat on top of it, swinging their legs back and forth. When he spotted them, Sirius jumped down from the fence to compare group numbers, only to be soured upon finding out that his ‘5’ did not match Remus’ ‘2’.

“Charlie and Erik J. are taking bets on which group’s gonna catch the calf being born,” Sirius said. “Guess I have to change my bet to group two now.”

“Bet on your own group,” Remus said, stepping past him to swing himself up on the fence beside James.

Sirius leaned on the fence post next to him. “But you’re our lucky charm!”

“Never been lucky a day in my life,” Remus corrected, stifling a yawn. He’d slept more poorly than usual the night before and after tossing and turning for hours he’d finally slunk across the room and set a vinyl on the turntable. That was all it took to wake Sirius up these days, and as always they ended up on the floor with their backs against the hutch, sharing the headphones between them until that fateful shit-all hour of the morning became a little less shitty.

“Lily’s in group two,” James said, glancing at his hand, a '3' to match Marlene. Next to him, Remus put a hand over his eyes, scanning out over the rest of the kids.

“Where is she?”

“There.” James pointed across the grass, to where Lily was standing next to Snape, looking rather ruffled. “She’s trying to convince him to take our train home for the holiday.”

“God, why can’t she just give it up?” Sirius blagged. Remus smacked him lightly on the shoulder with the back of his hand.

“No friendship-shaming,” he said. "Lily means well. Even if it is Snape."

Sirius gave him a hard look but then nodded reluctantly and turned around to lean against the fence. “Well, it doesn’t look like she’s being very convincing.”

That at least, appeared to be true. Snape had his arms crossed haughtily while Lily stared up at him, using her hands to illustrate whatever point she was making. As they watched, another agricultural student shouted across the small field that group two was on deck and would be heading into the barn in a few minutes.

“Guess I should go get her,” Remus sighed, sliding off the fence.

“Godspeed, soldier,” Sirius said, saluting him.

He trudged across the yard, stopping a few feet from the pair, who were still arguing quietly. “Lily?” Remus called. “It’s almost group two’s turn to go in.”

Surprised by his appearance, Lily looked back. “I’ll be right there!” She said, before turning back to Severus, who was only glaring at him over her shoulder.

“If you were just willing to work it out, Sev—”

“As long as you’re hanging around them, I don’t want anything to do with it,” Snape snarled, “so leave me alone.”

Turning, Snape stalked off, leaving Lily looking deflated and haggard. Remus walked up to her side and scowled after him. “Did you really think it was going to work?” He asked softly.

“Let’s just go,” she sighed, turning toward the barn.

Lily was quiet for the most part, even as Professor Kettleburn gave an ecstatic lecture on the miracles of calf-birth. The air inside the barn was slightly too warm to be comfortable and Remus found himself stifling yawn after yawn. If Lily noticed his fatigue she didn’t say anything. He knew the Snape-thing still bothered her and had ever since Snape had given up his role as a prefect at the start of term. His departure left not only a hole in the ranks, but also meant that Lily had no choice but to flounder with other undesirable partners like Chastity. Remus would’ve thought that that would’ve finally marked the end between them, but something about Snape ignited the righteous part of her, and no matter what anyone tried to say, she refused to let herself be hated by the boy she’d known most of her life.

When their twenty minutes of observation was up and no calf had been born they emerged out into the mid-morning sun once more to trade places with the next group.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” Lily said placidly, turning toward the school buildings. Remus continued on and passed Mary, Lottie, and Peter on their way into the barn, flashing them an unenthusiastic thumbs-up. When he arrived back on the patch of grass with his friends he found James and Sirius ripping open their packed lunches as well as his, peeling sandwiches apart like some field experiment.

“Er… What are you doing with my lunch?” He asked.

“I tried, Lupin!” James snapped. “I bloody well tried, but whatever maniac thought that fucking toff up really went to town on the ‘audacity’ and the ‘dickheadishness’!”

“Anybody got something to say that makes sense?”

“He tried to talk to Snape for Lily,” Marlene said, observing the boys from her spot on top of the fence. “It didn’t go well.”

“I swear to god that asshole won’t be happy until we break up!” James growled.

“Yes,” Remus said, “that’s exactly right.”

James stood up. “Well tough nuts 'cause it ain’t happening!”

“I would hope not. You only just openly declared your love for her in front of half the school last week.”

James shrank back slightly, still embarrassed by his drunken birthday proclamation, but Sirius only popped to his feet, grinning as he held up a baggy of peanut butter they’d scraped off the sandwiches.

“Snivelly told James to eat shit, and now he’s going to know how it feels,” he announced. “Good thing you prefer your jam sandwiches with enough peanut butter to choke a horse, Moony.”

Remus was unimpressed. “I was gonna eat that.”

“You and your grumbling stomach are just going to have to forgive us,” Sirius said, patting him on the shoulder and tossing the baggy to James, who continued filling it with handfuls of grass and mud. He passed it back to Sirius when it was full, nearly bursting at the seams with muck.

“What is the goal here?” Remus asked, slightly unnerved.

“We’re gonna trick Snivellus into thinking he’s really stepped in it,”

James told him. “We considered using a real cowpat, but decided it would be funny enough to watch him dance around with peanut butter on his head instead."

"You're so merciful," Marlene said sarcastically.

"I know, right? Ready, Black?”

“I await your signal, Prongs,” Sirius grinned, before he disappeared across the field with his cow-bomb in hand.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Remus asked. James glanced at him, mouth pursed.

“I’ll give him one last chance,” he said. “He can either get over himself and accept that Lily and I are together, or he can eat muddy peanut butter.”

“I think you’re asking for a little much. Snape’s not just going to start being tolerable because you want him to—or because you played some stupid prank on him.”

“Then he’s made his own bed.” Decisively, James set off toward the pig pen where Snape and a couple other Salazar boys were leaning over the fence, taunting the animals or poking them with sticks.

Remus looked back to Marlene. “I can’t believe you’re just sitting back.”

“You didn’t hear what he said,” she told him. “I say, let him eat shit.”

“Well are you coming then? I’ll give you a ride.”

Marlene looked him up and down. "You sure you can carry me?"

"I'm skinny not entirely useless," he scoffed.

She smirked lightly and reached out for him, and Remus pulled her up onto his back, smiling as he took off after their friends. They caught up to James just has he stopped to face the pig pen, clearing his throat. “Snape,” he called, drawing the other boys' attention away from the pigs, “I changed my mind. We've still got stuff to talk about.”

Snape sneered; “You never know when to give up, do you, Potter?”

“Lily wants us to get along.”

“And I told you—never gonna happen. I'd rather be drowned in the lake than pretend to be friends with the likes of you.”

That can be arranged," Remus said, letting Marlene slide from his back.

“Gonna hit me too, Loony, like you did Mick Truman?" Snape leered. "Go ahead, try it, there are enough teachers around. Maybe they’ll lock you up for good, you lunatic.”

The other boys laughed like some maniacal audience and Marlene bristled; “The only one who deserves to be locked up is you!”

“Ugh. Do us a favour and muzzle your bitch, Loony.”

Only Snape could make anger bloom so quickly. Remus stepped forward again, stopping only when Marlene grabbed his arm. “Don't. Just look up,” she muttered lowly, and he did, instantly spotting Sirius, who was lying on his stomach on the pig pen’s roof. In his hands he held the bag of mud and peanut butter, extended out over Snape’s head.

Seemingly unruffled, James crossed his arms over his chest. “I used to think everyone was worthy of forgiveness, Snape, but then I met you and I’m just not so sure anymore.” He sighed as if disappointed. “Can’t have everything, I suppose.”

“Are you finished?" The nasty boy snarled. "If I wanted to listen to bullshit all day I’d *ask* for your opinion.”

“It never gets any easier,” James groaned. “Okay, that’s it. Black, bombs away!”

“James?”

They all turned to find Lily standing there, her expression worried. Unfortunately, there was no stopping what came next. At the same moment, Sirius threw down the bag and it promptly exploded over Snape’s head in a great mucky mess, spattering him, his friends, and the pig fence to boot. In impact, Lily’s hands flew to her mouth while Snape let out a wail of disgust.

“What the *fuck?!”*

Rolling off the pig’s roof, Sirius dropped down next to James and both of them stared in a mixture of shock and victory. “This feels familiar

somehow," Sirius grinned; "The cow shit's new though."

Realisation dawned on the Salazar boys' faces and Snape immediately began to gag, whirling away to resist hurling.

"James!" Lily shouted, streaking forward. "What are you doing?"

"Don't worry," he said, trying not to laugh, "it's not real cow dung."

"It's only mud and peanut butter, Lils," Marlene said.

"Peanut butter?" Lily shrieked. At her words, Snape straightened and pulled a handful of muck off his head, holding it up to his face. He turned an ashen colour and then began to hyperventilate as though he couldn't breathe. It looked almost comical, even as Lily shot toward him and grabbed his arm. Snape tried to throw her off, but she only withdrew her prefect's help whistle from her pocket and blew it hard, making everyone around them turn and look. A moment later, one of Professor Kettleburn's students appeared, staring at them in shock.

"Er—What's the matter?"

"He needs to go to the medical room," she explained, while Snape wheezed next to her.

"What's that all over him?"

"Peanut butter—he's allergic!"

"Oh fuck," James winced.

The older student took Snape's arm and began quickly leading him away as he heaved-in breaths like a popped balloon. Lily started after the pair before whirling on the rest of them, her face a mask of vexation. "What were you THINKING?" She roared.

"We didn't know he was allergic!" Sirius tried.

"Don't you DARE try and act like this wasn't on purpose! This was premeditated! You three can't handle it when someone else wants to do things their way! You *always* have to have the last word!"

James suddenly looked very nervous. None of them had seen Lily so angry since Remus' birthday the year before. "Daisy, I swear," he sputtered; "we didn't mean to—"

"You never mean to! And yet you DO! You must have cow dung for

brains! Why can't everyone just get *along?"* With that, Lily threw her arms down and raced after Snape, her wellies squelching in the mud. The rest of them were left stunned into guilty silence, while every other student looked on in uncomfortable bewilderment. Remus was pretty sure none of them had cow dung for brains, but after listening to Lily scream it for all to hear, he was almost convinced.

“Did we just kill Snape?” Sirius asked, making Marlene seize up and smack him sharply on the arm.

“Don’t say that!” She wailed.

Shoulders slumped, James stepped forward and stared after Lily like a broken man—or in the very least, one that knew exactly how badly he’d messed up. “I am such a fucking idiot,” he moaned. No one seemed quick to correct him.

“Hey!” Peter shouted, appearing from the barn's direction and skidding happily into Sirius’ side. “You guys missed it—the calf was just born!”

“She’s so cute!” Lottie gushed next to him in a baby voice. “All *wittle and tiny!”*

Mary strolled up to them, arms crossed and looking almost as ashen as Snape had. “I swear I’m never having children. All slimy and disgusting, *eugh!”*

“It was just a baby cow, Mary,” Lottie insisted.

“It came out in a grey sack—they had to cut it out! It’s not a cow, it’s an alien.” She shivered lightly then looked them all up and down; “What’s wrong with you guys? Not like you just had to watch a live birth.”

“Pretty sure we just killed Snape,” Sirius repeated blandly, making Marlene shriek in horror and cover her face.

Mary crossed her arms. “Well, sounds like you had a much more productive afternoon then.”

* * *

They did not (thankfully—regretfully? Debatable) kill Snape. Having

not actually ingested the peanuts, the wanker wasn't ever in any real trouble, though he'd put on quite a show on his way to the medical room. The school nurse, Ms. Pomfrey, did give him a shot of adrenaline just in case, but by mid-afternoon it'd become clear that Snape was going to be just fine.

James and Sirius were not so fortunate.

They were marched down to the Headmistress's office where the severity of their actions were outlined with an unmerciful punishment consisting of four week's detentions as well as James' removal from the football team for twice that. Really he was lucky not to be kicked off the team all together, but tournaments began in June, and Hawkings still needed its star player. Snape, of course, wasn't satisfied with this. In his eyes every one of them were just as culpable and deserved punishment, most of all James, who'd plead guilty to inciting the prank. Snape wasn't convinced of his regret, but according to Sirius, McGonagall couldn't reach his parents to discuss proper punishment and refused to take his bias or anger into consideration when punishing another student. They were, however, to write Snape a letter of apology each, which they were to read aloud in front of him and the Headmistress.

Neither James nor Sirius fought the punishments, both too guilty or too afraid of Lily's wrath to even consider it. A creature of habit, she ignored them for a short while until James had worried himself into a frenzy thinking she was simply going to break up him; but rather than that, Lily took the incident as an opportunity to make amends. With only a day left at school before everyone returned home for the Easter holiday, she gathered all four 4A boys to her and ordered that they march down to Salazar House with her and formally apologise to Snape.

"But why do Remus and I need to go?" Peter whinged. "We had nothing to do with it."

"You're doing it to clear the air!" Lily shot back. Next to her, Sirius sighed dramatically.

"It'll never work. There's too much bad blood between us. He hates us, we hate him, it's just the way things are."

Bitterly, Lily smacked him in the shoulder. "And I've had enough of it, so we're all going to apologise and you better bloody well mean it!"

"We will," James promised eagerly, shouldering his best friend in poor

attempts to get him to shut up.

“Snape’s not so innocent just because he’s got a shitty immune system,” Sirius started indignantly, “James might be willing to forgive him for you but he’s still a shit-eating wanker and you’re making a mistake trying to stay friends with him, Evans.”

Lily gave Sirius a look that either meant she was about to explode or burst into tears and James reached forward to grab him firmly by the shoulder this time. “I’m willing to be the bigger person,” he reasoned. “And I do regret pranking Snape. I wouldn’t have done had I known he was allergic, and neither would you, Sirius.”

Sirius looked away, but it was obvious James was right. Together they made their way up the street toward Snape’s dorm, dragging their feet over the freshly-mowed lawn while Lily pestered another boy sitting on the front steps to go and fetch him. Snape emerged along with an entire brigade of boys that included the two he’d been standing next to at the farm (Remus had learned their names were Drake and Ainsley after they testified to McGonagall on Snape’s behalf) and even Barty Crouch, who was never one to miss out on drama.

“You made a mistake coming here,” Crouch called, like a cheesy TV villain.

“Sev,” Lily started, ignoring the other boys with all the prefect courage she could muster, “we’ve come to apologise. James and Sirius regret what they did, we all do.”

“I don’t,” Snape said, “from what I heard they’re going to be mucking barn stalls for the next month.”

“I think I can smell them already,” Drake answered. “Yeah, that’s it—eau de shit.”

Laughter echoed and all four boys flexed their hands agonisingly at their sides. Remus heard James take a deep breath while Sirius cleared his throat, no doubt itching to throw a snarky response right back.

“We’re not here to argue,” Lily pushed, “we’ve come to apologise.”

“But why? I’ve already got your apologies right here!” From his pocket, Snape produced the letters James and Sirius had been forced to write and began reading them off while those around him grinned and sniggered; “ ‘To Severus, I’m so, *so* sorry we attacked you with

peanut butter—there is absolutely no way things would've turned out that way had we known you were allergic. We feel most awful for what we did, and if you'd just consider forgiving us, we swear to spend the rest of our days seeking repentance for our most heinous sins—"

"I think you're skipping the part about using jam instead next time," Sirius said blandly. "Can you not read sarcasm?"

"Oh shut up, Black," Snape sneered. "I haven't even gotten to the part where you grovel to McGonagall."

"Sev, please!" Lily begged.

"No!" From his place atop of the dorm's stairs, Snape threw the letters in the air and Lily flinched as they fluttered down around her. "I don't give a shit about some stupid apology! Your shitty boyfriend almost poisoned me and you expect me to forgive *them?"*

James stepped up to Lily's side and grasped her arm, a gesture that only made Snape appear more livid. "You don't need to forgive us," he said, "but we don't need to fight anymore either."

"Easy for you to say," Snape snarled, "you got the last laugh!"

Lily pulled away from James; "No one was laughing, Sev! We've said so many nasty things to one another, don't you think this is finally the time to put it all to rest?"

"Put it to rest?! He almost put me in a grave! And you're still defending him! Honestly, isn't the righteous act getting a bit old, Lily? I wouldn't be his friend for all the money in the world, and you're doing it for free even though you can't even afford the tuition here!"

Lily snapped back like she'd been slapped but Snape wasn't finished. He pushed in front of the others and stepped down a stair, eyes wild.

"I've kept your secret for years and you repay me by dating and befriending the most intolerable pieces of crap imaginable! I was on your side when they were still pulling your hair and calling you a swot all day long! I didn't care if your family had no money or you could only get into Hawkings on a stupid scholarship! I was the one who told you about it in the first place so we could go to school together but the moment you got here you decided that popularity was more important!"

“Sev…” Lily’s lower lip had begun to tremble.

“Don’t you do that!” Snape lashed. “You always cry when things don’t go your way, but not this time! You’re just embarrassed that everyone else here comes from proper stock and you’re just a middle-class nobody who couldn’t get anywhere if you didn’t sleep with your bloody textbooks open!”

The silence was staggering. Snape’s admission had taken all of them by surprise, most of all Lily, who obviously hadn’t counted on him being so vicious. Snape was insufferable at the best of times and spiteful the rest, but he’d never turned his poison on her.

Almost panting from all the shouting, Snape drew himself up to his full height. “Well there then,” he hissed. “Maybe everyone else can keep your secret now too, you pitiful charity case.”

Like lightning, Lily turned and took off across the grass toward her dorm, eyes covered and already crying. James was the first of them to react—shooting toward Snape with one fist outstretched; *“YOU—!”*

“Now!” Barty wailed, and a second later all four of them were being bludgeoned with bags of peanut butter, which without the added mud and grass, mostly bounced off of them like lumpy rocks. Shocked and instantly sore, they all staggered back while Snape dove for cover.

“You little shits!” Sirius cursed, covering his head. “You’re gonna pay for this!”

“Hope none of you are allergic!” Someone shouted.

As they began to retreat, fresh peanut butter now staining their school clothes, the Salazar boys chased them right off the lawn, hooting in victory. Remus was almost glad Snape hadn't given them the chance to properly apologise; none of them deserved it.

“Ow…” Peter groaned, once they’d made it two dorms over and were no longer being pursued. “What’d they do—freeze the peanuts first?”

“Fucking dicks,” Sirius sighed, wiping muck from his jumper. Next to him, James was quiet, bent over with his hands on his knees and staring at the ground like it might crack open and swallow him.

“You okay, Prongs?” Remus asked, and James looked up.

“Did you know Lily was a scholarship student?”

Remus shook his head, but he would've been lying if things didn't suddenly make much more sense. One of the first times he'd ever hung out with Lily on their own, she'd asked him if he'd come to Hawkings with 'help'. At the time he'd rebuffed her, thinking she was pitying him for being poor, but now he knew she was just trying to see if they had another thing in common. If he had said yes, or at least explained himself better, maybe she would've trusted him with the secret; but instead he'd reacted like any other snob. It meant Lily had been left with only Snape, her childhood best friend who no matter what she did, would never be able to assimilate into the life she'd built for herself at school.

"She never told me…" James murmured. The shock on his face was clear as day. He and Lily had been dating going on seven months, not counting the whole summer they'd spent talking over the phone. "How many times did I invite her to the summer house… or—or to London to see the sights. I even offered to buy her train ticket! And for Christmas I sent all these books mum got as first editions and—and I got her that stupid bracelet for her birthday—*but what if*—what if she thought I was rubbing it all in her face?"

Sirius set his hand on James' shoulder. "She didn't, mate."

"Then why wouldn't she tell me? I'm her *boyfriend."*

"I get what you're saying, Prongs, I do. But I think right now what she needs is a friend. So let's be upset later, kay?"

It was the most reasonable thing Remus had ever heard Sirius say, and it was enough to leave James speechless.

"Sirius is right," Remus said. "Worrying about why she didn't say anything won't make her feel better. She probably just didn't want to ask for help."

"Yeah, Evans is stubborn like that," Peter shrugged. "Though, I dunno why 'cause she's always helping us. I'd have failed every maths class I've ever taken if not for her."

Slowly, James nodded, his mouth drawn together in a tight line. "Yeah, yeah, you're right. We just gotta tell her it's okay."

With a comforting smile, Sirius indicated down the street in the direction of Rowena House; "C'mon then, before her eyes get all red and puffy from too much crying."

They started forward together and Remus fell into step next to Peter, who had started staring down at the ground like he it was a puzzle he'd yet to sort out. “Moira isn’t a scholarship kid,” he murmured, “I don’t think, at least.”

“Thought you said her family was in real estate?” Remus asked.

Peter visibly relaxed. “Yeah, that’s right, they are.”

Remus pat him on the back.

Once they reached the girls dorm they went around the side and threw rocks at the girls’ window until Marlene appeared, opening it and sticking her head out. "What happened? I thought Lily went out with you—why's she so upset?"

Before they could answer, Mary appeared at her shoulder. “What the bloody fuck happened? Lily's in here balling her eyes out. Potter you better have not dumped her."

"I didn't!" James insisted. "Just let me—"

"You must've done something! Haven't seen her cry like this since eighth year Christmas when she—"

“I can hear you!” Lily wailed from somewhere inside the dorm. Flinching, Mary immediately buggered it out the window, dropping down onto the electric box beneath and then onto the lawn, Marlene not far behind her.

“Spit it out,” Mary lashed; “She’s in there crying like Sirius if Jagger died.”

“That bad?” Sirius asked, clicking his tongue.

“Snape said some stuff…” Remus started. Passing the girls, James climbed onto the dorm’s electrical box.

“I’m gonna go talk to her,” he said, “will you guys stick around for a bit?”

Sirius waved him on; “Yeah no problem, mate. Holler if you guys need anything.”

James nodded and hauled himself up onto the window ledge, closing it after he slipped inside.

“What happened?” Marlene asked again, and they all settled down on the grass while Sirius retold the story of the affair. He handled the topic of Lily’s scholarship carefully, but it still came as a shock when they realised that not even the girls knew. Lily had somehow managed to keep her mysterious scholarship a secret from everyone, including her closest friends. Marlene and Mary kept sharing the same look, communicating telepathically the way Remus knew girls could, but they let Sirius finish his story. The ending and the details about Snape came with more venom, but that was to be expected.

“That fucking wanker,” Mary growled from behind her teeth. “Maybe we should put peanuts in his food for real.”

“Killing Snape’s not going to make Lily feel any better,” Peter pointed out.

“It’d make me feel better," Marlene added woefully.

As they all lapsed into uncomfortable silence, Remus leaned back on his arms and continued picking grass to pass the time. Eventually, as the sun was beginning to dip down toward the trees, Lottie appeared, having spotted them under her window from her walk up the road. She flopped down on the grass and they relayed the same story, though this time Mary and Marlene interjected with their own tidbits until they all trickled back into silence once more. Remus hoped James was at least getting somewhere with Lily, but he had no way of knowing since he’d shut the window.

“It’s freezing out here,” Lottie said eventually. The street lights had turned on behind them and James had yet to emerge.

“Here, Lot, take my jacket,” Sirius said, shrugging out of his coat.

“Thanks Sirius, but you’re really not my type.”

“I literally just offered you my coat.”

“Hm. Okay then.” Lottie took the jacket and snuggled into it. “Ooh, you do smell good though. Not like eau de shit at all.”

“Hmph. Thanks.”

Marlene shifted closer to Remus on the grass, leaning her head on his shoulder. “I can’t believe she didn’t tell me,” she whispered sadly. “I mean, me? My family doesn't have money or influence or...”

“She might’ve just been embarrassed.”

“Maybe…”

A rumbling sound came from above them, and they all looked up to see James poke his head out. “Moony, she wants you.”

Remus blinked. “Me?”

James began climbing out the window. Slowly, Remus stood and changed places with him, clambering up the side of the dorm and swinging himself over the window ledge with a groan. Inside, he found Lily tucked up on Marlene’s corner bed, hugging one of Lottie’s fuzzy pink pillows and clutching a fistful of tissues.

“Hey… you…” Remus started, lowering the window whilst feeling extremely awkward.

“You can sit, Remus,” Lily said, her voice tight with congestion. He did so, gingerly taking a spot at the foot of the bed while Lily blew her nose. “Thanks for coming up.”

“ ‘Course. Are... you okay, Lils?”

She nodded at first, but then descended into a rigorous head-shake, covering her face with the pillow. “I’m just so embarrassed.”

“Of what?”

“Of everything! You guys tried to tell me I couldn’t fix things with Sev but I just thought that he’d listen to me eventually. I didn’t mean for it all to go to crap like it did.”

“Trust me,” Remus promised, “it was definitely not your fault.”

Lily blew her nose again. “I don’t mean to cry, but I can’t help it. Sev’s right.”

“Well, Snape’s a dick—” Remus caught himself; “I mean, it’s fine to cry. Everyone cries.”

“Do you cry, Remus?”

“Er—yeah, sometimes..."

Lily nodded in consideration. “I guess everyone knows about my scholarship now.”

“Yeah… but it’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know.”

“It just sucks sometimes to be in a place full of one sort of people and still be different. I didn’t mean for the secret to go on as long as it did, but one year turned into two and then I got top student and then prefect—I just didn’t want to be known as the ‘scholarship swot’.”

Remus rubbed the side of his neck. He understood better than Lily would ever know, just how it felt to keep a lie going with all your friends. “Well what about Marlene? She’s not rich or anything.”

“I know,” Lily sighed, “but she’s so much better at handling it than me. She’s actually really tough.”

“Oh I know,” he said, and Lily gave a small smile.

“I wish I had told them and not just Snape.”

“He shouldn’t have done that,” Remus said firmly. “I don't care how angry he was, you don’t just go shoutin' someone’s secrets out for the whole world to hear, and especially not like that. He was talking like you have something to be ashamed about, but it’s actually bloody impressive. You got into Hawkings without anyone’s help but your own—you set the curve Lily. No one else could’ve done it but you. Not me, not James, not Sirius. *You.”*

Lily glanced down at Marlene’s bed covers shyly. “Wow, Remus.”

“I only meant to say that you should be proud,” he said sheepishly. “Don’t let tossers like Snape or anyone else take away from your achievements. You’re better than that, Lils.”

Lily pulled a fresh tissue from the box near her feet and used it to wipe a bit of stray peanut butter from his shirt. “You’re pretty good at this,” she said. “You should start a club or something—offer relationship advice. Bet you could even charge for it.”

“Ha. Very funny.”

“I’m serious—well, partly. But you do actually give really good advice, Remus. Like James.”

“And I’m sure he’s much better with this stuff than me.”

“You’re both good, but I did chew him out again for going after Snape, just you know."

"I wouldn't expect any less, to be honest."

"Still, I'm lucky to have both of you. All of you."

Remus smiled. "Does that mean you're feeling better then?"

"Well… I don't feel any worse, so I suppose yes, I must be."

"Good."

Lily returned his smile as another rock hit the bedroom window. Remus stood up and crossed the room, lifting it and sticking his head out.

"Is she feeling better yet?" Sirius asked. "Because the sun is gone and we're freezing."

"They can come in," Lily sighed, tossing her tissues away and smoothing back her mussed curls.

One by one the rest of them climbed inside. The girls instantly dove on Lily, doing everything from coddling her with baby talk to kissing her cheeks. She batted her hands at them but eventually hugged back, and James let out a sigh of relief.

"Seems a shame to go home," he said, rubbing the back of his head sorely. "Maybe I should stay."

"You don't care about getting caught?" Remus asked.

"Nah. I've already got detention for a month, who cares."

Remus smiled slightly before glancing around the room. "Say, Prongs, do you remember Xeno's room—what they did with all the beds?"

James glanced around, and then perked up as though a lightbulb had gone off. "Ah, now that's not a bad idea, Moony."

Nudging Sirius and Peter, they filled them in and began pushing furniture out of the way one by one, while the girls looked on in question;

"What are you doing with our furniture?" Mary asked.

"You'll see," James grunted, shoving Lottie's bed toward Marlene's. Eventually the girls got it, and no one objected as they set the four beds side by side against one wall. Blankets and pillows came out in

full force, scattering between them for ultimate comfort and they all settled in next to one another in a row. Remus didn't argue as Mary and Marlene pulled him down between them, but did catch Sirius giving him an odd look before he tucked in on Mary's other side.

“A slumber party!” Lottie cheered. “On the last day before holiday, how brilliant!”

“We don’t have to stay the whole night,” Remus said, setting his hands behind his head, “we’ll fix it in a bit.”

“Don’t bother,” Lily said, “I sort of like it.”

“You want us to leave your room looking like you’re about to have a massive orgy?” Sirius said aloud, earning himself an elbow in the gut from Mary. “Ow! Sorry, sorry, I know.”

They all laughed, staring up at the roof of the beds until one of them hit the lights. Mary muttered that they could’ve used some music, but none of them wanted to bother setting up the stereo, so instead they just talked. It went on like a game of telephone, each of them recalling a story or a short anecdote until another interjected with something else. Lily talked a bit about why she’d hid her scholarship for so long and Remus could tell they all understood. Mary ended up confessing to already dumping Grayson, who was still too hung up on some girl he knew from back home to be of any real interest. Sirius made James congratulate himself for finally being able to tell the difference between rake and sweep picking and Peter told them all about his Uncle Morris, who had given him lessons on the drums when he was a little kid. Both Sirius and James were floored—then ecstatic. Finally Peter had managed to surprise them.

When it was his turn, Remus’ friends let him sit in silence for a while, mulling over all the secrets he’d kept and coveted in his short seventeen years of life. One secret leapt out glaringly, but Remus had never said *that one* aloud before, not even to himself. For so long he’d held onto the hope that as long as he kept silent then that horrible thing wouldn’t be true—*couldn’t* be true. And though he loved his friends more than ever in that moment, Remus was afraid that letting go of that hope now would doom him forever. And so he distracted himself with the one thing he knew would do the trick.

Tomny.

The moment he started talking about the London boys Remus knew he’d made the right decision. His friends were ecstatic. The room was

instantly alight with a flurry of questions, until it seemed like nothing was off limits. Luckily he had his secret-keeper there to reel them all in.

“One at a time, you lunatics!” Sirius cried. “Let the man breathe!”

“I knew it!” James practically shouted over him; “I knew that gang rumour wasn’t all rubbish! You should’ve heard him the first time we went to see Xeno, Sirius! He was talking like the bloody Godfather!”

“A gang? That’s how you broke your nose?!” Lily hollered after James.

“Imagine that,” Peter mused, “my friend, Remus, a drug dealer.”

Marlene put her hands together in prayer. “Our Father who thou art in heaven, please forgive Remus for his past sins. He was being stupid—just a great big fucking idiot.”

"Hear, hear!"

Once they’d managed to move past the illegal drabbles of the East Enders, the girls grappled onto any tidbit of Tonya, especially the stories Remus relayed about her travels and every man, bloke, and beggar she’d managed to swindle along the way.

“She sounds like a real queen bitch,” Mary said, and Remus hesitated before figuring that it must be a good thing.

And that was it. When he was done talking, his friends simply stopped. It was obvious there were more questions, but there was also more time. It was as though they trusted him enough to know that he wasn’t just going to run off and leave them hanging. And for Remus, who had done nothing but run for the last six years, it was peace.

As they cycled on to new talks of Easter plans and travels home, Remus lapsed into a bout of quiet tranquility. No one questioned it. Marlene held his hand and Mary’s shoulder pressed up against his own fondly. He was happy. Just like with music, his friends’ voices put him so at ease that before he knew it, Remus had fallen asleep.

* * *

Maybe it was the chatter, or the fact that he’d been operating on little

more than glimpses of shut-eye lately, but whatever it was, Remus had never slept so soundly. They'd left the window open so the girls' room was still cool, and Marlene's hair smelt good even as it tickled his nose. She must've changed her shampoo—instead of fresh linens and hints of lemon Remus detected sandalwood and the sort of burnt-sugar aroma that came along with hand rolled cigars. Smiling lightly to himself, he shifted and Marlene gave a muttered groan—only it was a much lower noise than he'd ever heard her make. Masculine almost.

Oh god.

Remus' eyes shot open.

No. No way.

He was pretty sure the last time he'd seen Marlene her hair was pin-straight and blonde, not a mess of pitch-black waves that looked like spilt ink on a pillow. He was also sure that Sirius had been lying on Mary's far side, and yet he was right there next to him, dozing with a relaxed expression. This close, Remus could almost count every one of his eyelashes. It was horrifying. His heart was hammering so loudly he was half-convinced Sirius would hear it and wake up. He could already imagine his eyes whipping open—that split-second of seeing himself reflected in their pooly grey colour before everything came crashing down.

Desperate, Remus made to pull away only to freeze again when someone nuzzled him from behind. It was Marlene, he realised. At some point while sleeping he must've rolled away from her toward Sirius, banishing his peace from the evening before. With his best friend at his front and his girlfriend at his back he was utterly trapped. If he dared move so much as a single muscle, he was sure Sirius would wake and they'd have to acknowledge the closeness. And then something would change. Their relationship would shift again. Like a barrel over a waterfall.

Remus tried to mentally reason with himself; Sirius wasn't—okay maybe he was—but *he* wasn't!

But who was he kidding? The girls, the squirmy sensation he got in his gut when they were alone together—the bloody *incidents?* It was undeniable. A change so subtle it'd become as natural as breathing before he'd even realised it. Maybe that's why it took so long to notice. Feeling almost light-headed, Remus looked down again. Sirius' lips were gently parted in his sleep. His own felt dry and chapped, but

Sirius' looked pillow-soft. And they were right there. All he'd have to do was reach across that short space and—

Squeezing his eyes shut, Remus went rigid as a board, refusing to even breathe in Sirius' direction. He waited for what felt like hours until mercy finally shone on him. With a little grunt, Marlene turned over onto her other side in her sleep and he seized his opportunity immediately, flipping over and breathing in until linen and lemon drowned out all hints of Sirius. It helped some, but still his mind wouldn't shut off. He and Sirius were friends, *best* friends even. They were each other's secret keepers—future bandmates. They both had girlfriends who they liked and they stayed up late listening to each other's favourite music, comforting one another when reality got to be too much. Sirius knew how to push boundaries just enough to make him feel better but not so much as to make everything bad again. And things were never bad around Sirius because Sirius made everything good. Sirius didn't think that about himself, but Remus knew it. Sirius was good. He was funny and handsome and infuriating and Remus loved—

He loved Sirius.

Oh no.

I love Sirius?

It was like a punch to the gut, and Remus' eyes flew open. Of course. That was it. That was everything. Everything wrong with him and everything so, *so* right. Sirius Black with one of his bestest friends in the world, and Remus was also indisputably—*irrevocably*—in love with him.

Well, the voice in his head said, *good luck with that one, mate.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N, as of 10/18/22:

This chapter has been edited to take away from the usage of a particular slur, once uttered by a character in hatred. I recognise that the slur is actively used as a vehicle for violence against other human beings today, not just in 1977. That word has since been removed from the fic, and will not appear in any further versions of my writing (actively condemned by character or otherwise). I apologise to anyone who might've been hurt by my usage of this word, even in a fictional context. Words are not

fictional, and in my own privilege I lost sight of that. Thank you for those who spoke their mind and helped me see how it was actively harming real people, not just an added plot-line in a fictional story, and my sincerest apologies for committing to the act in the first place.

Chapter 55: Detach

Chapter Summary

The return home before Easter holiday, 1978.

Chapter Notes

moonyfrog told me to take a break from my mental health and finish this, LOL (all jokes—shoutout to them) so you can... "thank" them for this chapter, hehe. Wanted to post it early because it's a shorter one, next chapter will still be out sometime this weekend.

PS: For those of you on tik-tok, the opening of this chapter reminds me a lot of "Wake up Gromit! C'mon Gromit, we've got to hide the body! There's no cheese and crackers in prison, Gromit!" and it just makes me chuckle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tommy, can you hear me?
Can you feel me near you?
Tommy, can you see me?
Can I help to cheer you?
Oooh, Tommy,
Tommy,
Tommy,
Tommy…

- "Tommy Can You Hear Me?" The Who, 1969

"HOLY FUCK, WE'RE SO LATE!"

Remus shot upright in bed. All around him, his friends awoke in varying states of distress. There was no time for any of them to wonder how Sirius and Mary had mysteriously changed spots—there was no time for anything. In some sick show of comradery, all of them had fallen asleep in one massive pile, and now they were late for their bus home.

"Fuck—fuck—fuck." James continued to curse as he flew off the bed, bouncing across the room to collect his trainers. It was his incessant internal clock that saved them, which meant there had to be at least

one upside of having a morning person for a best friend.

"How much time do we have?" Lily demanded, all while rubbing her eyes, which were still red and puffy from the day before.

"Not much!" Peter answered, white-knuckling Lottie's alarm clock. "Has anyone seen my other shoe?!"

Still slightly dazed, Remus got up after Mary and immediately bungled it, tripping over the corner of Lottie's shag rug. He sprawled with a great *'omph!',* knocking both his elbow and head sharply against the floorboards. While his ears rung, he became aware that someone was calling his name, but only snapped to when he come face-to-face with Sirius, who had bent over to help him up.

"C'mon, Moony. We don't have time for your theatrics, we're gonna miss the bus!"

Remus was a deer in headlights. His toes curled. His mouth dropped open. And then he remembered.

I like Sirius Black.

The thought crashed into him like a freight train. He wanted to flee—to find the deepest hole he could, crawl into it, and never come out again. Sirius looked so *perfect,* he couldn't take it! All sea-stone eyes and sleep-mussed hair and—

No! Bloody-fuck no! This is insane! Who thinks like this?!

Sirius was his *friend*—dammit! He didn't have the time or willpower for this. How had he even managed to fall back asleep? Was it sheer nerves? Had he simply passed out in shock instead?

"Moony? Earth to Moony!" Sirius grumbled, irritated that Remus had laid there like a dead fish rather than take his hand.

He's calling you, that cursed, sing-song voice said. *Maybe snap out of it, hey?*

"MOOOONY!"

"Okay!" Remus wheezed, grappling onto his arm and letting Sirius swing him back up to his feet. James and Peter were already outside, having left through the window while Remus was still having his internal melt-down. Sirius promptly followed them, before looking

back at Remus with an odd look.

"Are you okay? You look more freaked out than usual."

"I'm fine," Remus grunted, not meeting his eye.

"Did you actually hit your head?"

"No! Now go on!"

Sirius looked him up and down once more before swinging his leg over the window ledge and gracefully dropping down onto the electrical box below. Stomach in knots, Remus hesitated. Would he be able to survive nine hours on a train like this?

“Fuck, my hair!” Mary wailed from behind. “Has anyone seen my sleeping bonnet?”

“You left it in the bathroom,” shouted Lottie.

“… WHO GOT IT WET?! IT’S SILK!”

Screw the train, he wouldn't survive another thirty seconds in here. Practically holding his breath, Remus swung both legs over the window.

“Remus!” Marlene called, just before he could throw himself off the ledge. While the rest of the girls flew about their bedroom collecting last minute packing, she scuttled forward. “I meant to ask you something yesterday.”

“LUPIN!” James barked from outside; “LEG IT OR LOSE IT!”

“I’m coming!” Remus lashed. When he turned back he caught an eyeful of Mary as she whipped off her shirt without a shred of hesitation. Moaning, he quickly covered his eyes to preserve both their modesties. “Look Cherry, can this wait until we’re on the train or something?”

"Well, I meant to ask yesterday but with everything going on—"

"LUPIN?!"

"HOLD ON!"

“I just didn’t want to put you on the spot in front of everyone!”

That got his attention. He peeked out between his fingers and Marlene relaxed, adjusting the rumpled school shirt she'd neglected to change out of the night before.

"I wanted to know if you'd consider coming to mine for Easter?" She asked quickly. "You don't have to! S'just a thought really...."

Remus opened and then closed his mouth in surprise. "Oh. You mean like your house… with your family?"

"Yeah, I don't think the drive is too far from yours in Blackheath, and my dad already offered to fetch you himself if you'd like. Really, it was my mum's idea. She was the one who suggested you come by for dinner. They… They really want to meet you, is all."

"MOONY!" Sirius wailed behind him. "I personally don't mind staying but unless you want to camp out at school for the next week, get your arse down here!"

"Alright!" Remus cleared his throat a bit. He hadn't really considered what he was going to do to pass the time while at home. Under normal circumstances he would've gone straight to Tomny's, but it'd been weeks since the telephone line had been disconnected, and a part of him was afraid to find an empty flat. And now with this Sirius-headache, he needed to find a new distraction or he would surely go insane.

"I'll come," he promised, and Marlene smiled with relief. It instantly made him feel guilty. First for considering his girlfriend a distraction, and second for every thought he'd ever had about Sirius.

"Cool, okay, we can talk more about it on the train then."

"Okay, see you there."

"Don't be late," she chuckled, waving as he dropped down onto the grass outside.

They ran back to their dorm, just to stumble across the bedroom's threshold and continue the race to collect their things. Remus had only enough time to change his clothes and grab his trunk before James was ordering them out again and they were weaving down the staircase along with a few other lagging students. On their way out, he distantly heard one of the phones ring, and then his name was called.

"Lupin, wait up! Phone's for you!"

James hit the breaks just as he made it to the front door, jacket sagging on his shoulders. “Oh bloody hell—Lupin, the bus leaves in twenty minutes!”

“So I have twenty minutes then?”

“It takes *fifteen* just to walk to Castle Hall!”

“Then I’ll run,” Remus reasoned, despite the cramp already forming in his side. “Don’t worry, it’s probably just Giles making sure I’m getting on the bloody thing.”

“Give us your bag then,” Sirius said, taking his trunk from him.

Remus handed it over, and his fingers brushed against Sirius’. A shiver shot up his arm, like an electric shock and suddenly he was drowning all over again.

I like Sirius Black. Sirius fucking *Black.*

"Moony, hand your bag over!"

He pushed the thought away. Now was not the time for another freak-out.

“Sorry! I—I mean, thanks,” he stammered. “I’ll... I'll be right behind you! Just don’t let the bus leave without me.”

Another strange look from Sirius. He was forming a collection, it seemed.

While his friends all nodded and threw themselves out onto Godric’s front lawn, Remus hastily turned back to the phone. He found it unhooked and waiting for him and quickly raised it to his ear, smoothing out his hair while he cleared the lump from his throat.

“Yes? Hello, what is it?”

“Hey, Lu.”

Another shiver ran up Remus’ spine, this one much different from the one the gentle brush of Sirius' hand had given him. With a shaky breath, he glanced around himself, as though it were a cruel joke and someone was waiting in the corner to jump out and scare him. Finally he switched the receiver to the other ear, hands trembling slightly.

“Tom...?”

“Yeah," Tomny's familiar brogue answered. "Haven’t heard from you in a while. Er... How've ya been?”

“How have I…?” He began to sputter. “What the *fuck* Tomny!”

“Oh, damn..."

Remus felt his temper flare. “Haven’t heard from me—how ‘bout haven’t heard from you! What the hell happened to your phone line?”

“Was jus' down for a while,” Tomny mumbled, completely apathetic.

“I thought you were dead!” Remus lashed. “Instead you just—what—couldn’t bother to pay the damn bill?!”

Tomny sighed into the other end. “Wasn’t like that. Sorry to worry you.”

“Fuck your sorry,” Remus grumbled, though his anger was already waning. This many emotions so early in the morning—he wasn't going to make it to lunch. “What’s been going on then? I’m about to come home, dammit. My bus leaves in a few minutes.”

“I won’t keep you then.”

“Shut up. Just say what you want and I’ll gas you for the rest when I get back.”

“Okay. Tonya’s gone.”

He'd had a response ready—another vicious insult—but suddenly all coherent thought fled his mind.

“What...?” Remus held his stomach. “What do you mean she’s gone?”

“She left.”

“Left... where?”

“Left the flat, Lu.” Tomny’s voice had an edge to it. “It was a while ago. February.”

Remus looked down at his shoes. The last time he’d talked to Tonya was February. Then everyone had gone radio-silent.

“Do—Do you know where she went?”

“No. She didn’t say goodbye actually. Didn’t leave much behind either. Jus' this letter for you.”

“For…” Remus trailed off in disbelief. “You sure it’s for me?”

“S’got your name on it. I can post it, if you give me your school’s address or whatever.”

“O—Or I could come and get it?”

“I’d rather just post it,” Tomny said. “Don’t really want it around 'ere anymore, ya know?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. You... got a pen then?”

He waited until Tomny was ready before relaying the school’s address. He’d expected him to say something stupid about the dorm's name or the fact that the street the school was technically on was called ‘Bell End Road’, but Tomny was quiet the entire time.

“Well, I’ll post it when I got the time,” he said finally.

“Okay. Are you… alright, Tom?”

“Mm. Jus’ fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“I’m excellent then. Tonya’s old hat anyway. Sorry you’re just finding out now.”

“Yeah, but it’s okay,” Remus said, trying his best to sound upbeat, “I’ll come by and we can talk about—”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“… What?”

“I don’t think you should come by the flat anymore, Lu. Lots of stuff’s happened. Ian cut a guy last month and we're still cleaning up the mess. Don’t think it’s such a good idea for other people to start comin’ round again.”

"You mean he... killed someone?"

"Well, it was'na exactly a knick."

“Holy fuck.” Remus forced a breath in through his nose. “O-Okay, but maybe once things have calmed down a bit we can meet and talk. Tonya said some stuff when she and I talked—”

“God fucking dammit,” Tomny said lowly. “Don’t you get it, Remus? I don’t want you comin' around! No one does—me, the boys, we got shit goin' on. Can’t sit around pretending things are fine and dandy jus' ‘cause you got a holiday from school. So you jus' stay away, and life’ll bloody go on like it always has, *okay?”*

Remus had never felt so fragile. Tomny never yelled at him—not unless he really deserved it. Hearing him say he didn’t want him around was like a sucker-punch to the gut.

“Did you—” Tomny coughed sharply before letting out a staggered breath. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah Tom…” Remus whispered, head down, “I heard you.”

There was silence, then Tomny coughed again to clear his throat. “Good. I’ll post the letter, just… we’ll talk later.”

A lie. “Okay, Tom.”

“… Bye, Lu.”

The line clicked dead and Remus felt cold all over. He dropped the phone from his ear and leaned his forehead against it, sucking in a breath so sharp it sounded as though he were in pain. Then he realised—he *was* in pain. The cold became an ache, one he hadn't felt in a long time. When he finally realised what he was doing, he had no idea how long it’d been since James and the others had gone on ahead. Wiping his face, Remus hung up the receiver and turned, staggering out the front of the dorm toward the short-cut that led to Castle Hall. The reality that Tonya was gone and Tomny had finally said the words he’d been dreading most didn’t really hit him until he was walking across the pavement, staring as James waved his arms frantically for him to hurry.

“He’s here!” Remus heard him holler at the bus driver. When he turned back, James’ expression went from irritated to concerned. “Blimey mate, you okay? You look like your dog just died or something.” James’ eyes widened suddenly. “Your dog didn’t just die, did it?”

That would really be the cherry on top, Remus thought bitterly. He

shook his head.

Gingerly, James pat him on the back and together they stepped aboard, the bus doors squeaking closed behind them. Going on ahead, James sat down next to Lily while Marlene waved at him from the seat behind her and moved her bag so he could sit. Remus lumbered down the aisle toward her, feeling strangely disconnected from his surroundings. He almost sat, before spotting Sirius near the back, tucked up tight next to Chastity.

"Remus...?"

He looked down. There was concern on Marlene's face.

“Sorry,” he said, clutching the back of the seat until his knuckles went white; “I just really need to talk to Sirius right now. See you on the train?”

“Yeah, sure,” she answered lightly, obviously reading his expression.

The bus was already moving by the time he’d made it down the aisle to Sirius. Chastity noticed him first, glancing up from her window seat and muttering something under her breath to her boyfriend, who looked up with a smile that made Remus’ heart lurch.

“Oh, hey Moony, glad you made it. Thought you were gonna have to mail yourself back to London.”

“Can I talk to you?”

Sirius’ smile disappeared in an instant. He looked to Chastity, before leaning in and whispering something in her ear.

“Noooo,” Chastity started to pout, but Sirius only cupped her cheek and murmured some more, still wearing that handsome look that not even Remus could refuse. Finally she rolled her eyes and stood up, squeezing out inside the aisle. She made sure to shoot Remus a nasty glare, before stalking off down the aisle.

“It’s fine,” Sirius said, standing up and indicating for Remus to take the window seat, “I’ll find her on the train.”

Remus slid in ahead of him and was instantly thankful. Each limb felt as though it were made with lead and he felt sick, like the rumbling motion of the bus had knocked something inside of him loose. Dropping down next to him, Sirius glanced around to make sure no

one was listening in. Remus instantly loved him for it.

“So what’s up—who was on the phone? Was it…?”

As per usual, Sirius was already inside his head. “Yeah,” he croaked, “it was Tomny.”

“Well, about time. What did he say? Did he at least have a half-decent excuse for disappearing off the face of the earth?”

Remus turned away, rubbing his face. His eyes stung, and he didn’t want Sirius to see him cry. “He said Tonya left.”

“Oh…" Clearly it wasn't what Sirius was expecting. "Damn... She just left home?”

“Yeah. In February. Maybe right after we talked.”

“Do you know that for sure?”

“… No.”

“Then don’t say that.”

Remus felt a sob well up in his throat. *What makes you happy?* If he’d said he would tell her on Easter, would she have stayed?

"Hey," Sirius tried, leaning in close, "what's all this? It's okay. You're gonna be okay. You just need to see Tom, right?"

“No," he whimpered. "He told me not to come back, Sirius. He said don't come back to the flat.”

Anger bloomed on Sirius' face. *"That sodding git*—he’s blaming you?!”

“No, I just—I dunno. Someone died. Not anyone I know, but… God, I bet it’s a mess.”

“And he’s blaming you,” Sirius said again. “Man, *fuck* him.”

Remus flinched and Sirius pulled back. “Sorry,” he mumbled, before slowly placing his hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, Moony.”

“It’s what I get,” Remus murmured, “for thinking I could play both sides.”

“Aw, you poor idiot. You weren’t playing both sides, you were just

existing. What’s wrong with that—with just being happy?”

But Remus wasn’t happy. For nearly two years he’d been torn, never fully in one place. And now Tonya was gone and Tomny had outgrown him and he had no way of catching up to either of them.

"I wish we weren't going home," he breathed.

"Trust me," Sirius said softly, "where we're going? It ain't home."

Oh, Sirius.

With his head in hands, Remus bent forward, and finally the tears came. It was like opening the floodgates. The rumble of the bus hid all noise, but it was like a thunderstorm had hit inside his chest.

“Aw, Moons,” Sirius said, rubbing his back. “It’ll be okay. It just sucks for a little while. I know, I know.”

Just the day before, Lily had asked him if he cried. He'd hesitated then. But now, with Sirius doing his best to cover him from view, Remus wasn't sure he would ever be able to stop.

Chapter End Notes

:^)

(that is my suss face. sorrz)

Chapter 56: Easter, 1977

Chapter Summary

Remus returns to London for Easter, short a few friends. Luckily the McKinnons have invited him for dinner.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took a while to edit, so it's out a little later than I would've preferred. Hope you enjoy it though!

CW: 'F' word used in smoking context. Brief mention of sexual content. Some not so nice undertones of homophobia and vague references of suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yesterday,
All my troubles seemed so far away;
Now it looks as though they're here to stay,
Oh, I believe in yesterday...

- "Yesterday" The Beatles, 1965

Number twelve, Grimmauld Place of Widcombe, Bath, stood three hours away by train and a little more than four by car. Remus knew this because he'd spent his first day back in London measuring the distance out on the maps Giles left tucked in the seat pockets of the Rolls. It was as though he needed to convince himself on paper that simply running away to Sirius was not a feasible option. Even if he did make it all the way to Bath, Sirius wasn't even permitted to use the phone over holidays—Remus doubted he'd be allowed so much as a glimpse of his friend if he went. Though, the rebel in him couldn't help but imagine throwing stones at Sirius' window, then climbing some trellis until they were nose to nose and he could look him in the eye as he asked him to run away together. He knew without a second thought that Sirius wouldn't hesitate. They'd climb down that trellis with little more than the clothes on their backs and they'd be off. They could busk on street corners for pennies like they'd always talked about, and stow away in freight trains to warmer weather the moment it grew cold again. Sirius would never complain, too busy enjoying the moment, and that gave Remus courage.

Except it was only ever a fever dream, and foggy London mornings culled those quick enough.

Maybe if he'd had Sirius he would've been able to pluck up the courage to visit James or Peter's—but alone, Remus couldn't even pick up the phone, let alone accept invitations to mother-made suppers or Piccadilly Circus. He knew James and Peter would understand if he told them, but the mere idea of trying to explain what Tomny had said made him sick to his stomach. They would feel sad for him, then rage as Sirius had, but it would be misplaced. They didn't know what had gone on before, not really—how he'd lied to everyone and stuck his nose in where it didn't belong. How he'd used Tomny as an outlet for all the anger he felt for his parents, and Tonya as a comfort. How he'd fallen in love with both of them and then treated it all like a vacation from a life without any real hardship. It was guilt beyond measure—and James and Peter would never understand. Sirius came the closest. He already knew the 'before' stuff, which made the 'now' bits easier. But Sirius wasn't around.

On his second day, Remus wrote a letter.

Dear Sirius,

I called the flat again from my house. I know you told me not to, but I did it anyway. I was hoping the line would be dead again, but it rang and someone picked up. I think it was Ian, but I couldn't really be sure because I hung up the moment they said hello. I guess a part of me wanted to think that things would stop for them too. But Tomny was right. Life just goes on.

In the end he didn't post it. Instead Remus shoved the letter in a bottom drawer with the rest of his things; books, albums, cigarettes—everything that'd ever come out of the flat. He told himself that he would burn it. That way there wouldn't be anything left and he could truly put it all behind him.

When he'd reappeared on Tomny's doorstep last Christmas it'd been thanks to a sliver of hope that Tomny hadn't truly meant what he'd said when he'd gotten hurt in August. Now that sliver was inflamed. Infected and slowly poisoning the rest of him with anger and hurt and bitterness, enough to drown out some of the guilt. Tomny had given up, and wherever she was, Tonya had given up too. They weren't his friends, maybe they never had been. What sort of friends ran away or gave up on one another so easily? Sirius wouldn't have given up—

James or Peter neither. The phrase ‘give up’ didn’t exist in any dictionary they owned, and you’d probably have to break a few legs to get any of them to leave you behind. It made Remus wonder where he fell on that spectrum. He didn’t want to give up either, but if Tomny hated him so much, what else was there to do?

The only calls he took were from Marlene, his girlfriend and possibly the most reliable person he knew. She made things easier, even if he did feel guilty every time he so much as thought of Sirius in her presence. If Tomny’s phone call had done anything, it’d distracted him from the sudden Sirius revelation. The distance felt good too, in that way. Surely Sirius couldn’t occupy his every waking thought all the way from Bath.

Marlene visiting the estate had been Remus' idea, surprisingly enough. They had several days before he was due to visit hers for dinner and he’d suddenly grown antsy in the absence of his friends. Unlike James and Peter, Marlene knew some bits about Tomny—mostly the innocent stuff—and so confessing to her what had him so rattled was easier too. Always making sure to invite her over on the days Lyall was at the office, he sent a car and Marlene became the first friend he’d ever had over to his childhood home.

“Bloody big enough, isn't it?” She said, staring up at the looming ceilings of the foyer. Suddenly, as if remembering where she was, Marlene clapped her hand to her mouth. “I-I mean, it’s beautiful.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he smiled; “You can just be yourself, Cherry.”

She seemed grateful for that at least, and truthfully, he was grateful for her. They took their time walking the grounds, where Marlene met all the dogs and laughed when they leapt up to lick her face. She seemed to like the horses best, and though Remus had no personal interest in, he enjoying seeing the way her face lit up outside the stable.

Giles loved her, naturally. He’d grown up in Battersea not far from hers and was more than delighted to discuss how the area had changed since he was young. Other topics of conversation included football matches they both followed and of course Remus himself—though he was pretty sure Giles was making up most of the embarrassing stories he was able to ‘suddenly remember’. It was almost startling how well the two of them got on. Marlene had that sort of quick and witty disposition Giles admired, and the second time

she'd come to visit, he went himself to pick her up.

Eventually Marlene had the idea that they should go and see a show. It was just by happenstance that her local cinema was showing the film version of *Carrie,* and though she seemed less than excited over the content, Mary had suggested to her that they should catch a movie at least once as a couple before they headed back to school for the rest of term. Mary was actually supposed to meet them there with some guy her cousin had introduced her to, but at the last second she'd declared him a creep and bailed on their plans.

"I don't know what's wrong with her," Marlene grumbled as they paid for their tickets. "It's like she's gone completely off the rails. She hops from guy to guy like there's a prize to be won—except the only prize I can think of is being called a slag. I don't know how she gets away with it."

"She doesn't sleep with all of them, does she?"

"No, but that hardly matters—they'd just lie and say they did get with her. Most boys are disgusting that way."

After the usher ripped their tickets they made their way inside and Marlene left him to go to the toilet while Remus got in line for the concession. When it happened he was mostly spaced-out, staring at the movie poster showing Carrie's actress bathed in blood on the wall next to the theatre hallways. Another movie had just gotten out, and a small crowd of people were shuffling toward the doors, scattering bits of popcorn on the floor as they went. He saw a flash of familiar golden-brown and abandoned his place in line immediately, shooting toward him with his hand outstretched.

"Tomny! Tom!" He called, hardly believing that he'd spotted his friend in some tiny picture house in East Dulwich of all places, but as he clasped his hand on the guy's shoulder, he turned and Remus realised that it wasn't Tomny at all, just a guy who slightly resembled him from the back.

"Sorry, mate," he breathed, "thought you were someone else."

The guy just looked at him funny before shambling off with the brunette girl he was with, and Remus had the bitter thought that Tonya was much prettier.

"Remus?"

He turned to find Marlene, her blue eyes wide with concern.

“Sorry, I… got distracted.”

“It’s okay,” she said kindly. “Did you still want that popcorn?”

The theatre was dark, which Remus was grateful for, and Marlene spent most of the film with her face turned into his shoulder, jumping every time the music clashed or anything moderately gruesome appeared on screen. He tried his best to focus on the film, but the incident with the almost-Tomny had him too rattled to really enjoy it —which was a shame too, since he’d heard the filmmakers had used actual pigs’ blood in the finale.

Giles was waiting to drive Marlene home when it was over. She sat in the front and used her extensive vocabulary of *‘ibles’* (‘horrible’, ‘terrible’, ‘incomprehensible’, that sort of thing) to regale the driver with her impression of the film while Giles interjected with tidbits such as how Remus used to be afraid of everything from pigeons to his own shadow.

“You had your eyes covered during that part!” Remus protested from the back seat, after Marlene complained about the way Carrie effectively cut two students in half like ground beef by slamming them in a door.

“Says you,” Marlene laughed. “You were staring at the wall for most of it! What, starting to rethink this whole interest in horror and gore?”

He let her have it, only because he didn’t want her to think he was too distracted to have a good time with her.

When they made it back to Marlene’s house—a very modest-looking row home on a very modest-looking street—he got out and walked her to the door. Giles was watching them and Remus had to turn around and wave an arm at him in exasperation to get him to drive up the street a bit, which he did, only after honking obnoxiously.

“I like Giles,” Marlene said; “I see where you get your sass from now.”

“Yeah, he’s good,” Remus said, putting his hands in his pockets.

Marlene looked down at her shoes. She was wearing trainers and a pair of flared jeans, which had shocked him at first since he’d grown so used to seeing her in her school clothes. She had no makeup on and her hair was in a plain ponytail, but she’d worn these jangly bracelets

on her wrists and a large flowy wrap-shirt which made her look a bit like Stevie Nicks.

“I had fun tonight,” she said shyly. “It was nice to go out on a real date.”

“Yeah it was,” he shrugged. “Too bad we can’t really see movies at school.”

“It’ll be summer soon. Though, who knows what that’s gonna look like. Lots can change between now and then.”

“Yup.”

Marlene opened her mouth like she was going to say something else, but just closed it again, smiling. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Remus nodded. “You’re sure I don’t need to bring anything? I could always—”

“Nope, don’t worry about it. Mum’s got it all covered. She’s excited to meet you by the way—Dad too. And my brothers are coming, so you’ll see them.”

“Right, no pressure then.”

Marlene pushed him lightly on the shoulder. “Don't do that thing."

"What thing?"

"The 'Remus worry'."

Remus managed a genuine smile. "The what?"

"You fret like an old woman, Remus. Sometimes I wonder if you're a teenage boy at all."

"Harsh, Cherry."

She shrugged innocently. "I'm serious, though. Mum’s a little pushy but if you just be yourself, you’ll be fine. Maybe polish up your table manners a bit though, they’re a bit lax.”

“Oh, you’re so funny."

Smiling, Marlene pressed up onto her toes to kiss him before turning and unlocking her front door. “Bye,” she said, closing it and leaving

him on the doorstep.

Turning, Remus made his way back down to the pavement and up the street to where the Roll's brake lights were shining. If he were back at Hawkings he'd probably have heard crickets chirping, but it was just London, so all that could be heard were the nearby sounds of late-night traffic. Giles tucked away the paper he'd been reading under the car lamp as he slipped into the backseat. It was the same one he'd read cover-to-cover that morning, which meant he hadn't been reading it at all and had definitely been spying instead.

"Ready for home?" He asked.

"Yeah," Remus said, "let's get back."

That night he wrote Sirius another letter.

Sirius,

I saw Tomny today. Okay, you can relax, I didn't actually see him. Just thought I did. Made a stupid idiot out of myself walking up to some random bloke who I mistook for him, too. But now I gotta know. After Miles left, did you ever think that you saw him again, but it wasn't actually him? Was it all just wishful thinking? Did it ever stop?

I don't really know who else to ask about it. Marlene was with me but she doesn't deserve to deal with all my shit. You though, you kinda owe me. A question for a question, right? I suppose James might have some insight—I'll bet he sees Lily everywhere when they're not together. Every ginger girl from here to France could be her in disguise.

I never thought I'd say this, but I'm ready to go back to school. The city's suddenly too quiet. I might be going crazy, but I miss your noise. Or maybe I just can't sleep without hearing Pete snore anymore.

Hope you're doing okay. Don't jump out any more windows, the Marauders still need you as a guitarist, and I'm just not sure you can get away with only playing the harmonica. You're no Mick Jagger yet, mate.

Remus.

He let Giles post that one, even though it was embarrassing. He told himself not to expect a response, but Sirius was always doing the unexpected anyway—and even if Tonya had been the one to push him

into it and all he wanted was to scream in her face, if he was going to stick with this songwriting thing, he might as well get over his aversion to the fucking postbox.

* * *

Sunday 10th April 1977 — Easter Sunday

He brought flowers because Giles said he couldn't turn up empty-handed to meet Marlene's family. He combed his hair because Giles said he looked like a yob when he didn't. He'd almost worn a tie because Giles said so, but had drawn the line there and shoved the thing in a bush on the way up to the front door to ring the bell.

Marlene answered, looking pretty in a blue dress and matching barrettes in her hair. "Don't you look spiffing," she said. "And you brought flowers. How cute."

"Giles' idea," Remus said bashfully.

Marlene smirked. "Well, you came all this way, might as well come in."

"Wow, thanks."

He passed her the bouquet and took off his shoes in the tight entryway as Marlene hollered down the hall to announce his arrival; "Mum, Remus is here! And he brought flowers!"

"How nice!" Mrs. McKinnon hollered back from deeper inside the house.

"Dining room's this way," Marlene said, gesturing down the hall.

"Hey," Remus asked quietly, stopping her before she could lead him further into the house, "your family isn't gonna, like... ask me about football and stuff, are they?"

"That's what you're worried about?" Marlene sniggered.

"That and *other* things. It just would be great if they didn't."

"Well, no promises," she smirked. "Now c'mon." Looking far too pleased with herself, Marlene turned and led him down the yellow-papered hallway and into a dining room. The table was made up for

eight, set with floral-covered china dishes and a lacy table cloth. The dining room's walls were scattered with pictures and photographs of the McKinnons and their family, along with several holy crosses and a large portrait of Christ.

There was a short clatter and Marlene's mother appeared through the doorway separated the dining room from the kitchen. “Oh, there he is!” She cried, while wiping her hands on a dishcloth. Apart from being shorter than Marlene, she was almost the spitting image of her daughter, all fair and rosy. “It’s so nice to finally meet you, Remus,” Mrs. McKinnon said, immediately pulling him into a rib-cracking hug. “Marlene’s told us all about you, of course, but she never said you were so tall, my oh my.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Mrs. McKinnon,” Remus winced. She had a grip like iron.

“What good manners. But oh please, call me Joyce!” She declared, finally releasing him. “And these flowers—” she took the bouquet from Marlene as Remus subtly stretched out his spine; “they’re lovely! We can set them in the middle of the table. Now, dinner’s almost ready, so I’m going to get the boys. They’re out back smoking. Gracie, will you go check on Danielle? Her feet were feeling sore so she laid down in John’s old room.”

“Kay,” Marlene said, taking his hand while Joyce turned and retreated back into the kitchen. “Do you wanna see my room?”

“Sure,” he shrugged, and Marlene led him back out into the hall, dodging a rather large china cabinet and a second painting of Jesus nailed to the cross. “They call you Gracie?” He asked, absent-mindedly staring at Marlene’s hand in his as she led him up the staircase.

“Yeah,” Marlene said, “since I was little. 'Grace' is my middle name.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I was named after my dad’s aunt Gracie actually—the one who paid for my school and all that. Only you guys call me Marls.”

They stopped outside the first bedroom on the second-floor landing and Marlene knocked before poking her head in. There was a bit of mumbling, but she came back out with a smile. “Danielle’s my brother John’s wife. She’s six months pregnant and apparently has had a pretty miserable pregnancy so far, so I’m pretty sure everything still sucks for her right now.”

“And I suppose everything’s gonna suck for John too, in about three months.”

“Shhh!” Marlene hissed, but she was still smiling. “C’mon, my room’s just down here.”

They kept going, the floorboards creaking beneath their feet. Everything was tight in these sort of row homes, he knew, but Marlene’s house felt more lived-in than any of those he’d visited with Tomny in their early days. Each room seemed to smell of candles or cloves and every surface had some sort of crochet doily draped over it. Remus had never met any of his grandparents, but it made him wonder if this was what their homes might've looked like. The feel of a grandmother's doily, the smell of a grandfather's cigar—that sort of thing.

Down the hall, Marlene's bedroom was tiny, with only a closet, desk, and a single bed decorated with pink and blue flowers. There wasn’t much else apart from a few bits and bobs here and there and some old photographs of her and her family. She had a more recent photo of her and the girls framed on the desk and a small cross hung on the wall over her bed, but it was clear that the space was only occupied for about four months out of the year; Marlene’s school jumper was draped on the back of her desk chair, next to a stack of books and assigned reading.

“I’ve never had a guy in my room before,” she said.

"What d'you mean? I've been in your dorm loads."

"I meant *my* bedroom. Feels sorta different, don't it? More... private."

“Oh. Well, I’ve... never been in a girl’s room before either,” he told her. It was almost a lie—he’d been lots of places with Tomny, but as Marlene had so kindly pointed out—never in a girl’s room *alone*.

“Do you want to sit down?” Marlene asked, indicating to the bed.

“Okay,” he said. Like the floor, it creaked beneath him on squeaky rails. He expected her to sit next to him, but instead Marlene came forward and straddled his lap, thumbing the collar of his blazer. He stared at her a moment, at the blondness of her eyelashes and the light spatter of freckles that fleeted across her nose, and then just like that, they were kissing.

It was warm and wet, not unlike any of the other times they’d snogged

one another. Remus never bragged, but they'd tried shagging again since their very first too. Just a few times; never enough to be deemed insatiable—neither of them seemed interested in it *that* much—enough to keep up. Or at least, that was what it felt like. Remus told himself it was normal. After all, they'd gotten more comfortable with each other. Marlene didn't shy away when he touched her anymore, and he'd grown used to lying with her afterwards. It didn't feel bad to leave, simply a 'right, see you tomorrow'. It was normal. *Normal.* And every part of Marlene was soft, the inside of her mouth even more so. *This is what it's supposed to feel like,* he told himself. Marlene was smart and attractive and she liked the things he liked, and he *liked* her—he did!

As Remus drew his arms up her, cupping the gentle curve of her waist with his eyes closed, he tried picturing what might come next. How he'd fumble with the zipper of her dress and then the clasps of her bra before tracing the soft ridges of her spine. It'd be easy, he'd done it before, except this time his brain didn't obey. Instead he found himself imagining a different back, a different waist. One that didn't broaden into female hips but narrowed into a smooth pelvis, and lips that weren't sylph-like and pink, but full and cupid-shaped. Blonde hair became dark, baby-blue eyes turned to silken-grey, and then everything was sandalwood and burnt-sugar hand-rolls and *him*—

Remus' eyes flashed open immediately. He pulled away, too ashamed to look up or say anything at all. If only Marlene knew. Maybe then she'd just hate him and some of the guilt would finally ebb. Except that would require admitting it aloud.

Hovering above him, still breathless from their kissing, Marlene bit her lip while she scanned his face with her eyes. “Sorry,” she mumbled. It only made Remus feel worse.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” he murmured. "You're my girlfriend..."

“Right. I meant, sorry I nearly jumped you at my parent’s house.”

Remus deflected; “Thought that was normal for a couple of horny teenagers.”

“I’m not entirely sure you are a teenager though," Marlene said, her mouth quirking up at the corners. "You’re more like a cranky old man trapped in a seventeen year-old’s body.”

Her humour worked, and Remus relaxed slightly, hearing the bed squeak beneath him. “If I’m a cranky old man then you’re a crazy old

bat."

"Huh. Does that make us old before our time or young in our old age?"

"Both, I suppose."

Marlene chuckled and leaned forward, hugging him tightly while pressing her face to the side of his neck. Letting out a sigh, Remus reached up and cupped the back of her head. It hit him then that this was all he ever wanted from her. Her laughter—her acceptance. Except he was pretty sure boyfriends were supposed to want more from their girlfriends.

"Okay," Marlene said finally, pulling away and sliding off his lap to fix her dress. "Let's get down there before someone notices we're gone."

Another thing to appreciate about Marlene, she always cut out the torturous bits.

Remus stood.

"After you."

They encountered Danielle in the hall, stopped at the top of the stairs as she cradled her round stomach. "Oh, you must be Remus," she said, before holding out her hand. "Be a doll and help me down the stairs? My feet are killing me."

He did so, following behind Marlene while he guided her pregnant sister-in-law down to the first floor. When they emerged back in the dining room, they found four others waiting for them; Joyce, Mr. McKinnon, and Marlene's two older brothers. Remus shook his hand, finding it just as firm as wife's, though considerably rougher around the knuckles. He was tall too, certainly where Marlene got her height from.

"Michael," one of the brothers said, reaching across the table to shake Remus' hand as well. John, the eldest, was next, after he'd helped his wife into her chair and they'd all tucked in around the lovely Easter dinner Joyce had prepared.

"I hope you like ham," Michael said. "Mum's gone the full monty for ya, it seems."

"It looks great," Remus answered, both honestly and to be polite.

“Remus, since you’re the guest would you consider saying grace?” Joyce asked, opening a napkin over her lap.

At her request, Remus shifted in his seat slightly. He couldn’t remember having to say grace in his entire life. Luckily, Marlene caught on to his discomfort early and leaned toward her mother’s place at the end of the table.

“Mum, I told you Remus doesn’t pray,” she murmured.

“Oh yes, that’s right,” Joyce said, and Remus got the distinct feeling she hadn’t forgotten whatever her daughter had told her at all. “Well, that’s fine dear. Gracie told us about your family, and I’m so sorry about your mother. John, will you say grace instead?”

Remus froze in place. The comment about Hope struck him as so completely out of left-field that he had to be prodded by Marlene just to take her hand. To his left, Michael also thrust his open palm forward and Remus swallowed the stale air in his throat as everyone closed their eyes and John began reciting his prayer.

“Bless us, oh Lord, for these gifts that we’re about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord, we pray, Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone else chorused.

The swift sound of clanking silverware followed as everyone dug in, spooning themselves generous helpings from the large dish ware. As he robotically did the same, Remus felt his mind begin to float. *Your mother,* Mrs. McKinnon's voice kept echoing. *So sorry.* Sorry for what? Why mention it? What did Marlene tell you? So much of what he’d told *her* had blurred together with his conversations with Sirius. Suddenly Remus found himself desperate to recount every bit of information he’d relayed about his family or his friends.

"Pass the potatoes, John?"

"Here's the butter."

"Has anyone got a spare napkin?"

"Remus?"

He snapped out of his daze, turning to find Marlene staring at him while offering a basket of dinner buns. "Do you want a roll?" She asked, presumably for the second time.

"Oh. Er—yeah, thanks." He took it, and quickly ripped into it with his fingers.

“So, Remus,” Joyce started, while the rest of her family picked away at their dinners, “how is your father? I hope he’s not missing you tonight. What is it he does for work again?”

“Remus’ father is a state minister,” Marlene said quickly.

“Let the bloke answer for himself,” Michael quipped, making his sister scowl lightly.

Stuffing his face with the bun to stall for time, Remus choked it down and managed a sip of water. His face felt hot. “She—*ahem*—She’s right. He works for the Ministry of Agriculture.”

“Doing what?” Joyce asked, spooning extra potato mash onto Michael’s plate for him.

“Well—er—he’s head of the department for animal welfare so he spends a lot of time at the office. It’s a lot of bill passing, I think. They’re responsible for food production and imports. A lot of trade, mostly.”

“I see. So he’s away a lot?”

“Yeah. He stays in the city centre a lot.”

“You poor thing. And what do you do while he's away?"

"We're at school a lot of the time," he answered, shooting a questioning look at Marlene, "but mostly I help with the dogs."

"Remus' father raises hunting dogs," Marlene explained.

"Hunting dogs, eh?" John mused. "You get out to shoot much then? Ride your horse down to the foxholes?"

Remus tried not to take the jab personally. "Actually, I don't hunt."

"What good's a hunting dog if you don't hunt?" Michael asked, raising his thick eyebrows. He had darker hair than the rest of his family but the same sort of strong nose as Marlene and their mother.

"I see friends too," Remus said, pointedly looking back to Mrs. McKinnon. "It's good being home. Most of the time."

"Oh, well in that case," she smiled, "if you're ever looking for a good group of people to spend your time with while at home, I'm sure our parish would be happy to host you."

"Mum, please," Marlene groaned.

"What? I'm only offering Remus a place to soothe himself and find a good sort to mingle with. Don't think I haven't caught on to your little attitude lately either, young lady. You can't be stingy with God."

Clearly embarrassed, Marlene glowered down at her dinner and Remus began pushing the roasted broccoli around his plate.

"You keep up with football much, son?" Mr. McKinnon asked. Having feared this question for most of the night, Remus glanced at Marlene, who turned her sullen look into a guilty smirk.

"Not really, sir…"

"You mean Gracie found herself the only bloke in London who doesn't have a team?" John snorted.

"People can have hobbies other than sports, John," Marlene said pointedly. "And Remus is hardly the *only* one."

"And where is it you're from again, Remus?" Michael asked, nudging him lightly in the arm.

"Blackheath."

"Hm, nice area. Lots of big houses. I worked on one once—building a fence. You ever been out this way much?"

"A bit," Remus said. "But mostly around the Tower Hamlets—Shoreditch sort of area."

"Ah, you're on the wrong side of the river then, mate," John interjected with a chuckle.

"I guess," Remus said, attempting a shallow laugh.

"What brought you out that way then?" Michael pushed, leaning forward slightly as though he could snatch Remus' answer right off his lips.

"Mates, mostly. They get around."

“Ah, ah, yeah, that’s right. Gracie mentioned that you had a few pals out that way. Fancy that, a posh boy from Blackheath with friends east of the river. Guess I’ve seen it all now.”

“Shut up, Mike,” Marlene grumbled over her fork.

“Marlene!” Joyce snapped before huffing and resuming her smiley expression. “I must say though Remus, when Marlene told us she met a boy at that school of hers I assumed you would be a bit different. More… French maybe.”

Marlene gaped at her mother; *“Mum!”*

“What? I only meant I find him refreshing! Not at all like what Mrs. Pierson’s daughter said the school was like. You remember Lacy—she graduated when you were still small. She was always saying that the boys there were rather full of themselves and their money and clearly Remus isn’t, so I’m just relieved!”

“You mean you’re relieved he ain’t a poofter,” Michael snorted.

“You mind your mouth at the table,” Mr. McKinnon warned, and Michael instantly turned stony.

“That is *not* what I said,” Joyce corrected.

“Thank the Lord,” John added, eyeing his wife as she spooned a second helping of potatoes onto her plate.

“You ever do much work with your hands, Remus?” Mr. McKinnon asked.

Remus squeezed his fork. *Did rolling your own fags count?*

“Remus is a musician,” Marlene supplied. It was probably the worst thing she could’ve said—Remus knew this even before he saw her father and brother’s face tighten in suspicion. What sane working man wanted to know that their only sister and daughter was dating an *artist.*

“I dated a musician once,” Danielle supplied around her chewing. “He’s a plumber now.”

“Now there’s a respectable profession,” Michael said, “ ‘cept every day you come home smelling like—”

“How about your mother, Remus?” Joyce interrupted; "What did she

do before she passed on?"

"Well, she um…" Remus took a deep breath, "she was sick for a long time when I was a kid so, mostly just took care of me and other stuff."

Joyce frowned; "I feel for you, I really do. It's so hard when a family member just refuses to get better. Didn't she try seeking any help for her problems?"

Refuses? Problems? "She had lots of doctors."

"Oh of course, but when someone's sick like that we really should be looking toward—"

"Mum, please," Marlene tried, "can't we just eat dinner?"

"I thought you wanted us to get to know Remus?"

"This is private," Marlene pushed. It made Mrs. McKinnon click her tongue in disappointment and turn back to him.

"I'm sorry, Remus, I must sound just terribly pushy. These things are of reasonable concern though, you understand. You're both so far away at that school, it makes me nervous. I've read that it can be genetic, and if you and Marlene continue on together it's just as well that we be open about—"

"Joyce," Mr. McKinnon interrupted gruffly, while clearing his throat. "Food's getting cold."

Mrs. McKinnon sighed, but nodded her head. "Oh, listen to me ramble. Must be embarrassing for you kids. All I meant to say is that you have help here, should you ever need it. Alright, Remus?"

He was stunned. Livid, possibly. All he could manage was a grim 'thank you', and that only brought another one of Joyce's sickly-sweet smiles. By the time everyone was finished eating, Remus had been reduced to brief or else, one-word answers. He could tell the family was becoming unimpressed—Michael just about said as much—but he was too astonished and too irritated to care.

Once the girls got up to start clearing the dinner plates to make way for dessert, Remus whispered to Marlene that he was going to have a cigarette and stepped out the front door by himself. The more he thought about Mrs. McKinnon's words, the angrier he got. How could someone like Marlene have come from such an obtuse, unpersonable

group of people? And how could she have thought it was a good idea to tell them *anything* about him? It was exactly why Remus didn't share stories back and forth. Hope was one thing, but the music and stuff about Tomny was too much intersection. It made him sick just thinking about what they'd all really been thinking while they sat there around the table.

"Whooh," Marlene said, stepping out the front door behind him and awkwardly rubbing her arms. "Sure got chilly. I thought we were done with winter, but guess not."

Grunting in response, Remus lifted his cigarette to his lips and took a long drag. So far the nicotine had done little to tame his foul mood.

"I brought you your jacket," Marlene said, offering it up. He took it and slipped it on without a word, turned away from her and glaring at the street.

"Sorry if that was uncomfortable," Marlene continued, trying to edge her way into his eye-line. "My brothers and I normally get on, but Michael's gotten almost intolerable ever since he got this job laying sheet metal. All he does is work and hang out at pubs now. It's turned him into a right jerk most of the time. And Mum, well... you know how it is."

"Do I?" He replied dryly. Marlene frowned quietly and got closer, waving the smoke away from her face.

"Are you alright?" She asked gingerly.

"Fine."

"You don't sound fine. You sound a bit upset actually."

"Nah, just peachy."

She sighed; "Remus, I'm sorry for what my family said—"

"Oh no, they were totally fine, or at least I was surviving their fucking interrogation. It's what *you* said, actually."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." Remus pulled his hand down and blew smoke out his nose as he rounded on her. "Why would you tell them about my family? My mum—my *friends?"*

“Because… you’re my boyfriend,” Marlene started, eyes wide.

“So that just gives you free rein to ramble on about someone else’s business? I didn’t come here on Christ’s bloody birthday—”

“Christ was born on Christmas.”

“Oh for fuck’s—I didn’t come so your family could rag on me for my dad's money while also pitying me for being the poor mum-less bleeder. ‘Least of all your lunatic of a mother!”

Marlene gasped, clearly astonished by the insult. “Is that really what you think that was—pity? Remus, I know my mum might not have the smoothest delivery, but her mother passed when she was young too. I’m sorry if she was insensitive, she just knows how it feels, s'all. Don't you want somebody to relate to?”

"No!" He snapped. "In fact, I don't! Actually fuck that!"

"Don't swear at me!"

“I'm not!" He croaked. "But what the hell was with all that shit about ‘doctors’ and ‘help’ and 'problems'? Excited for dinner—as if! She just wanted to see how much crazy got passed down so she could call the damn loony bin to have me carted off and committed!"

"No, she wasn't!"

"Then what the fuck, Marlene?!"

“You never talk about what happened,” Marlene whimpered, suddenly a lot more hesitant. “Maybe if you did then we’d be able to—”

“To what, pity me even more?!”

“Damn it, Remus—we want to sympathise with you! All of us!”

“Yeah well, who fucking ASKED YOU TO?!"

She was quiet for a moment, lips pressed into a thin line. “I’m gonna let that one slide only because you’re right, she was being too nosey—but just that *one.* You don’t get to yell at me at my own home, Remus Lupin. You don’t get to—to insult me and my family.”

“I wasn’t insulting you," Remus scowled.

“And yet I feel insulted.”

“Sounds like a you problem, then.”

“Oh, where’d you hear that?” Marlene lashed. “From Sirius? Funny how he always ends up cutting in. Figured London would be far enough away but guess not.”

“It wasn’t Sirius,” he snapped. “I just don’t know why everyone feels the need to talk about other people’s damn business!”

“You may not talk to your family, but that doesn’t mean everyone else wants to cut them off! You’re the odd one out here—not me!”

Remus scoffed and threw his cigarette away. “Fucking fine. Whatever.”

Marlene gave a great sigh and pinched her forehead. “I should’ve seen this coming. Mary said we were due for our first fight anyway.”

“Oh, so you’ve been telling Mary everything too, then?”

“No, of course not! But you tell Sirius everything and she’s *my* best friend!”

“Really, ‘cause all you do is complain about her! You never like anyone she dates and you always have to have a bloody opinion about it—”

“And you hate everyone Sirius dates!”

“That’s different!”

“How so? You complain about him just as much as I complain about Mary and you’re still friends, so don’t talk to me about relationships, you bloody hypocrite!”

Furious, Remus turned away but Marlene only grabbed his arm and drew him back. “Remus, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. We’re just angry. If you’ll come back inside we can yell and scream at each other later when we’re both feeling a little less stressed. I’ll tell Mum no more talk about family or friends or whatever.”

“No,” he started, pulling away; “No, I think I’m just gonna go.”

“What? You can’t just go,” Marlene said, reaching for him again; “What are you gonna do, walk home?”

Remus quickly backed away. “I’ll call Giles from a booth, just… I’ll see

you on the train."

"Remus? *Remus!"*

Marlene kept shouting his name but he was already turning, starting down the dark pavement and away from the row of tiny houses. She chased him in her house slippers, but finally stopped once he'd crossed the street and slipped between a few parked cars. It wasn't hard to find a phone booth, but Giles was less than impressed when he asked him to come get him, not only early but several streets from his girlfriend's house. He came anyway and Remus threw himself into the back of the Rolls feeling just as irritated as before, but a lot chillier.

Back home, it was easy to feel angry over Marlene's admission to guilt. It was as though his childhood home was seeping into him, feeding the rage and feelings of betrayal as it always did. The things he'd told Marlene, he'd told in confidence, even if he didn't outwardly say it. Someone like Sirius would've known that—it would've been automatic in his mind—so why wasn't it for her? What made her parents so worthy of such information? What made anybody?

To try and forget some of the grief, he listened to the radio. That only made him miss Tonya and Sirius. And since he couldn't have either, he went for walks. All day he stayed out, tracing the same path around the estate until he could see the clear outline of his boots in the mud. The dogs were noisy and happy enough for the both of them, and eventually he wasn't angry anymore. Or he was, and rather the fatigue of it all had dulled everything.

"Don't feel down, lad," Giles would tell him, "women are fickle things —impossible to please. It's why I never married. Never had any interest in the heartbreak of it all. And lemme tell ya, stay a an eternal bachelor, and you'll live a long life. Get married, and you'll be down and out by the time you're forty."

"You know, Gil," Remus sighed. "I actually think I believe you."

"You should make up with the girl though," Giles instructed right away. "Whatever you said couldn't have been that bad. Besides, I liked her. She could definitely keep your cheeky arse in check."

Remus tried not to agree, and at night, he tried not to think about Sirius. It was proving hard. *Does he think about me?* Remus would wonder. *Did it happen with Miles? Does he torture himself like this?* But Sirius had Chastity, and seemed perfectly content with the way things were. For all the things he was and wasn't, Sirius must've been a good

boyfriend at least. Girls always seemed interested and it wasn't often that he got broken up with. How did he balance it all? How did he keep everything normal? He did it somehow—but *how?*

The problem was with Remus then. It was him who couldn't figure it out, not Marlene or her family or their friends, it was... it was hopeless. Without his anger to distract him, Remus just felt guilty again. Maybe things would become easier if he just resigned himself to being a better boyfriend. If he could just be like the rest of his friends, then perhaps things would finally settle into place. He could make boundaries, find a better confidant in Marlene, and put his feelings for Sirius aside for good. All he had to do was avoid that cursed 'L' word. Sirius and 'Love' could never meet. It was as good a plan as any.

Bounding into the parlour, he found Giles astride his maroon armchair, the daily crossword open in his lap. "I'm gonna apologise to her," Remus promised.

Giles looked up, his white tuffs of head returned to their original carrot-orange thanks to the fire that was glowing gently in its hearth behind him. "You are then?"

"Yeah. We'll work it out... or something. I like Marlene. Don't wanna lose her."

"I see. You gonna call her then? She can't whap you one through the phone."

They both glanced at the parlour phone, sitting ominously a few feet away. "I thought it might be better on the train," he mumbled. "Besides, I might deserve a whap."

The old driver smiled. "Smart lad."

He spent the rest of his time at home constructing a script, the same way he had with Sirius when they'd fought the Christmas before. It featured many apologies, but also boundaries, which Remus was proud of. And with any luck, Marlene would accept it.

Then, on the morning when he was about to leave to see his friends in person, a single letter arrived, expedited and addressed to him.

Dear Moony,

You're a shit.

Now that that's out of the way, the answer is yes. Yes. Abso-fucking-lutely, yes. I saw Miles everywhere—even heard him in the way James or Pete called my name. Still do, sometimes, but I wasn't lying to you either. It'll always suck, but it'll suck a little less later. You'll forget what the sting is supposed to feel like until eventually you've grown so used to it that it just feels like everything else. And maybe if you're lucky, you'll find some tosser who'll sit with you and share stupid stories and fags and tell you all about their favourite crazy books. (I finished "Carrie" by the way, and I'm never going to an American prom as long as I live.) Maybe that tosser will enjoy noise just as much as you do, and you can tell them all the secrets you've told me. And maybe if you're really, really lucky, you might even like them just a little bit.

I did.

Hope you're having fun with McKinnon. James says that Lily says that that's all you've been doing. (Ha—get the double meaning?) At least that means you're keeping busy.

See you at school.

Sirius.

PS: I already told you once, didn't I? One day Mick Jagger is going to wish he was me.

He folded the letter up tightly and tucked it into his jacket pocket, right over his heart. Then Remus picked up his trunk and made his way down the Lupin estate's front steps to where Giles waited next to the boot of the Rolls, all the while cursing Sirius for his ability to so easily ruin every plan he ever laid.

Chapter End Notes

The filmmakers did not, in fact, use real pigs blood to shoot 'Carrie', pfftt.

This chapter stunnnnggg, but was a necessary evil. Remus is deep in his 'denial' stage, but we'll see how long it lasts. 'Til next time <3

Chapter 57: Cherry, Amended

Chapter Summary

Back to school, with apologies and guilt in tow. But things go smoother than anticipated. Remus is loved.

Chapter Notes

CW: References to sex and smoking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh, thunder only happens when it's raining,
Players only love you when they're playing;
Say, women, they will come and they will go,
When the rain washes you clean, you'll know;
You'll know…

- "Dreams" Fleetwood Mac, 1977

Wednesday 13th April 1977

Despite arriving early, Remus did not spot Marlene on the platform. He tried waiting, bouncing nervously on the balls of his feet until the train's whistle was screaming and James all but dragged him aboard. Feeling antsy as they made their way down the train's aisle, he peeked into the passing compartments in search of a familiar wheat-blonde ponytail, and only stopped after Peter had asked what he was looking for. Deciding that it might just be better to wait to apologise at school where they might have some real privacy, Remus solemnly padded after his friends to their usual seats. He was doing a good job of chalking his sombre mood up to general tiredness, until about an hour into their trip when Mary and Lottie passed by their carriage. Without saying anything, the girls waved through the compartment window to each of the lads, but when it came to Remus, proceeded to flash him several gestures of his own, these of the more crude variety.

As the girls disappeared back the way they'd come, Sirius leaned back against the seat with his hands behind his head, appearing nothing less than amused. "Blimey, Moony. What did you fucking do?"

"Nothing!" Remus snapped. " 'Least nothing that's any of your

business.” He tried not to think about how Sirius had his legs extended, stretching across the cabin towards him in a lazy fashion until he was nearly tucking the toe of his Oxford under the hem of Remus' pant leg. The teasing gesture had been giving him goosebumps ever since they'd left the station. Remus *also* tried not to think about how Sirius’ cheeky smile—the same smile he’d been seeing for the past year and then some—now left him with very guilty knots in the base of his stomach. It made him hate himself—Remus the failure. Being in love with your *best* friend couldn't be the best way to make-up with your *girl*-friend.

At least Sirius seemed okay. Though he'd tried not to voice it (Sirius didn't like the fretting), Remus had been worried. Worried for him, about him—it never ended. Especially not after Christmas, when Sirius had returned with a flighty disposition and a bum-wrist. It'd taken weeks and an intervention on Regulus' part just to get through to him, but apparently this time around had been better. Since their arrival Sirius had been laughing and joking with his friends, a wide smile on his face. It made Remus happy, until he turned that smile on him.

"It's McKinnon, isn't it?" Sirius ragged. "She finally kick your lanky arse to the curb?"

"No." At least, he didn't *think* so.

"You in the dog house, Moony?" Peter snarked.

"Go on, tell us," James went on. "M'sure it couldn't have been that bad. We swear to help ease your heavy heart."

“We just had a bit of a row,” Remus amended gruffly. “It’s *normal*. Don’t try telling me none of you don’t get into it with *your* girlfriends?”

”No need to get nasty,” Sirius said.

”Oh? Shall I try asking them then? How ‘bout Lily, Prongs? When was the last time the two of you had it out?”

James grimaced a bit. "Well, I—"

"And Moira, Pete? Or Chas? Boy, I'll bet she'd love to share."

At that, all three boys looked away and Sirius began to whistle innocently. Irritated and not the least bit satisfied with his miniscule

win, Remus turned to his window and propped his elbow up on the edge, glaring out at the rolling countryside as it passed them by. Then, for good measure, he kicked Sirius' shoe away by the toe. Sirius recoiled instantly, and Remus felt his eyes on him in question until he finally shrugged and turned away.

Don't think about it, Remus told himself. *It'll go away eventually. Let the bastard shrug it off.*

"You got our letters, right?" James quietly asked Sirius.

"Yeah," he answered. "I posted you back. Did you not get them?"

"Nah, sorry. Must've been too late for the post."

I got mine, Remus almost said, before he remembered that he was supposed to be brooding.

"S'fine," Sirius said. "You know, even Chas wrote me. Sent an entire package. It was a nightmare sneaking in without mum seeing."

"What'd she send you?"

"A few records. They're in my trunk. But also something else."

"Don't keep us in suspense," Peter prodded. "What was it?"

"You'll never guess."

Sirius' sarky tone got the attention of all of the Marauders, and even Remus was curious enough to turn back from his sulking view. Hopping up from the bench, Sirius reached up to the shelf over their heads and slipped one hand into the outside pocket of his trunk. He came back with a fistful of something pink and frilly that made every eyebrow in the room shoot up. Not even Peter had to do a double-take.

"She sent you her knickers?" James crowed, while Sirius held the pants aloft like a trophy.

"If you think this is shocking, you should read the note that came with them."

Suddenly the compartment felt rather stuffy. Remus shot to his feet, stepping past Peter and sliding the door open.

"Where you going?" James called.

"To apologise to Marlene," he grumbled, before whipping the door shut after himself.

Now, Marlene had always been a very straight-forward person. She preferred to tackle problems head-on rather than ignore them until insanity, which was not Remus' ideal method, but made for better apologies. Doing his best to work Sirius and Chastity Bell's knickers from his system, he prowled the train, stopping only once in the smoking car to puff on a single nervous cigarette. Eventually he found the girls in a cabin near the front, all three of them crowded onto the same bench and giggling over some magazine Mary was holding. Remus almost wished Lily was there to play mediator or at least ensure Marlene didn't push him out of the train at full speed, but they'd yet to make it to Lime Street, which meant he was on his own.

Feeling like an idiot, he gently wrapped on the compartment door with his knuckles and the girls looked up. Marlene appeared tired when she spotted him, which made Remus feel even sorrier. Next to her, Mary and Lottie shared the same narrowed eyes, like angry lionesses out for blood. In response to his arrival, Mary tried to get up and shut the curtains, but Marlene shooed her away with a sigh and opened the door.

"Hi," she said blandly.

"Can we talk?"

"So *now* he wants to talk!" Mary wailed from inside. Marlene whirled on her.

"Mary."

"Typical men," she carried on. "What's that they say? A women's dime spent on a man's time? Ugh."

Marlene pinched her forehead, while Remus all but cowered in the doorway. "Enough," she said. "Can you lot can just give us a few?"

Clicking her tongue, Mary moved past her best friend with Lottie in tow, stopping only when she was chest-to-chest with Remus in the aisle way. "You're a right twat, you know that?" She snapped. "If it were me I'd kick your arse to the curb."

"I'd kick more than your arse," Lottie added helpfully.

"You get a *few,"* Mary agreed, before jabbing Remus in the chest with

her finger. "And remember, I'm watching you."

With a final begrudging look, they shuffled past and Remus stepped inside relatively unscathed. Marlene tugged the door closed after him and pulled the curtains together to keep out any prying eyes.

"Mary looked about ready to skin me alive just then," Remus said, trying for humour and failing. Marlene gave him an icy look, and he sat quickly, as guilty as a hanged dog.

"Mary's loyal," Marlene replied curtly, before taking a seat on the bench across from him. She crossed her legs, then her arms. "Go on, then. I'm listening. Say what you came to say."

"I'm sorry," Remus said automatically, hanging his head.

"For…?"

"For leaving in the middle of dinner."

"And...?"

"And for yelling. I wasn't myself, and I embarrassed you." He looked up. "Can you forgive me?"

"Can I forgive you for dumping me on my own porch?" Marlene drawled.

Remus licked his lips. "I... didn't... dump you..."

"No? You mean to say that wasn't a break up?"

... Don't think about it. We're not supposed to be thinking about it!

"No."

Marlene tensed her jaw, staring at him for a long while before ultimately letting out a long sigh. "Well, considering you actually left between dinner and dessert, I guess it could've been worse." Uncrossing her body, she stood and came to sit next to him. They instantly settled into each other's side, and Remus took her closeness as an okay to put his arm around her. Marlene seemed to appreciate it, as she took his other hand and held it in her lap, fiddling with his fingers. "I'm sorry too," she said quietly. "I didn't realise it'd hurt you to tell people about your family and your friends. I should've asked you first, instead of assuming it would be alright. I know things can be complicated for you, and I don't want you to think you can't trust

me."

"I do trust you," Remus conceded, "I just wasn't feeling all that great on Easter, and I think I took it out on you. Does your family hate me now?"

Marlene shook her head. "Told them you had a nasty allergic reaction to the mince pies. As far as they know, your face got all ugly and splotchy and you were so embarrassed you had to call Giles to come and get you."

"You couldn't have said I got a stomach ache instead?"

"I was still quite mad at you, you know."

Remus smiled down at their hands, interlocked at the fingers. This was how it was supposed to be, he told himself. He didn't like any other girl as much as he liked Marlene. There was Lily, but she was just a friend, and Tonya, but she was different and now gone. The Sirius thing was just that—a thing. He owed it to their friendship to keep it that way, and he owed it to Marlene to be a better boyfriend. More patient and affectionate and willing to show her off. Like James.

"What have you been reading lately?" Marlene asked obliviously. Instead of answering, Remus tilted her face up to kiss her. It felt like the right thing to do, and he was rewarded by the eagerness with which she kissed him back. Marlene was so soft. He appreciated this, he was certain. And then when they pulled apart she was smiling warmly at him.

"I'm lucky you're my girlfriend," he told her.

"What'chu mean?"

"I mean, we just get each other. Right?"

For a split-second, Marlene's eyes shifted, as though she were seeing something far away. But her smile didn't falter, and she hummed contently as she set her head on his shoulder. "Right."

They stayed that way until their train pulled into the next station, filling each other in on whatever reading they'd gotten done over the holiday (Marlene was not impressed to hear about *The Shining,* either) and Remus was grateful. Talking with Marlene was so easy. It made the painful things throb just a little bit less.

"I cannot believe she did that," Marlene gasped over the steady thrum of the stopped train. "Mark my words, you are never getting a pair of my knickers in the p—"

Suddenly their compartment door flew open and Lily Evans stood there, her hands fisted at her sides as though she were already primed for a fight. “Remus Lupin, you thick idiot! You sorry excuse for a toe rag!” She bleated. “How could you do something so nasty and horrible and—*and—!”*

“It’s okay, Lils, we’ve already made up,” Marlene said simply.

Instantly sagging against the doorway, Lily breathed out in relief. “Oh good. I was afraid I'd have to stay mad at him. In that case, happy to see you, toe rag.”

She came in and sat down, followed almost immediately by James, Mary, Sirius, Peter, and Lottie. All eight of them crammed into the girls’ compartment together, shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip. It was hot and uncomfortable but still, Remus had been missing it. Until something occurred to him.

“Hold on," he gaped, "were you all just waiting to listen to Lily tear a strip off me?”

“ ‘Course,” Sirius said, taking the spot to his immediate right; “Couldn’t very well miss that. I do love watching Evans shout.”

“So long as it’s not at you,” James pointed out, fitting in between Peter and Lily. The moment he sat down, Sirius stuck his leg out and jammed his best friend in the shin.

“Why would she be yelling at me when she has you?”

“You say that as if I wouldn’t be yelling at the both of you at the exact same moment—for the exact same thing,” Lily said smugly. Sirius only grinned back at her.

“Now Evans, I swear,” he started, “you’ll have nothing but allegiance from me, from here on out. In fact, you'll all be glad to hear that I'm turning over a new leaf.”

“Why the sudden urge to repent?” Marlene asked.

“Because as it happens, I came to a few conclusions over the holiday, the first of which being that I will never be having children of my

own.”

“No?” Mary said curiously, leaning forward on Marlene’s other side.

Sirius shook his head adamantly. “No, and therefore I must prove my worth to Evans.”

“Why?” Lily laughed.

“So you’ll let Prongs name your first born after me, of course.”

A great guffaw went up from all of them, most of all Lily. “I'd love to say that the world would have to freeze over first, but even then!”

Sirius only shrugged humbly and leaned back into his seat. “Well, I guess I’d settle for godfather,” he hummed, his arm still pressed against Remus’ side. While the others were laughing, Sirius poked him lightly to get his attention. As if he didn’t already have it.

“Moony, when we get back to school, there’s something I wanna show you."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise," Sirius whispered keenly. "I don’t need long, just a little bit. Just you and me.”

Remus tried not to react. “After dinner then?”

“Yeah, but not in the dorm. I want us to be alone.”

Fuck. His heart jumped. “O-Okay. Astronomy building?”

Sirius winked. “Meet you there.”

* * *

He’d expected Sirius’ ‘meet you there’ to be of the metaphorical sense, but Remus really did have to meet him there. Sirius was still off honouring the detentions he’d gotten from almost poisoning Snape, and when he’d finally arrived, he had Andy’s guitar in hand and a whirlwind smile on his face.

“Sorry if I made you wait,” he said, sprinting across the room to where Remus was just polishing off a joint. He hadn’t meant to start smoking

so soon after returning to school, but he'd been nervous ever since Sirius had asked to meet and waiting on his own had kept him bored anyway.

"S'fine," he said, tapping the empty spliff on the ground and smudging out the ashes with his palm. "How was detention?"

"Alright—boring, mostly." Sirius set the guitar case down and lifted its lid.

"At least you don't smell like a barn," Remus observed. Sirius pulled the guitar out and shook his head.

"Wasn't at the barn today. Kettleburn passed us onto Sluggy to clean out like, a hundred beakers. It smelt even worse believe it or not. Next time I'll take the cows."

"Tosser. Who says the cows want you?" Remus said lightly. "Now what's this big thing you wanted to show me?"

Sirius glanced at him before slapping a single piece of notepaper down on the floor between them. "Voilà!"

Picking it up, Remus squinted at the page in the dark. He recognised the stanzas immediately. "You wrote a song."

"Mhm! Spent all week on it too," Sirius said giddily. "Dunno if it's any good, and I didn't have the guitar to write it to, of course, but I wanted you to hear it first."

He scanned the page, reading the lines off one by one and imagining how Sirius might fit them together to music. " 'She loves you smart-mouth, she loves you, she do, she loves your quick wit but she'll kill you too'."

"I like that bit," Sirius said, "when I wrote it I imagined something like this—hold on."

He fiddled with the guitar's tuning for a moment before taking a deep breath. When he played, he kept his eyes closed, as though that was the only way he could remember the moment he'd written it. As he did, Remus took advantage and got his first real eyeful of Sirius since they'd met on the train that morning. He'd been avoiding looking at him directly, half afraid that he'd notice and finally connect the dots. It was dark but like the star he was named after, Sirius glowed brightly on his own anyway. Remus saw him perfectly.

“What do you think?” Sirius asked, and Remus realised he’d missed the song entirely, too lost in watching the way Sirius’ head turned while he played, showing off the sharp outline of his jaw. When had his jawline even start to look like that anyway? It’d always been good, the lucky bastard, but now—*blimey*.

“Er—sorry, I sort of… missed it?”

Sirius gave him a funny look. “Is that code for ‘it sucked’?”

“No! Sorry, just stuck in my head a bit. Play it again, I promise I’ll listen.”

Sirius sat up a bit and scrunched up his nose. “Alright.” He started again and Remus concentrated on the melody. He was rewarded too, because it sounded so good. Sirius’ playing suited most things but it suited rock and roll most of all. It made Remus giddy just thinking about the day he’ll get to finally see him on a stage.

“That’s fucking brilliant,” he said the moment Sirius had finished. “Is there anymore?”

“Not quite,” Sirius amended. “Need a bit more time, but if you take the lyrics and add some flair to them, I’ll write the music.”

“Some ‘flair’? Who am I—Elton John? Want me to add some of the ol’ razzle-dazzle, too?”

“I just mean you can do what you want with it!” Sirius laughed. “That way it’ll be our song, not just mine. How else am I gonna rope you in?”

“You think I’m not already roped in enough?”

“I just mean I gotta give you a stake in something, right? Keep you tied down."

“As long as I get royalties.”

“Of course. I'm nothing if not honourable. For a Black, anyway.”

Smiling, Remus looked back to the song and bit his lip. “Do you want to work on it now? It’s still early enough, we can go back and I’ll grab the Fender and we can go wherever you want. Or just stay in the dorm —that’s fine too. James can even join in.”

“Sorry, can’t,” Sirius said, tucking Andy’s guitar away. “Told Chas I’d

meet her. Man, she's so clingy sometimes. Did you know she wrote me a letter for every day of the holiday?"

"You mean, plus the knickers?"

"Yeah! Poor kid who passes the post along to me looked like he was gonna shit his pants when he had to smuggle all of them inside. Sometimes I'm real jealous of you."

Remus coughed out a laugh. *"Why?"*

"McKinnon's not so clingy, is she?"

"No… she isn't."

"Not trying to say anything about it," Sirius said quickly, shutting the case. "Just meant that it might feel refreshing to find a girl like that. It's good. I'm happy for you, really."

"You are?"

Sirius shut the guitar case with a smile. "Yeah. You're one of my best mates, Moons. Don't know what I'd do without you."

Remus wanted to rip his hair out. Instead he forced a smile, folding up Sirius' song and tucking it into his coat pocket. "I don't know, probably walk off a cliff or end up prison or something."

"Ha. Probably."

Standing up with the case in one hand, Sirius offered him the other. Remus took it wordlessly and let himself be pulled to his feet. Together they snuck out of the astronomy building, skipping down the fire escape's stairs. He tripped near the bottom and Sirius stuck an arm out to catch him. They might've sprawled down the last flight together had he not been so quick.

"Guess I can't go anywhere without you either," Remus laughed nervously, hating the way his ears and neck burned. " 'Roped in' and all that… ha…"

"So what you're saying is you don't need those royalties?" Sirius said, and Remus glanced at him sideways before pushing him lightly.

"Don't push your luck."

Sirius smirked at the ground and they walked the rest of the way to

House Lane in comfortable silence, only stopping outside Chastity's dorm, Bronte House.

"Take Andy's guitar back for me?" Sirius asked, holding out the sticker-covered case. "I don't really feel like playing guitar tonight, if you know what I mean."

He winked, but Remus would've understood without it. "Yeah sure," he said, taking the case from him. Sirius saluted him and turned to cross Bronte's front lawn before disappearing around the dorm's side, no doubt to meet Chastity at the back door. Like an oik, Remus stood there wondering what the chances were that Sirius would reappear in apology. Then he'd say 'Don't know what I was thinking letting some silly girl distract me' and 'Let's go practice, Moons!'

He didn't, obviously, and Remus was snapped out of his daze as a group of kids made their way up the pavement toward him, chittering away. Rather than going back to his own dorm, where he might have to listen to James or Peter drone on about how much they'd missed *their* girlfriends over the holiday, (Remus loved them both, really, but *Jesus Christ*) he headed straight for Rowena House and threw rocks at Marlene's window until she opened it.

"You alone?" He called. Marlene nodded. "Can I come up?"

She nodded again and he climbed onto the electrical box, passing the guitar through the window to her first before climbing inside.

"What do you have Sirius' guitar for?" Marlene asked, setting it down beside her bed.

"Safekeeping," was all he said. Then he pulled her close and kissed her, because he wanted to but also because it felt like something he should do—should *only* want to do. He wanted to draw her up against him and forget everything else existed, but why did that feel easy and hard all at once? Everything seemed so simple for Sirius, like turning a light on and off. He missed him, missed talking with him. Was this how he'd felt when he lied about the double date? When he'd chased him down for practice or pranks and everything in between? Why had he always said no? All he wanted was to be around Sirius—Sirius knew everything. He knew about Tomny and Tonya and his dad and his bloody mum. He wanted to talk to Sirius.

But Sirius was with Chastity.

Remus sunk into Marlene and mercifully—because she was a better

person than him—she kissed him back. He wasn't sure what he'd have done if she hadn't, and it was almost enough to chase the relentless thoughts of Sirius from his head. For the rest, he pulled her long runner's legs up around his waist until they were staggering to hit the lights. Quickly they became lost in each other's desperate breaths, as though they couldn't wait to stop thinking. Together they started tracing that gentle path that felt familiar and foreign at the same time —where comfort and guilt went hand-in-hand—and sank back onto her bed, just a tangled knot of limbs and clothing.

It's good, Sirius had said. *I'm happy for you.*

Remus arched up, knocking his lip sharply against Marlene's upper tooth in a clumsy attempt at a kiss. She didn't even hesitate, merely pulled off his shirt along with his jacket, then his belt, and he did the same for her, dropping her skirt off the side of the bed while she kissed his neck. It caught on something and he tugged, only to hear a clatter as the guitar case rolled onto its side. Freezing up at the hollow sound, Remus bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. It was enough for Marlene to notice and she straightened up above him, eyebrows knitted together in concern, still breathing hard.

"Are you okay?" She asked, smoothing the hair back from his forehead. "You seem a little off."

Eyes shut, Remus leaned into her touch, but even that too made him feel guilty. He took her hand and kissed her palm, mumbling into the soft skin; "I like you so much."

"That's not an answer," Marlene said, drawing her hand back gently. She always knew what to say.

He sighed, gritting his teeth. "I think I might be becoming weird, Cherry. I feel strange and I'm not sure why."

"Can you describe it to me? The strange bit."

"... Not without hurting you."

Marlene smiled, sadly. "It's okay, Remus. I understand."

"What?" He breathed. "How?"

She tucked a bit of hair behind her ear. It was such a Marlene thing to do. "I'm not blind," she said, "and I… well, I just do. Probably."

“I wanted to make this work,” he swore. “We just made up. On the train, I—I told myself I’d be a better boyfriend. That I owed you that much.”

Marlene squeezed his sides with her legs. “Remus, you don’t *owe* me anything. That’s not how love works. Two people who like each other shouldn’t be obligated to like each other in the first place.”

His gut squirmed painfully. “I think we should break up.”

A moment passed between them in the dark room.

"... Oh."

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay,” Marlene said. Then her shoulders sagged too, and he realised it was relief. “Actually, I think we should break up too.”

He tried to sit up but she was still straddling him. “You do?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately and I’m just not sure being in a relationship is what I really want right now.”

“I see.”

“It has nothing to do with you, of course, Remus.”

“Oh, yeah, you neither...”

The corners of Marlene’s lip curled upwards. “You know, after you left on Easter my mum kept talking about marriage and weddings and other crap.”

“No way. Thought she hated me.”

“No. You make her a bit nervous I think, but she's probably just happy I brought a guy around at all,” she smirked down at his bare chest—a sad look—and gently traced the outline of his ribs with her soft skin of her fingertips. “I told her to forget it though. I mean... I don’t have any desire to get married as young as my parents. Do you?”

“Fuck no.”

Marlene laughed genuinely then, and rolled off of him. She shimmied in between his side and the wall in only her underwear and stared up at the bed’s ceiling.

“God, what are we gonna tell the others?”

“Who? Oh. You mean *those* nosey bastards. We’ll tell ‘em the truth—that we’re friends.”

"Friends. I'd like that."

"Me too."

“Then… I’ll tell the girls if you tell the lads?”

“Deal.”

More laughter, then Marlene leaned her head on his shoulder. “It’s sort of a relief—not dating you anymore.”

Remus covered his eyes dramatically. “And there goes my pride.”

“Fragile jessy,” she said, pinching his arm. “You’re the one who broke up with me.”

“You agreed!”

“As I was saying, it’s a relief to just be your friend again. I like you, Remus, but I’m not sure relationships are for me. Maybe I’m weird too.”

“Nah, you’re great.”

“Aw. You poof.”

“You might actually be the meanest person I’ve ever met,” Remus exclaimed happily. “And I’ve met Snape!”

“Ooh, do I get a prize?”

"Only my love."

“Ha. You *are* a poof. And I love you too. As a friend, of course.”

"Naturally."

They smiled at one another, before Marlene sighed and grabbed his neck, drawing him toward her. Their foreheads knocked together, and Remus felt calm wash over him.

“You know,” Marlene murmured, “I’m coming to realise something

else about myself too."

"What's that?"

She hummed a bit. "I think I'm going to keep it to myself for a little while longer, if that's okay."

"Oh. Yeah, I understand."

Pulling back, she cupped his face, stroking her thumbs across the bit of stubble on his jaw. "Knew you would." She kissed him on the cheek and pat his thigh before swinging her legs over his and standing up. "Guess we should get dressed if we're not going to shag, then. Unless you wanted to try break up sex?"

"I thought it was 'make up sex'?"

She shrugged, then tossed him his shirt, tugging her own over her head as she made her way to the wall next to the door. "Got anything else to say before I turn the lights back on and we're officially broken up?"

"Is that the signifier?" Remus snorted, then; "Nah, I'm good."

Marlene smiled, but her hand stilled as she reached for the light switch. "Remus, do you think I could ask one more thing of you before we break up?"

" 'Course. Anything."

Hesitating a moment longer, she bit her lip. "Will you still call me Cherry even if we're broken up? You'll think it's silly, but it sort of… makes me feel pretty. Like how Mary feels when her boyfriends give her nicknames."

"Of course I'll still call you Cherry," he said, like it was the easiest thing in the world. And really, it was.

Marlene's shy smile returned. "Thanks," she murmured.

"Oh, and Cherry?"

"Yeah?"

"You've always been pretty."

"Oh Remus. In another world…"

Then she turned the lights on, and just like that, they were broken up.

Chapter End Notes

Lime Street [Station] is the main rail station in Liverpool, where Lily is from.

It's my birthday today! Feels crazy to have gotten this far. The fic has passed 300k words and 500 kudos, which is INSANE, so thank you so much for everyone that's been reading and commenting and leaving kudos. You guys are mental to be willingly going on this journey with me, but I love you so much for it! Best birthday gift ever <3

Chapter 58: Love Aeternus

Chapter Summary

> Remus Lupin is a free man. Free to date, or not date and just fret over how good his best friend looks when he's doing... well, anything at all, really. Dammit.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Light sexual harassment at the beginning. (All in jest.)
>
> Also, maybe bring some tissues? Idk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Goodbye Ruby Tuesday,
Who could hang a name on you?
When you change with every new day,
Still I'm gonna miss you…

- "Ruby Tuesday" The Rolling Stones, 1967

Knowing that they'd be forced to shut up during communion, Remus waited until after breakfast to break the news about the breakup. Marlene had already strategically taken the girls on ahead, leaving the four of them to doddle over to the church on their own time. Remus purposely drifted back, nervous but also disinterested in the current topic of conversation.

"So Potter, what's the verdict then? Look, we already know you were all about the threepenny bits when you were but a wee lad—" Sirius illustrated by clapping his hands over his chest proudly; "but we're old and grown now. And I'll wager that nowadays, it's gotta be the arse for you."

In answer, James rolled his eyes dramatically. "I'm so glad we're talking about this *before* we get to church."

"C'mooooon, I've seen the way you watch Evans in that little skirt of hers," Sirius pressed, grabbing his best friend by the shoulders and waving him about. "Arse-man! Arse-man! Arse-man!"

"You're that sure, you fuck?" James demanded, shoving him off.

"Oh? You saying you're actually a fan of those little mosquito bites? Lucky Evans."

With a scornful yet delighted cry, James threw himself forward and began chasing Sirius along the outside of the courtyard, whooping and hollering as they disappeared behind the fence.

"This idiots," Peter said, falling into step with Remus as the other two took off. "Shall we go in, Moony? Let them catch up."

"I had something to tell you all," Remus said with a tsk. "Looks like it's gonna have to wait."

Peter squinted up at him. "Well, what was it?"

"Hm... You see, Marlene and I—"

With another holler, Sirius reappeared, his hair mussed from the chase; "Oi, Pete! We're taking a poll—tits or arse?"

Sirius all but shouted the question, drawing the ire of a group of passing girls. Each one of them scowled as they continued on into the church courtyard, making Peter turn a guilty, beet-red colour.

"O-Oh shove off, Black. It's time for bloody church," Peter wobbled.

"Blimey! So modest it hurts!"

At Sirius' teasing, James made his re-entrance and grabbed hold of him in a headlock. "Stop teasing our Wormy, you villain!"

"I'm only collecting statistics! Moira's rack ain't *that* bad!"

"Nicer than yours anyway, you thick nob!" Peter said, with more vigour this time.

"HA! You got me there, Wormtail," Sirius grunted, still trying to pry James off.

"Come on, let's just go in," Remus huffed, unentertained. "James, let him go."

Obediently, James released Sirius and laughed as he stumbled backwards. "Moony's right. Let's go, Black, before McGonagall drags you in by the ear herself."

"Well, hold on now," Sirius said, straightening his collar and tie, "Moony hasn't bid in. Now c'mon wolf-man, which do you prefer, bosom or bum? I'll bet it's bum."

"Don't be a prick."

"Ooh, a bit touchy today, aren't we? Don't tell me you and McKinnon had another row?"

“Actually Marlene and I broke up yesterday,” Remus answered plainly, drawing an immediate halt to any and all laughter. As his friends gaped in shock, Remus quickly busied himself by plucking a stray leaf off his jumper, trying to appear nonchalant.

“You broke up?!” James cried.

"—Yesterday?!" Peter added.

“Yep.”

“But I thought you just made up with her?!” James continued. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I'm not some wilted dandy,” Remus scoffed. “And no, nothing happened. For your information we talked and just agreed we were better off as friends.”

“Friends?” Peter replied. “Like actual friends or ‘we dated and now it’s painfully awkward' friends?”

Remus made to go around them, rolling his eyes lightly; “The first one, Wormtail.”

“He means, are you two actually gonna try and be friends after being boyfriend and girlfriend?” James translated, following Remus from behind. He caught Remus midway across the courtyard and made him turn round again, which he did with another huff.

“Of course we’re gonna be friends. We were friends before we dated.”

“But dating kind of changes things, don’t it?” James pushed.

“How so?”

James took a moment to consider, looking uncomfortable. “Well—er—it just does, doesn’t it?” He threw an arm out toward Sirius next to him, who had been quiet ever since Remus started explaining. “Go on

then, Black. You've never been friends with any of your girlfriends after you broke up, right? I mean, apart from Mary of course…"

"Yeah, and he's never been friends with any of them *before* they dated either," Remus pointed out stubbornly. "Look, is Marlene and I breaking up really going to be such a problem for you guys?"

"No," Peter said, "s'long as you're okay with it."

"I am."

"Well… good then," James finished. "What'd the girls say?"

"Dunno. Marlene was gonna tell them."

"Suppose we'll know soon enough then." James cracked a smile. "Hope this doesn't throw the group off-kilter though, now that we're not all in relationships."

Remus shrugged. "If you're that worried, Prongs, I could always propose to Lily that she dump you for me."

"Don't you dare, she was pissed at me only yesterday for spilling tea on her study notes, and she might just do it."

"Too bloody right, she might," Remus smirked, indicating to the churches doors with a flick of his head. He waited for James and Peter to go first, before falling into step with Sirius. He was still slightly irked, but Sirius' dubious silence was getting the better of his curiosity.

"You've been eerily quiet," he prodded. "What, no witty remarks about the break-up?"

"I'm sure I could come up with something if you're that desperate to hear my voice," Sirius drawled sarcastically, as he fell in line behind the crowd of other kids and began climbing the stairs into the church.

"You seem mad," Remus taunted, doing his best to squeeze in between the bodies to keep up with him.

"What? I'm not mad."

"You're being quiet. You always go quiet when you're mad."

"That's funny coming from *you."*

"There it is," Remus shot; "So what—you're mad when I start dating her and mad when we break up?"

"I'm *not* mad, Lupin. You just always ruin the fun."

Remus scowled and looked away, muttering under his breath; *'Dick.'*

Some silence passed between them, filled only by the chattering of other students and teachers as they all started down the aisle between the pews.

Stupid Sirius, Remus thought bitterly. *This is mostly your fault. Dick. Fuckface. Asshole.*

“Are... you okay then?” Sirius asked out of nowhere, making Remus practically spring up on the spot.

“You—You mean about Marlene?”

“Yeah. Duh.”

Remus licked his lips. “Yeah, I’m fine. It was mutual.”

“Heh. That’s what they all say.”

“It was!”

Sirius snorted lightly, head tilted up toward the chapel's expansive ceiling. “Mhm. Okay, Moony.”

You are a fuckface. A handsome fuckface. Dammit.

“Anyone for cards after class?” James asked from up ahead.

“Can’t,” Remus and Sirius answered together, before sharing a quick glance of surprise.

“I-I'm... meeting Chas,” Sirius mumbled, not making eye contact.

“You could always bring her,” James offered; “Lily’s busy, and unless Remus wanted to bring his ex along then I think we’re in the clear.”

“So smug,” Remus sneered, “little do you know that the person keeping Lily busy will be me. She asked me to quiz her, but I’ll say hello for you too.”

James smiled, good-naturedly and slid into their usual pew. “Okay, in

that case, hope you two have a good time."

Sirius blanched a bit, stopped at the end of the pew "How can you be so okay with that?" He half-squeaked. "He just practically told you he's taking your girlfriend on a date, and you didn't even know!"

"It's only Moony," James smiled. "If I stopped to worry every time it occurred to me that my girlfriend might be in love with him, I'd never sleep again."

"And if I asked Evans on a date—what then?" Sirius asked, and James pulled them to a stop to look him up and down.

"To be honest, I think you'd have more trouble getting Lily to say yes than me, but more power to you. Though..." James looked Sirius up and down pointedly; "Lily does prefer guys on the more—you know, *tall* side."

"Oh so we're doing short jokes now, huh?" Sirius lashed, before using both hands to propel himself down the pew toward him. "C'mere, Potter, I'll knock you down a foot or two!"

James squealed and scooted further down, crushing Peter in the process. "Remember the commandments, Black! Thou shall not maim their best friends!"

"Shove your commandments! I am five foot nine and still growing—and for your information that is *above average!"*

Remus didn't even bother sitting down. He simply took a step back and waited for one of the ministers to come along and berate his friends for fighting in church—which they did, severely. But as he watched Sirius stick out his cheeky tongue and flash the father the bird, it occurred to him that he no longer had to worried about that squirmy feeling in the base of his stomach. Sirius was in a relationship and he—Remus Lupin—was out of one, exactly the way things should be. Clearly dating had made him too aware of his surroundings, but maybe now he'd finally be able to relax and focus on the normal things, like music and school and just being present with his friends. Hoping for normal wasn't an impossible ask after all. Remus just hoped it stayed that way...

Later that day, he met Lily outside the Bellchant building as promised. The sun was shining overhead and the ground was miraculously dry for April, but still she brought a picnic blanket just in case.

"I'm glad you suggested we sit outside," Remus said, as he laid out his books and things.

"Me too," Lily agreed. "It's been so long since it was just the two of us."

The spot they'd chosen was just around the Eastern side of the building, giving them privacy from anyone who might just be walking down the street. It was also near the private music rooms, and Remus could hear the music of a violin drifting out of one of the open windows. He wondered briefly if it was Regulus, but then the violin made a screechy noise like nails on a chalkboard and he was instantly convinced that Regulus “Partita in D minor” Black would have never risked anyone hearing such a mistake.

“I believe you, you know,” Lily said eventually, “that the break-up was mutual. Marlene seemed fine about it and clearly you are too.”

“Finally someone gets it.”

"But if you want to have a little cry, I promise not to tell anyone."

"My hero." Smiling to himself, Remus tucked his hands behind his head and kept his chin tilted up toward the sky. They were supposed to be studying, but in a moment of sure insanity, Lily had tossed her school texts aside and laid down on the blanket to stare up at the bright blue overhead. He’d joined her, and they’d been picking out shapes in the clouds ever since.

“That one looks like a turnip,” he said.

"Where?"

He pointed.

“Oh." She squinted, then; "Nah, that’s a rabbit."

“Why do clouds always have to look like rabbits?”

“Rabbits are just very cloud-like, I guess.”

“Tell me about your holiday?” Remus asked. “How’s your family?”

“Mum and Dad are fine,” Lily said. “They just started compiling research for their newest book actually. 'Ferns of the Northern Isles'."

"Sounds... ferny."

She chuckled. "Kept them busy mostly, but Christmas was still good. I finally met Petunia's boyfriend—*Vernon.* He makes drills. Or sells them. Can't remember which."

"And I'm guessing he wasn't utterly magnificent?"

"Well Pet likes him, so I guess that must count for something. But good lord, it was like talking to wet cardboard."

It was Remus' turn to chuckle. "I like it when you're mean. Makes me feel so good about myself."

"What are you talking about, I'm not mean. I'm objective."

"Come on now, Evans. Everyone thinks you're this uber-kind prefect, but only I know the real truth—that you're actually Satan incarnate."

Lily gasped playfully and reached up to pinch his ear. "You take that back. Or I'll hang you by your thumbs in Purgatory."

Remus batted her hand away with a smile. "Oh, look there—dinosaur cloud."

She tilted her head. "What kind of dinosaur d'you think?"

"The one with all the spikes on its back."

"Hmm. I think it sorta looks like a rooster."

"Would it kill you to agree with me for once?"

Lily threw herself onto her stomach, hovering over him. "Possibly!" She declared, before blowing on his face sharply. Remus flinched but opened one eye to find her smiling at him, chin resting on one hand. "I'm glad we got to go home for holiday when we did," she said, suddenly quieter. "It helped put some things into perspective."

"You mean Snape," Remus surmised, and her downcast expression told him he was right. "He hasn't said anything else, right? 'Cause if he has, I'll—"

"No, no," Lily waved, "not him. As far as I'm concerned Severus can do whatever the hell he wants—it's the others. Secret's out so I figured everyone would know of course, but we've been back for less than two days and already people are calling me things like 'charity case' and 'hand-out Hannah'."

"Lils!" He gasped.

"That's not even the worst of it," Lily sighed. "Yesterday Severus' roommate—Belby, you remember—well, he sorta suggested that I... That I'm just dating James for his money."

Angry, Remus made to sit up but Lily only pressed him back by the shoulder, shaking her head tiredly. "Who the fuck gives a shit about what Belby has to say?" He demanded.

"Enough people to gossip, I suppose."

"Well, you can't just let them! We have to do something! Let me or James—"

"Oh really! What am I supposed to do—let you punch every idiot who thinks making fun of people for having less money than them is original?"

"Uh, *yes!"*

Despite herself, Lily smiled and flicked him in the forehead. "Sweet idiot. It's stupid anyway. If actually I wanted to marry rich I'd have chosen Black, I'm not that thick. Did you know he tried asking me out in eighth year?"

"No way," Remus gawped.

"Mhm. I said no, obviously. I'm was pretty sure he just did it to make James jealous. Now that we're older I'm even more sure."

"Sirius really did that just to make his mate jealous? Unbelievable."

"Well you've never heard it from James, have you? So I'd say it worked," she smirked. Their amusement allowed them to relax temporarily, but just when Remus remembered why he was so angry in the first place, Lily reached out and gently stroked the curls resting on his forehead. "I only told you about what the others have been saying because I had another point. I wanted to say that I'm not going to let it bother me. Not their teasing or their pathetic jokes—none of it. We all went home and I got to see with clear eyes exactly where I come from, and you know what? I'm proud. My parents might not be title-owners or business tycoons or whatever else, but they're scholars and they're *good.* It's enough for me so—so fuck everyone else."

Unable to help himself, Remus smiled. How could he have forgotten.

This was Lily. Lily "take no prisoners" Evans. No one could touch her. No matter the depth of their parents' pockets. “Ferocious Lily Evans," he murmured, reaching up to take her hand; "you amaze me sometimes.”

“Now you see, *that’s* why everyone likes you,” Lily said, blushing slightly as she turned his hand over in hers and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “You best be careful or you’ll have a list of proposals a mile long, Remus Lupin. Mary’s already put the word out that you’re back on the market.”

He shot upright slight, nearly knocking their foreheads together. “She *what?!”*

“Yup," Lily grinned, patting his hand now. "And I may know a few gals who might be interested if you’re looking.”

“I’m not,” he moaned, dropping back down on the blanket; "So please, don’t bother.”

“Did Marlene crush you that badly, dear Remus?”

“Augh—no.”

“Ah, I see, then. You’ve already got your eyes set on someone else.”

Remus felt his stomach clench. “No! I’m just too busy for another relationship right now. I think I’m gonna try the single thing for a while, if you don’t mind.”

Narrowing her eyes, Lily peered down at him suspiciously. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not!”

“You are.”

“And how can you even tell?”

“You’re getting defensive.”

Remus almost snorted at that. “I’m always defensive. It’s literally a fatal flaw.”

"And you're being sarcastically dismissive!"

"Call those fatal flaws two and three!"

“Do you know that when you’re really lying, you get this little nervous twitch at the corner of your mouth.”

“I do not!” He shouted, covering his face with his hands.

Lily beamed; “Ah! I’m right then, aren’t I? You fancy someone!”

“I’m telling you, Evans, you’re wrong! I just don’t want to date anyone right now.”

“Hm, okay, suit yourself.” Lily began to examine her nails, almost imitating Mary. “Just let me know when I should be playing cupid again.”

He peeked out at her between his fingers. “Satan. Incarnate.”

“Oh look, you have a pimple right there. Here, let me get it.”

“No, keep your vicious mitts to yourself!”

Drawing back, Lily gave a playful shrug and then reached up to untangle a red curl that had blown into her face in the breeze. Lowering his hands, Remus watched her. Even if he could find some reason to justify liking Sirius, Sirius had a girlfriend. And the world wasn’t going to stop just because he’d broken up with his. It went on.

Lily looked down at him, and to avoid her piercing green gaze, Remus began counting the freckles on her nose. He’d counted twenty-seven before she spoke again.

“If you did like someone new, would you tell me, Remus?”

The question caught him off guard.

No, one voice swore.

Yes, another promised.

“I would want to."

Lily considered this, before kissing the tips of her fingers and pressing it to his forehead. “I guess I’ll have to live with that for now,” she smiled, turning over and settling onto her back again. “Look there. Leprechaun cloud.”

“There’s no way.”

She pointed.

“Oh. You’re right. It is a bloody leprechaun.”

She laughed, and it was like sunshine after rain. But that was the thing about Scotland; no matter how many sunny days you got, there was always sure to be a coming storm.

* * *

The letter came on an inconspicuous Thursday. There was absolutely nothing about the day that had felt any different from the last. It’d rained in the morning, and by the afternoon the rain had stopped. He had taken four sugars in his tea at breakfast, three at lunch, had homework in two classes, and once that was finished, had made plans to practice with Sirius and James in the music room. Even Peter was going to join them, still sceptical over the drums but finally willing to try as long as Sirius agreed to go at his pace and not push too hard. By all accounts it was a good day. Remus mourned it the moment the letter slipped under their bedroom door.

It had taken its time to arrive, that was for sure. Maybe it was just the slow post, or maybe Tomny had had second thoughts about sending it. He knew the latter could be true, as the top edge of the envelope had already been ripped before being hastily taped back together.

It was strange to see Tonya’s pretty handwriting juxtaposed with Tomny’s poor scrawl. All she’d committed to was his name, ‘Remus John Lupin’ in the centre of the envelope’s back. It’d been Tomny who’d scribbled the school’s address beneath, though he’d misspelled ‘Hawkings’. Remus found himself thanking whatever lucky stars he had that it hadn’t been lost along the way, which he hated himself for a second later. Perhaps it would've been better off lost. After all, this wasn’t just a letter updating him on her journey, or a postcard from some tiny hillside village in the south of France, this was Tonya's goodbye. He wanted to tear it in half—to shred it into little pieces just like she'd done with his heart. But he didn’t because it was also an explanation, and that was more than he’d ever gotten from anyone else.

He waited until he was alone in the dorm to read it, then he peeled back the tape and slowly unfolded the thin paper.

The words hit like a train.

Remus,

I know you won't understand why I'm writing this to you, but words are all I have left and I know you deserve them. I feel sorry I can't give as much to Tomny, but he wouldn't know what to do with a letter and no matter how hard I tried, I could never bring myself say them aloud. I think it's because I knew that if I had, he'd have just smiled at me and I'd have never left. But I have to leave. I never even meant to stay, you see. I haven't spent this much time in one place since I was fourteen and when I asked myself why that is, I couldn't find the answer.

I suppose that's just it though, I want to find the answer. I know that's vague, but I've spent half my life looking for it and I didn't find it in London. I'm sorry if it's selfish, but I want you to know that seeing you at Christmas made me so undeniably happy. I love you so dearly, Remus. In fact, I heard a song on the radio the other day that reminded me of you. I didn't catch its name, but I know you would've liked it. It made me think that there are lots of things out there that we might like that we don't even know about because we've missed them or because someone couldn't remember the name or the words or what it smelt like or how it felt to run their hands across it. But I 'm rambling now, and this was the only piece of blank paper I could find in the entire flat without any coffee stains so I should probably stop wasting it.

I want you to know that I loved Tomny, I did. But I've never really considered love to be the end-all-be-all. Love to me has always felt like an ongoing method of life, not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Love should be eclectic—diverse and transformative just like people. When it isn't—when it becomes something that is required of life, that's when I feel myself drifting away. This time I drifted away with drugs, but it wasn't even the first time. I've also drifted away with alcohol, work, religion, (did I ever tell you about the time I joined a cult? Wild times, man) and each time it left me emptier than before. I suppose it's a lot like how you treat music. But I advise you not to make it that terrifying end-all-be-all. Don't let it be the only way you can communicate with others, otherwise it'll lose all its meaning. And when our vices lose their meaning we really don't have much left, do we?

I'll stop trying to give you advice now. I know you probably don't want it. You're probably very angry with me. Tomny too. And I want you to know I understand. You can be angry, but I'll still love you. I'll always love you. Even when you're wasting away as a bank teller or a rice farmer or a rock star, you'll always be loved by me. Oh, look at that—I've used the whole

front and back and still this page is too short. I should've written in pencil so I could erase all my bad advice and only list the ways that I love you.

These aren't all of those ways, but here are a few:

I love you like you love Queen, Remus—only much more because you started loving Queen on Christmas last year and I've loved you since the moment we met. I love you the way Tomny loves Lee, Doss, Seesaw, Vint, and all the rest—only I'm a girl and much better looking so naturally my love's much more desirable. I love you like the sky meets the sea, forever and endless no matter how far you go to meet it. I love you enough to write cheesy lines like that. I love you like springtime. Like a second snowfall but not the first because it's always unexpected and I always expected to love you. I love you like a soulmate, which says a lot because I don't believe in soulmates. Instead I like to think that our souls are made for more than just one thing, but I'm so lucky because my soul was made to love yours.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I really, really love you.

Don't let Tomny stay angry. I love him too. I loved him enough to stay but I love him even enough to leave. And I'm sorry I couldn't give him anything. It's just not how we work. He'll understand what I mean.

I have to go now, sweet love. Be safe, be healthy, and please be happy, whatever that means. And don't let anyone—ever—tell you what that means.

Love forever,
Tonya.

* * *

Sirius lowered the letter.

"Damn."

Remus couldn't help it. He laughed. He kept laughing until it'd become sad and weepy and pathetic, and Sirius had moved over against the wall of the astronomy room to press their shoulders together. He'd rushed from the dorm before even finishing the front half of the letter—unwilling to remain where anyone could find him. When he'd failed to show up for band practice, Sirius had been the one to come looking. He was grateful that he'd come alone—any attempt from James and Peter to comfort him would've felt

unbearable. But when Sirius put an arm around him and pulled him in close, Remus was so, *so* pleased. He felt inconsolable, fragile and even a little broken—if this was what brokenness was—but having Sirius close numbed some of it—allowed him some perspective. Tonya was the loss he'd been mourning for weeks now, the letter was just the finality of it. The last string to be cut.

"She really doesn't pull her punches, does she?" Sirius said, and Remus choked on another laugh-turned-sob.

"No… no, she does not."

"Just straight to the throat. No mercy."

"Ha… yeah."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Remus sighed. There were plenty of things Sirius could do, but none he could ask of him.

"Tell me a story?" He asked instead. Begged.

"What kind of story?"

"A happy one."

Sirius clicked his tongue. "Those are hard to come by, but I suppose I'll see what I can do…" Sirius lifted his thumb nail to his mouth, nibbling on it while he thought. "Huh…" he started; "Okay. Once upon a time—"

"Oh bloody hell, here we go."

"Oi, do you want the story or not?"

"… Proceed."

Sirius cleared his throat. "Once upon a time, there was a musician—"

"You?"

"Shh! Shut up—there was once a wonderful musician and... he was known throughout the world for his musical compositions."

As Sirius lapsed into gentle prose, Remus found himself relaxing. He slid back against the cool wall of the astronomy room and let his head

rest next to Sirius'. Not touching, just close enough to feel his radiating warmth.

"He could play any instrument—any style," Sirius recited, "and was revered as a master of the art. Some called his abilities, ‘a gift from God’. Others whispered that he’d made a deal with the Devil, as no one could comprehend how any normal person could possess such a talent. So, along with his small band, he travelled the world for many years, playing to not just noblemen and ladies but also those without a penny to their name. He did it all for free too, because he thought that if his talent was God-given, then it should be shared with everyone.

“Well one day, while he was playing a concert for some King’s court, a man stepped forward, interrupting the music. He was wearing simple clothes, nothing fantastical at all, and yet when spoke, everyone listened. He said that he didn’t believe one man could create such sweet music all on his own—that it must’ve been some sort of trick or a lie. Naturally, the humble musician stood up for himself—of course it wasn’t a lie, his music was his to possess and to share.”

“This guy sounds like a right dick.”

“Yes, well, he was—and he wasn’t convinced! He asked for proof of the musician’s talent. He told him to set aside his accompanying bandmates and play in the middle of the hall for all to see. Of course the musician agreed, though he was unaccustomed to others challenging his talent. First he played the piano, but that was deemed too grand—there were plenty of places one could hide a trick or lie within a piano. So instead he played the harp, but by some chance, the strings snapped the moment his fingers touched them. Next he tried the violin, but those strings snapped too. Frustrated with his bad luck, he borrowed the brass horn of his bandmate, but its keys were mysteriously rusted in place. It was unplayable, and he blamed the man for neglecting his instrument. He took the drum of another, but its hide ripped the moment he set palm to it, and he was left embarrassed. Finally he reached for his own brass flute, the very first instrument he’d ever learned how to play. But when he took up the flute and blew into it, no sound came out.

"Disappointed, the musician insisted that he could play, and demanded that another instrument be presented to him. It was then that the same man who'd challenged him presented a reed flute to replace the musician’s very own. Now, this flute was a dinky little thing—and the audience whispered about how it was too simple an instrument to be played in a King's court. But the musician accepted it

anyway, and when the flute was played, it produced the most beautiful music. Satisfied, the musician continued to play, pleased that he was finally able to show-up the nasty challenger—and with his *own* instrument, no less. 'There, now you see what I can do,' he told the man. And the stranger bowed and said, 'Yes, you truly have no rival'. And so the musician finished his concert to many applause, returned the man's flute, and went home.

The next day the musician was due to give a second show. He arrived back at the hall with his band in tow, feeling even more victorious than before. Confident, he took up his instrument and began to play, and only then did he find that he no longer could carry a tune at all. Not on any instrument, big or small. Grand or simple. It was as though his very fingers had forgotten what it was to play music. When he looked to his music sheets it was as though his eyes no longer worked —he couldn't read the very notes he himself had written. Devastated, the musician looked to the crowd, who were all staring on in disappointment. He did not see the man who had challenged him. One by one his bandmates abandoned him, unable to support a master who could not lead them to greatness. Repulsed by the horrible noise, the King ordered him from his hall and as word spread of the musician's failure, not even the common folk wanted to hear his ruins. So, he wandered the world, returning to the same places he'd once played to crowds of hundreds, hoping that one day the mysterious stranger with the reed flute would reappear and challenge him again. But he never did, and no matter what instrument the musician played or however many sheets of music he gathered, he could never play or read a single note ever again. *The end."*

Sirius let out a long breath, sounding almost tired, and though he'd successfully lost himself in the story—lulled by Sirius' easy voice— Remus tipped his head back against the wall and stared at him in question. "Is that the end?"

"... Yep."

"Actually?"

"Yeah, but don't you get it? It's about vanity. The man wasn't a man at all, he was a reflection of pride. By giving into pride the musician lost everything—his talent, his friends, his admirers."

Remus' mouth dropped open. "Okay but, fucking hell—I thought it was supposed to be a happy story not some bloody cautionary tale about being a pompous nob!"

The corners of Sirius' mouth twisted and he nodded in silent agreement. “Maybe, you're right. I thought it was happy when I first remembered it, but then I guess it does sorta fall off at the end there.”

“You are a sociopath,” Remus laughed incredulously. “Couldn’t you have just—I don’t know, made a fairy appear that forgave him and gave him back the bloody flute?”

“I guess I could’ve, but somehow that doesn't sound as genuine, does it?”

Remus wiped the corners of his mouth, still shaking his head. “You really know how to cheer someone up.”

“Does that mean you’re feeling better?” Sirius asked merrily.

“Better than that musician guy, I’ll bet.”

“Oh good, then you’re welcome.”

Remus looked down at the ground. Sirius’ arm was still around him and his shoulder felt warm where it met his. But then again, everything felt warm around Sirius.

“Who told you that story?” He asked.

“Hm, maybe the second or third governess after Gisela? Now that I think about it, she was probably just trying to scare me out of being a massive cunt. I was thirteen and thought that anyone less than Schubert was a hack.”

“Someone should tell her she failed. You're totally a massive cunt.”

“Ha! C'mon now, I’d say I have at least few more years before that story really becomes applicable. Can't be revered as a ‘master of the art’ until I got people in Japan and South America shouting my name.”

Remus cracked a smile and wiped his face on the back of his sleeve. “Do me a favour and send me a postcard.”

“Don’t need to—you’re gonna be there with me. Royalties, remember?”

“Eh, I dunno, maybe I’ll be a rice farmer instead.”

Sirius chuckled. “Okay, whatever you say. But I’ll tell you what

though, Moons, that letter was pure shite. Like ‘run down your leg—ruin your trousers type-a shite.”

”I get the picture.”

”My point *is*… I’ll never love you enough to leave you.”

Remus’ breath caught. “Yeah…?”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, beaming at him in the dark.

With nothing else to do but cry, Remus closed his eyes. For a moment he could see it—standing next to Sirius on stage, James and Peter right there with them. It would be nice if something as good as music was the only thing that mattered. It would be really nice.

Slowly he folded up Tonya’s letter and held it out to Sirius. “Will you keep this for me? I just… I don’t need something else to keep me up at night.”

Sirius took the letter without a shred of hesitation and tucked it into the inside pocket of his coat. “Of course, Moons,” he said, “anything.”

They locked eyes for a moment and Remus let himself wonder if maybe… *but no.*

“Alright,” he said, untucking himself from Sirius’ side and getting up, “your story might’ve sucked arse, but I’m not nearly as weepy anymore.”

“Hey, I worked hard on that story! My delivery was very authentic!”

“Work smarter, not harder, Black,” Remus smiled, holding out his hand. Sirius took it eagerly and he pulled him to his feet.

“Is there anything you’d like me to tell the others? You know, about your shitty gangster mates and their bad taste in women,” Sirius asked as they made their way to the exit.

“No,” Remus answered blithely, “I sort of like being a little mysterious.”

“In that case, I'll never have to say anything to anyone. You’ve already got the market cornered in ‘mysterious’.”

Again, Remus thanked his lucky stars for giving him Sirius.

Walking back together, they met James and Peter on Godric's front steps, hailing the pair of them as they were about to make their way inside. It was cooler out now that the sun was going down, and the wind was blowing just enough to excuse how close together they'd been walking, but then their friends called out they naturally sprung apart, though the look Sirius gave him afterwards appeared almost reluctant. Remus told himself to ignore it. No use giving in to nonsense assumptions.

"There you are!" Peter moaned. "Thought you'd gotten lost in the woods or something."

"Nah, not the woods, just the little girls room," Sirius smirked, shouldering Remus as they made their way up the path.

James set the bottom of Andy's guitar case on the ground and leaned his chest against its top. "So much for practice, hey lads?"

"Sorry, my fault," Remus said. "Wasn't feeling all that good."

"You go see the nurse?"

"No, he slunk off on his own like a dying cat," Sirius said mercilessly.

James sighed sadly. "Oh, Moony, Moony, Moony."

"I wasn't feeling that bad!" Remus scoffed, shooting a glare at Sirius.

"Anything to do with Marlene?" Peter asked pityingly.

"Er—yeah, sure, whatever."

James reached over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry mate, we're here for you. We ain't afraid of a few tears. You can just let it all out if you need to. We'll hold ya."

"Thank you, Prongs. What would I do without you."

It was sarcasm, but James smiled anyway.

"Look at him blush," Sirius said suddenly, reaching to pinch Remus on the cheek. "Do you need a pick-me-up, Moony?"

"Fuck off."

"No—I'm serious! 'Cause I had this great idea for a prank—"

“You’re still paying off your detentions from your last ‘great idea’,” Peter pointed out.

“Wormy—where’s your sense of adventure?”

“It’s up yours.”

James and Remus both snorted. Sirius blazed past it; “I was only wondering, how do you think the professors would fair if we just switched all the coffee in the teacher’s lounge for decaf?”

“If they find out they’d be likely to let Filch lynch you,” James said, but he was holding his chin in that way of his that meant he was already on board. Sirius knew it too.

“Okay, so step one—we leave a few of Bob’s firecrackers outside the building, light them all off with a fuse—that should clear the room long enough for us to make the switch.”

Listening to steps two, three, and so on, Remus leaned back against the dorm’s metal handrail and crossed his legs at the ankles. Sirius always tended to talk with hands, but it was particularly bad when he was excited. He held his fists up, waving them about as Peter and James peppered him with questions about this or that. Content to watch, Remus was smiling until he spotted someone moving up the street in front of their dorm.

“Don’t look now, Black," he mumbled, "but your girlfriend’s coming.”

Sirius straightened up immediately, and they all turned just in time to spot Chastity as she swept up the dorm’s front path.

“Sirius!" She called sweetly; "C’mon, darling, it's almost dinner and you promised we’d eat with the girls today!”

Waving back awkwardly, Sirius replied; “Yeah, just one moment, babe.”

James and Peter began to chortle quietly, and even Remus couldn't resist a tease. “Oh,” he said smugly, “well, don’t be late on our account, darling. The girls *are* waiting, after all.”

Sirius whipped his head around and glared at him while James picked up the guitar case and turned toward the door. “S’okay, Sirius. Go and join her, we can talk more about your prank idea after dinner.”

Sirius sighed, clearly irritated, and Remus felt a spark of satisfaction. It vanished the moment Sirius stepped down the stairs, casually waving goodbye as he crossed the lawn toward his girlfriend. As he reached her, Chastity immediately grappled onto his arm, and Peter turned to follow James inside, holding the door open.

“You coming, Moony?”

“Yeah...” he murmured, when in reality Remus was caught. *I'll never love you enough to leave you,* that's what Sirius had said. But he couldn't expect that. Sirius wasn't his. Sirius was a friend and a guy and—and Remus was... Well, quite frankly Remus was sure what *he* was! But it was something, wasn't it? How could a feeling like this be nothing? How could he be forced to stare at their backs as they got further away? Before when he'd watched Sirius disappear across the grass to the Chastity's dorm he’d begged fate to bring him back, and fate had laughed at him, but now Sirius was only a few feet away. All it would take was a few measly words—if he could only figure out what they were.

"Come back..." Remus whispered, because he had nothing else. "Come back."

The words were but a breath of a wish on the wind. He couldn't even bring himself to say them any louder. *You have my letter,* he pleaded silently. *You have my everything. Please come back.*

He didn't think he would. Remus had never believed in magic, but watching Sirius turn—like he could actually *hear* him—that was nothing short of a miracle.

When their eyes finally met, Remus’ lips parted, and for a moment his heart stopped all together. A second later, Sirius had drawn his long strides to a halt at the edge of the lawn as if he too were frozen. If Remus could've looked anywhere else he might've seen how Chastity's mouth moved in the shape of her boyfriend's name while she tugged on his arm, but he could not see her. He only saw Sirius. He saw him as his expression became torn, as he looked to the girl that claimed to love him, and then back to Remus. It was as if he were searching for a reason to stay. Remus wished he could give it to him, and wished harder still when Sirius licked his lips and he swore he could taste it. All of it was pure torture in the span of a few seconds.

“Moony, lad, you okay?” James called, reappearing in the door next to Peter and snapping Remus out of all of it.

“Yeah—Yeah, m’coming,” he croaked, forcing himself to look away. Moving stiffly, he crossed the front step to the door, but just as James was stepping aside for him, a shriek of girlish contempt echoed from across the lawn;

“What?!”

They all spun round to find Chastity standing before Sirius, hands fisted in front of her and a look of utter disbelief on her face. As Chastity wailed her displeasure, Sirius only shrugged, speaking more quietly than she, with his hands now rid of hers and pressed into his jacket pockets.

"You really—?! Tell me you're not serious!" Chastity howled.

Next to Remus, James leaned in and murmured; "Five quid he says something like 'I'm always Sirius'."

"No bet," Peter snarked, just as Chastity lifted her arm and slapped Sirius clean across the face.

“Ooooh!” The boys winced together, recoiling backward in surprise.

“FUCK YOU, SIRIUS BLACK!” Chastity roared, whirling around and stomping off. They all watched her go, still frozen in place while Sirius started back toward them, rubbing his cheek sorely.

"Man, that girl should try out for the olympic boxing team," he winced, approaching the bottom set of stairs. "She's got an arm to rival Muhammad Ali." Shaking the sting off, Sirius let out a heavy breath and glanced up at them. His cheek was positively glowing red, and yet Remus had never seen him looking so happy.

“What did you bloody say to her?” James ogled.

“… Who?”

“CHASTITY!” They all wailed together.

“Oh!"Sirius grinned broadly; "Y’know, just that we should probably try and see other people and all that.”

“You *dumped* her?” Peter demanded.

“Sure—if that's what you want to call it.”

“What else would you call it?”

“Amicable separation, maybe?”

“Mate,” James clapped a hand to his forehead in disbelief; “there was absolutely *nothing* amicable about that.”

Sirius shrugged, appearing completely unbothered. “You win some, you lose some.”

“You’re something else, Black. Really.”

Sirius started up the stairs and squeezed between them, taking the guitar from James and slipping through the front door. They all followed him, one by one, but James caught up first.

"So what, you're just gonna be single now?"

"Why not? More fun that way anyway." Sirius glanced back at Remus, giving him a wink that turned his insides to water. “Now Moony and I can be single blokes together. Wolves need a pack, right?”

He began to howl mockingly, and Remus made a strangled noise in the back of his throat. *“You—!* You did not just dump your girlfriend to make that terrible joke!”

“HA! No, but it felt pretty good anyway. Now when do you reckon we should forcibly switch our dear teachers to a decaf diet—tomorrow at lunch?”

“Can’t,” Remus huffed, following his friends inside, “got a lunch date."

"With who?" Sirius snorted sardonically.

"Marlene."

Slamming to a halt, Sirius glanced back at him sharply, staring as though his soul were leaving his body. “WHAT?” He exploded. “But I thought the two of you broke up?!”

“We did,” Remus said innocently and suddenly a lot less frazzled. “Don’t tell me you guys don’t go out on dates with *your* friends?”

Sirius puckered, actually turning red, and in a final hurrah, James hugged him from behind. “Don’t worry, Sirius, I’ll take one for the team and take you out. Now where is it you'd like to go for lunch, darling?”

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I'm SORRY for that Tonya letter. Second of all, like they say, "ain't no rainbow without a little rain" <3
*Putting this chapter out today so I can make you feel better (or worse, you never know, hehe) this weekend with another.

Also "Ruby Tuesday" is just Tonya, I'm sorry it just IS. I don't make the rules.

Notes:
'Threepenny bits' is Cockney slang for 'a pair of tits'. Sirius is obviously using it mockingly.
Franz Schubert was an Austrian composer of the late classical and early romantic periods.

Chapter 59: James Potter's Technicolour Dream World

Chapter Summary

> Remus meets with his forms teacher to discuss his plans for his future. The Marauders discover something surprising about James' connection to music.

Chapter Notes

> No CWs for this chapter. See end notes for an update on my posting schedule!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh God, life is strange,
Some are fast and some are slow;
Some believe me, don't even know,
No, no, no, no, no;
Strange, life is strange,
Life is strange,
Oh, my life is strange…

- "Life is Strange" T. Rex, 1973

Sunday 24th April 1977

Once a year, all sixth form students were required to meet with their forms teacher to discuss what it was they wanted to do with the rest of their lives. Being a rather prestigious place, most Hawkings students had their entire life plotted out by year 7, either by their families or someone their family hired. Those students who didn't commit to upper sixth (and there were some, even at Hawkings) would leave school and take over whatever business or lordship from their parents. Naturally, anyone who stayed would aim for the most reputable university that would admit them and from there head into politics or business or whatnot, and if they didn't do that it was probably because they had a diamond mine in Botswana to inherit. Remus' friends were no exception.

For most of his life James had resigned himself to simply following in

his father's footsteps. Shortly before his first and only child was born, Fleamont Potter, an already in-demand corporate lawyer, opened his own law firm and was quickly propelled into London's legal stratosphere. A child of immigrants, Fleamont was determined that his own son have every opportunity available to him, though he was distinctly under the impression that taking pre-law classes at school and actual law in university was the best way for James to secure that opportunistic future. James didn't seem to refute this. As long as he had enough free time to play his sports and hang out with his friends then he was content.

Peter was a little more vague about his future. Like James, his father expected him to head into the family business, supporting Simeon as he ran the newspaper until their sons could inherit it from them. For the most part, Peter appeared agreeable to this, despite the fact that working under his brother seemed to be the last thing that he would ever want to do. Remus had never said it, but he'd always sort of pictured Peter doing something with his art. Every time he saw his friend complete another sketch it struck him that it was better than the last. And the last had always been very good so… but Peter was not a risk-taker, and he was always saying how his father didn't believe in the arts—a great source of contention between his and James' families, since Euphemia Potter, a highly educated woman in her own right, was a curator at the National Gallery in London.

"The world will always need news!" Peter would say, puffing up his shoulders to imitate his father.

"And the world will always worship art!" James would say, wagging a finger to imitate his mother.

And then, because he was Sirius, Sirius would chime in with; "Mum's right! *Ars longa, vita brevis*—'art is long, life is short'!"

'Life is short' became Sirius' mantra in the weeks leading up to the teacher/student meetings. He'd read it off-hand in one of their textbooks and always said it with conviction, but somehow it still felt as though he were trying to reassure himself that art was worthwhile, rather than convince the rest of them. Under normal circumstances Sirius would have had absolutely no cause to worry about his future. The Black family was so old and esteemed that if Sirius were to trace his roots back more than three generations he'd probably have found that he was cousin to not only the British royal family, but at least four other monarchies as well. Sirius could've lived the rest of his life without lifting a pinky and still have been richer than any sorry sod

that crossed his path and yet, he wanted none of it. To him it was blood money—paid for but never earned. Yes, Sirius was determined to make his own way—with Uncle Alphard's inheritance as a comfortable subsidy, of course. After his meeting had finished, he left Sheila's office looking cool and collected. Not much worried Sirius Black, and certainly not the future. When he dropped down on the bench where Remus was waiting for his turn, he was still smiling. Even played at lighting one of his cigarettes, but put the pack away when Remus gave him the stink-eye.

"What'd she ask you?" Remus asked, as Sirius untucked his hands from his jacket pockets and lifted them up behind his head casually.

"Oh, you know, the usual—what university I want to go to, what I'm gonna study, what goals I have in life. All boring stuff."

"And what'd you say?"

Sirius tilted his head toward him and raised an eyebrow. "What do you think I said?"

Remus looked away, fingers knotted in his lap. It'd been hard to look at Sirius these last few weeks, but beyond breaking up with Chastity, Sirius had done little to provoke such a reaction, which meant it was all on him. Embarrassing, really.

"I at least hope you weren't a dick about it," Remus said snidely.

"Me? Never."

A smile tugged at the corner of Remus' lips, but a moment later the office door opened and Sheila stuck her head out. She was wearing a long hair scarf covered in daisies, and when she leaned over to peek out the doorway the tips of the scarf hung almost to the ground.

"Remus, you can come in now," she said fondly.

"Good luck, lover boy," Sirius teased, jamming him in the ribs with his elbow before hopping off the bench and starting down the hall. Remus glared after him, wondering if this was what it meant to really like someone.

"Can I get you a cup of tea?" Sheila asked after he'd followed her into the office. "I was just about to have one myself."

"Sure—I mean yes, please."

She smiled and gestured for him to sit while crossing to a small coffee counter. Being in less demand than those found throughout the school's other buildings, Sheila's office in the music hall was of a decent size, but was made tighter by the mountains of papers and books she had piled on every shelf and in every corner. There were binders upon binders and instruments upon instruments scattered about the room and enough boxes of old records to get Remus' heart racing, but still it managed to feel like a sort of organised chaos. This was proven when she pulled a small sugar tin out of a cupboard filled to the brim with miniature, multicoloured maracas.

"I'm afraid I don't keep any milk in the office," she apologised, while carrying two mugs of steaming tea back to her desk, "but there's plenty of sugar."

She handed him a small spoon and set the tin in between them, which Remus appreciated, before scooping three generous spoonfuls into her own cup, which Remus appreciated more.

"I've a bit of a sweet tooth," she amended shyly. "Colin always says it'll be the death of me."

"Who's Colin?" Remus asked, stirring plenty of sugar into his own tea.

"My husband."

Remus stirred a little slower. Of course *Mrs.* Buchanan had to have a husband, but the way she'd said it so casually had surprised him. "Is he who you're always going to visit when you leave school?"

Sheila tipped her head forward. "Yes, in fact. Colin lives in Glasgow. It's where our home is, actually."

"Why teach all the way up here then? Surely there are jobs in Glasgow."

"You'd think, but I'm afraid our government hasn't been so helpful on the job front as of late. Anyway, I like Hawkings. It's like my second home. And I really don't mind the travelling, I get to do most of my marking on the train. It's great to pass the time."

"Why aren't you there now?" Remus asked.

"Because we're having your meeting, silly. A teacher's work is never done, after all. But don't worry, I actually do like hearing about my

students' plans for the future. Makes me excited to think about what they might accomplish. And besides, Colin's at the hospital this week, so no one'll be home anyway."

"Oh..." Remus tapped his spoon on the rim of his cup. He'd never really given much thought to accomplishing anything. "He a doctor then?"

"Hm, something like that."

Her answer felt a bit dismissive, as though he were nothing more than a child, but then again he had been asking a lot of questions. Remus would've never admitted it, but just hearing Sheila talk made him feel... well, better, probably.

"Now, I do believe I'm the one who's supposed to be interviewing you, so shall we get started?" Sipping her tea with one hand, Sheila used the other to flip open a folder with his file in it. She looked it over for a moment, drawing her finger up and down each page as she read. "Mhm. Yes, good marks—"

"Decent marks," Remus mumbled. Sheila gave him a sly smile and glanced back to the file.

"*Good* marks, good health, suspected interests in literature, history, and—" she looked up again coyly, "music."

Suddenly shy, Remus lifted his tea cup to his lips.

"Your father still works in government, yes?"

"Yeah."

"And do you have any desire to enter a position such as his?"

"No."

"So that's a no to politics or law?"

He shook his head firmly.

"And is it your intention to return school next year for upper sixth or do you have plans to pursue your education elsewhere?"

"I want to come back," Remus said without a moment's hesitation.

"You do?"

“Yeah.” What was there at home anyway—Giles and the dogs. His friends were at school.

“That’s wonderful then,” Sheila grinned, “we have a goal. Have you given any thought to the classes you might take next year? Most students coming back chose a single subject to work toward before going on to university. There’s law, philosophy, ethics, history, fine arts, human biology, music—”

“I haven’t given it much thought.”

“Well, you still have time to decide. The school doesn’t ask you to confirm re-enrollment until the end of summer.”

Remus nodded, picking at the rim of his cup. It was handmade with a sunflower painted on the side. A closer look revealed a small engraving near the bottom; *‘To Mrs. Buchanan, made with love—Elsie, 1973’.*

Watching him, Sheila flipped his file shut. “How is it you’re feeling today, Remus?”

“Fine,” he murmured.

“I want something a little more than ‘fine’,” she said, clicking her tongue; “Remember it’s not just a solo, it’s a cadenza, and music isn’t played as ‘cheerful’ it’s played as ‘allegro’.”

“I’m *very* fine, then. I'm andante.”

Sheila smirked. “Alright, you cheeky thing, might as well spit it out then. What is it you want to do with your life, Remus?”

He squirmed a bit. Of course he’d been expecting the question—dreading it really—but he had no answer for her.

“What did Sirius say?” He asked.

Sheila shook her head lightly. “I’m sorry dear, that’s confidential. I couldn’t tell you what Sirius said in his meeting any more than I could tell him what you say in yours. It might influence your decisions.”

“Not all kids are so easily influenced, you know.”

“I know,” she smiled, “but I just want to make sure that they’re all doing what it is *they* want to do. Are there any universities you have your eye on?”

“Not really.”

“How about a goal for after you leave school, or even this summer?”

He shrugged. “Gonna learn how to drive.”

“Brilliant. And where is it you want to drive?”

“Anywhere, really. Away.”

“Away, where?”

“Dunno…”

Sheila sipped her tea again. “Well, it’s okay to not know right now. Sometimes the best trips we take have no real destination. Will you tell me where it is when you figure it out?”

“Do I have to?” Asking that felt better than just saying no.

“Of course not,” Sheila said, before placing a hand to the side of her mouth to whisper; “but I would like to know where your band is playing so I could come watch one day. I’ll bet you and Mr. Black could put on quite the show.”

Remus perked up. “I thought you said you couldn’t—”

“Now, shall we talk about your maths for a bit?”

* * *

Remus slid in next to Sirius at the dinner table. “You told Sheila about the band.”

Sirius smiled deviously over a bite of stew. “Gossips.”

“You told her we were planning an *actual* band.”

“Aren't we? Really, this dancing around our future is getting a bit old, Moons. Don’t tell me you actually told her that you’re going to be a flippin’ rice farmer.”

Remus shook his head, then, too curious; “What’d she say?”

“She congratulated me actually,” Sirius said smugly, “said if anyone

could do it, we could."

"Really?"

"Well, good as."

"You're so full of shit."

"Vita brevis, Lupin."

"Yeah and 'carpe diem' and the other bit," James finished, joining them at the table along with Lily. "How were your guys' meetings?"

"Peachy. Yours?"

"Long," James yawned. "I swear, Bilshin lives to exhaust us."

"Yours go long too, then?" Remus asked Lily, who had begun to pick at her dinner like she was lost in a daze.

"Oh? Yeah, good."

Remus exchanged glances with James who immediately tightened hold of his fork. "Everything okay, Lils?"

Lily said nothing at first, until James nudged her pointedly. "It's nothing to worry about," she persisted. "Barty's young and stupid, that's all."

"But he said something again, didn't he?" Sirius glowered.

"Yes! *And* he's not the only one," James lashed. "Snape—"

"Tried to apologise," Lily interrupted.

Remus' jaw practically hit the floor. "You didn't *accept,* did you?"

"No, of course not! Severus can apologise until he's blue in the face. He did as much while we were home for Easter—it doesn't mean I'm just going to forgive him, but I don't have to hate him either."

"Well can I finally hate him freely then?" Sirius scoffed.

Lily rolled her eyes, but James was not finished. He leaned toward her; "If you would just let me say *something* to them then they wouldn't bother you—"

She slapped her fork down. “You’re obviously all cut from the same bloody cloth so I’ll say to you what I’ve already said to Remus: I *refuse* to let it bother me. Start reacting and they’ll just keep at it even more.”

“So we pretend like you’re not being bullied?” Sirius demanded.

“If that’s how you want to put it, then yes.”

“No!” All three boys said together.

“Do you want me to find somewhere else to eat? Because I will,” she threatened. “Now I’ve said my piece, and that’s that. If I hear that any of you are going around threatening people or getting yourselves in more trouble I’ll put you in detention for the rest of the year myself!”

Sirius leaned in. “How about we just prank them with—”

“No pranks!”

“Kay, fine,” James grumbled, “but I don’t understand why you can’t turn that wrath of yours on little shits like Barty.”

“It’s not effective on Barty,” Lily said through her teeth. “Now eat your damn dinner.”

None of them were satisfied, but Lily refused to say any more on the matter and they knew better than to argue. Remus did have to hand it to her though, she was holding out for much longer than anyone else he knew would’ve been able to. It wasn’t as if she took everything lying down—anyone who might be ballsy enough to say something snide in her presence were promptly handed a detention slip, but that only seemed to make things worse. Eventually kids started to turn and flee from her in the halls, shrieking things like *‘here comes the penniless prefect’* while waving pink-slips she’d already given them in her face. James just about throttled Barty every time they were in the same room together, but the real surprise was Sirius’ reaction. The following Monday, after Lily had lambasted them over dinner, Sirius got into a fist fight in the middle of history class with some pig-faced kid named Jason Mueller.

It was the middle of silent study, and Professor Binns was lightly dozing at his desk like normal. A faint noise drew his attention and Remus looked up from his textbook to find that Jason had dropped his pencil, but when Lily went to pass it back to him, he only sneered;

“Oh, keep it. I’m sure you need it more than me.”

Temporarily stupefied, Lily just sort of blinked at him for a while, but before she could turn away and hide the red blooming in her cheeks, Sirius, her seat partner, stood up and plucked the pencil from her hand, pointing it sharp-end first at Jason’s nose.

“Here,” he snarled lightly, “you dropped this."

"No, I didn't," the pig-faced boy contested.

"Yes, you *did.* And Evans was nice enough to pick it up for you. Now take. It. Back.”

At that, Jason looked from Sirius’ face to the pencil, to Lily. “No thanks," he laughed finally, "wouldn’t want to catch anything. I hear poor-people rats have all sorts of nasty diseases. You understand, right Black?”

Sirius raised both eyebrows, then pressed the pencil’s eraser to his lip in feigned consideration. “Sure, Jake, I understand. But would you do me a favour? Catch *this*.”

Before Jason could react, Sirius had tossed the pencil straight toward him, but while Jason fumbled to catch it Sirius’ fist came down, socking him in the cheek hard enough to leave the other boy sprawling from his seat. Several other students shrieked in shock and Lily leapt up, completely horror-stricken, but before anyone could do anything, Jason sat up and threw himself at Sirius' middle with a great cry.

While their classmates hooted and hollered, the two scrapped on the ground until Remus managed to pull both of them apart. It was enough to get Professor Binns’ attention and Sirius was quickly shuffled out of the classroom, holding his punching-hand to his chest. Remus knew he’d be hurting—it was a rookie shot, he’d squeezed his thumb on the inside of his fist—but something about watching Sirius come to Lily’s aid like that had made him incredibly proud... among other things.

Unfortunately for Sirius, Lily did not share the same sentiment.

After using her prefect status to escort both boys to the nurse and then detention, she spent an entire evening lecturing not only Sirius, but all four Marauders on the importance of rising above their tormentors. To his credit, James tried his damndest to make her see reason, but Lily

was adamant. Any issues stemming from Snape or her scholarship were hers to deal with, and everyone else should respect that. Remus didn't agree, but she wouldn't allow him a word in edgewise anyway.

Still riding the high of socking Jason, Sirius once again milked his injury for all that it was worth, taking the opportunity to sit back in art class and play model, as they continued their unit on oil portraits. Remus loathed the class but the girls had convinced him that taking it would mean an easy A, except according to their teacher, Madame Aubert, he painted like he'd already *'jeter l'éponge'*. Thanks to Sirius he was half sure he knew what it meant, but if 'jetering' the 'ponge' meant he'd never have to pick up another bloody crayon again, he'd do it.

"You're such a nob," Remus complained, doing his best to mix a colour that looked even slightly akin to Lily's copper waves. Peter was the one painting Sirius, and was doing a significantly better job of capturing the blue tones in his dark hair.

"It's my right wrist, Lupin," Sirius complained, waving his wrapped hand at him. "My strumming hand!"

"He's just worried he won't be able to wank anymore," Peter teased.

"Correct," Sirius said crudely, "but I'm a musician first, a masterbater second."

They all laughed, except for Lily, who was trying her best to hold still for Remus while Sirius tossed this way and that on his stool.

"Does that mean your dreams of being a musician are shattered, Sirius?" She asked.

"Of course not. Lead singers hardly even have to play instruments these days anyway."

"You're a *lazy* nob then," Remus corrected, looking up from his portrait. It made Lily look more like some hair-raising evil witch than a girl, but he wasn't about to tell her that.

"Ah, what do I care," Sirius waved, "I got Potter."

"To wank for you?" Remus suggested, making Lily groan.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Didn't you know—I get off vicariously though others. You couldn't imagine the time it saves me. Speaking of which,

I got us some more sheet music for tonight. Pete, think you can pass it onto Prongs next period so he can look it over for our practice tonight? Don't want him lagging behind."

"Dunno what help that's gonna be," Peter mumbled, staring down at his painting with a concentrated expression.

Sirius rocked forward on his stool. "What do you mean?"

"Stop moving," Peter huffed, wetting his brush, "I mean James can't read the music so what's the point?"

"Sure he can. I taught him myself."

Peter snorted. "That's what you think."

Remus shared a glance with both Lily and Sirius. "Mind extrapolating a bit, Wormtail?"

"It's not that big 'a deal," Peter sighed, glancing from Sirius to the canvas. "I mean, he still sounds great right? He just can't read it. I'm surprised neither of you have noticed. Now stop bloody moving."

"But he never has any issues during practice," Sirius said.

"Well yeah, it's because he always gets you to play it first."

"... What?"

Peter let out an irritated sigh and lowered his paint palette. "Okay, *read my lips*—James. Can't. Read. Music. I quizzed him myself last practice. He knows all the notes, and if you ask for a G or B-sharp or whatever he'll play it, but the moment you point to it on the page he's lost. You've never noticed because you're only ever listening to him, but that's it exactly—he's listening too. James plays by ear."

Sirius' mouth dropped open. "No fucking way. By ear? He's moved on to bloody Hendrix now and you're telling me he's playing that all by *ear?!"*

"I don't understand, is that uncommon?" Lily asked.

"Plenty of musicians can't read music," Remus shrugged, also shocked, "but memorising every note just by what it sounds like isn't exactly the most efficient way to learn an instrument. They have to have perfect pitch, and yeah, that's pretty rare. Most people just start with memorising a few chords and work their way out from there, but I

guess if James has been doing it from the beginning then…"

"Then he's also a genius!" Sirius finished.

Remus nodded. "Even with your memory, hearing an entire song and copying every note by ear should be impossible."

"It basically is," Sirius said smugly. "And he was holding out on us this entire time. Wow. I'm gonna kick his arse."

"Try sitting still for a second first," Peter grumbled, setting his paintbrush down just as their teacher strolled by, clutching a fistful of fresh parchment. She stopped at his shoulder and beamed as she took in his portrait.

"Ah, Pierre," she sighed in that thick, French accent of hers, *"c'est magnifique.* You've captured Monsieur Black's likeness exquisitely."

"You hear that," Sirius said to Lily, "she called me 'exquisite'."

"What is it you are calling this piece, have you decided?" Madame Aubert asked.

Casting a look at Sirius, Peter smirked shyly. "I have. I think I'll call it, 'A Narcissist's Mirror'."

Both Remus and Lily began to snicker and Sirius crossed his arms with an unimpressed expression, but Madame Aubert just clapped her hands together in enthusiasm. *"Très bon! Monsieur Lupin, et toi?* What about your portrait of Mademoiselle Evans?"

Holding up his wicked painting (wickedly *bad,* that was), Remus considered. "Er... 'Smudged Ginger'?"

Sirius snorted and Lily gave a little gasp before playfully whipping his own paint rag at him. Madame Aubert just clicked her tongue.

"Je vois… Maybe keep thinking, yes?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Their teacher strolled away, shouting to the class that it was time to start cleaning up, and Peter began looking between his and Remus' paintings pointedly.

"Oi!" Remus snapped, pulling his portrait back when he noticed.

“What? It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Moony. You said it yourself, it's abstract.”

“Yes, and it’s still a work in progress!”

“Whatever you say,” Peter said, smiling smugly.

Remus scoffed and dipped his fingers in his water jar before flicking them at Peter, who flinched away.

“Watch the masterpiece, Lupin!”

“C’mon, it’s already time to clean up,” Lily said, hopping off her stool as Remus set her portrait aside and collected his brushes.

“Sirius hang on, I just want to finish this bit,” Peter insisted, keeping him sitting while the rest of the class fluttered around, trying to finish up before the final bell rang. When it did, Sirius launched himself up from his stool.

“Are you done yet, Pete? ‘Cause I’m starving,” he declared.

Peter nibbled on the end of his paintbrush in consideration, still teetering his stout legs on the bottom rung of his stool. “You guys go on ahead, I wanna finish this bit here before the paint starts to thicken. I’ll just catch a late dinner.”

“Alright, but remember we’re practising in the music room tonight. Room two. I wanna see for myself if your ear-tingling assessment of James’ abilities are for real or just rubbish.”

“Fine, fine,” Peter waved, turning back to his painting.

Saluted his friend goodbye, Sirius met Remus and Lily by the door and joined them as they left the classroom.

“What’re they serving for dinner, again?” Lily asked, dodging other students as they shuffled up and down the hall.

Letting the sea of bodies part naturally around him, Sirius opened his mouth and spoke through a yawn; “Pot pie again. With corn and the little cups of jelly that are great for throwing—”

“Lily?”

Snape appeared behind them unannounced, so close that he might as well have been breathing down the back of their necks. At the

interruption, Sirius jumped nearly a foot into the air and spun around with the rest of them. “Fuck—! You should come with a warning bell!” He hissed.

“And you should come with a muzzle,” Snape shot back. "I'm here to talk to Lily, so why don't you just get back to whatever ridiculous scheme you're sure to be planning and leave us alone."

"Ha, joke's on you, Snivelly," Sirius shot, "it's a Thursday and Thursdays are for initiating ridiculous schemes, not *planning* them."

"I'm surprised you can plan anything at all, what with hot air where a brain should be," Snape seethed. Remus might’ve congratulated him on the good quip if Lily hadn’t immediately sighed and stepped between them.

“Severus, that’s enough," she sighed. "Now what do you want?”

Snape eyed Remus and Sirius, who had both drawn themselves up to their full height, fully prepared to defend Lily’s already degraded honour. “I want to talk to you,” he grumbled.

“We already talked,” Lily said tiredly, “there’s nothing else to say.”

“Yes, there is. There's plenty more to say if you'd just listen, and if we could have five minutes to ourselves—"

"You're lucky you're still standing here," Remus scoffed. "If it weren't for Lily, I'd have already—"

"Flunked out? Been arrested for assault? Trust me, I know your type, Lupin."

"You don't know anything about me, Snivellus."

"I know enough. Like how your—"

"Enough!" Lily shouted. "I'm so done with this! Severus, if all you're interested in is fighting then I don't want to hear—!"

"—I want to apologise!" Snape cried hurriedly. "I'm sorry! I don't want us to fight anymore."

While Remus and Sirius suppressed a string of irritated moans, Lily's shoulders slumped in worry. “Sev, you’ve apologised plenty, and I already told you that I'm not angry anymore... but that doesn’t mean everything’s just fixed. I think that... Well, that maybe we've just

outgrown each other."

Snape's screwed up his face so tightly it began to turn red. "That's a stupid answer."

Before any of her friends could jump to her defence, Lily threw a hand out to stop them. "I understand if that's how you feel, but I've made up my mind. I'm sorry."

"Is this about the charity case thing?"

"No, it's about trust. Trust you broke."

"Everything can be fixed."

"Not *everything,"* Remus ground out.

Snape snapped his eyes toward him, but Lily just shook her head. "I'm sorry, Severus, but we're not friends anymore. I've made my decision."

"You can't just do that!" Snape snapped. "We've known each other longer than anyone here. Now I've apologised, and I already told everyone to stop calling you a charity case!"

"Don't think they heard you," Sirius scoffed. "Now you've got her answer so buzz off."

"Go paint your bloody nails, why don't you, Black! You're the one poisoning Lily. You and the rest of your scummy, low-life group. Band —what *band?* You're going to fail before you even get your feet off the ground! Lily's mental for thinking that hanging around you will bring anything but failure!"

Pushing up his sleeves to ready himself for another fight, Sirius took a step forward. "Come here and say that, you fucking worm!"

Lily spun around, grabbing onto him; "No! Sirius, it's alright."

"No, it ain't! Real friends don't talk to one another like that."

"Fuck you, Black! This's got nothing to do with you anyway!"

At Snape's reply, Sirius let out an incredulous laugh and crossed his arms over his chest;

"Actually it does! You see, we were there when you revealed your true colours and permanently revoked your own 'Lily Evans' friendship

card'. Rather spectacularly, I might add—no offence, Evans—*and* you've already given your shitty excuse for an apology, that Evans has been so gracious to accept—good on you, Evans—which leads me to believe only one thing..." Next thing they knew, Sirius had gotten between Snape and Lily, tipping his head in Snape's direction; "You didn't come here today to apologise, you came here to *guilt* Lily into being your friend again. Well, let me be the one to tell you that that's not how the world works—that's not how people work! You don't get to just decide that you're important to someone, especially after you've fucked up so royally—people aren't *things.* So if you're so hurting for friends, why don't you go find your little chemistry set and *build a new one?!"*

Snape drew back, a look of utter loathing on his face. "You're making a mistake," he warned Lily. "One day these freaks are gonna end up in jail—or *worse!* Then you'll know I'm right. Mark my words, Lily, they'll just disappoint you."

"I'm used to disappointing people," Sirius said, almost smiling; "the shock wears off after a while. Now too-da-fucking-loo, Snivelly."

Scorned and embarrassed, Snape finally turned and left them in the middle of the hall, stalking away for what Remus hoped, but knew, wouldn't be the last time. Still, as he watched him go, he couldn't deny the giddy feeling he'd gotten watching Sirius verbally thrash one of his greatest enemies.

"You were too mean," Lily sighed sadly, "and yet somehow I'm still grateful."

Sirius turned around and took Lily's hand in his, actually dropping down into a bow and kissing her freckled knuckles. Remus felt his mouth go dry just watching and had to clear his throat as Lily's eyes turned to saucers.

"I am sorry for every nasty thing I have ever said, thought, or even briefly wondered about you. And—" Sirius beamed at her; "I am grateful to be your friend."

"Oh, well, I—" Lily also cleared her throat; "Thank you, Sirius. Really."

Sirius winked up at her. "Anytime, Evans."

"You've never said that you're grateful to be my friend." The comment slipped out before Remus could stop it.

With any and all bad mojo dispersed, Sirius dropped Lily's hand and straightened up. "Ah, well you're not just my friend Moony, you're the apple of my eye—my fair-haired boy!"

Unable to help it, Remus opened his mouth to tease him some more; "Actually that sounds more like Peter to me."

"The yin to my yang then!"

"James."

"Alright—you're the light of my bloody life then!"

"Nuh-uh!" Lily jumped in spectacularly. "I'm the light of Remus' life! And he's *my* object of dearest affections!"

Sirius sighed dramatically, sagging against the row of school lockers behind him. "I am running out of metaphors here people! Keep it up and I'll make you, Evans, my gentlemanly caller, and Moony here—honey bunch!"

"Why wouldn't Remus be the gentlemanly caller?" Lily snorted.

Sirius covered his mouth with his hand as though he were scandalised. "Oh, because we're much more intimate than that. What you and I have is still just puppy love, but Moony—us together is like a burning flame of wanton eroticism."

"Keep it up and I'm going to smack you with your own thesaurus!" Remus swore. He could hardly function anymore as friends. One spark of eroticism and he might actually keel over. Though, Sirius would probably pay to see that, he expected.

"Careful, he might like it," Lily smirked, confirming Remus' suspicions.

"Maybe I will. We'll never know unless we try—" Already puckering up for a kiss, Sirius made to straighten up, only to gag a little when his school shirt got caught on the edge of the locker, pinning him in place. "Oh hell—Moony, be a dear and come free me."

Remus turned to Lily. "Lily, are you hungry?"

Lily turned to him. "Why yes, Remus, I believe I am."

Remus offered his arm. "May I escort you to dinner, oh light of my life?"

She took it. “Yes, oh object of my dearest affections, I would simply love that.”

“Wait!” Sirius wailed as they turned and started down the hall. “Evans! Moony! You can’t just leave me, I’m gonna tear my shirt here! C’mon guys, I’ll keep trying! How ‘bout 'my angel'? Dear paramour? Sweetheart?! Honey bunch!? *C'mon guys, don’t leave me behind!”*

* * *

Peter wasn’t much of a liar. In fact, Remus could’ve sworn that keeping a secret caused him physical pain, so it made sense that he hadn’t been lying about James. Completely amazed by his best friend's unsung talent, Sirius leapt up from his spot on the music room’s risers, swinging the acoustic around his back and grinning like a madman. “You jammy bastard! If I’d have known that this was what you were capable of when McGonagall kicked you off the football team, then I would’ve poisoned Snape ages ago!”

“Poisoned him? I'd have put him in the ground already,” Remus said from his seat on the risers.

James waved them off before slinging the Rickenbacker off his shoulders and setting it down on the guitar stand. “Man, my arms feel like rubber,” he huffed.

“You might feel better if you don’t hold your breath for the entire solo,” Peter supplied from his spot behind the drum kit.

“Yeah, I think you’re right, Pete,” James smiled. "Honestly I’m glad you noticed. Pretending I understood what you were on about with those silly little lines and dots was really starting to suck. Just gotta work on my endurance, I guess."

“Endurance—*smurance!* I still cannot BELIEVE you just casually picked up ‘All Along the Watchtower’ by *EAR!”* Sirius gushed, still shaking his head in disbelief.

James rubbed his neck. “I'm sure it’s not that big a’deal."

"No, it is,” Remus said. “You’ve got perfect pitch, Potter. Not even Black has that.”

“Oi. I don't need perfect pitch. I have range." Sirius illustrated his

claim by launching into a bit of Led Zeppelin. *" 'And I'm buying a stairway to heaveeeeen'!"*

"You always have to steal the show," Remus sniggered, balling up some scrap sheet music and pelting Sirius upside the head with it.

Again, James tried to wave them off. "Okay, fine, so I have perfect pitch. What, like three out of four Beatles must've had it too?"

"Try none of them," Peter said, and when they all glanced at him in surprise, he balked a bit. "What? So I did some research over Easter. Sue me..."

"C'mon Potter, how do you do it? Now, don't be shy, spit it out!" Sirius demanded, grabbing his friend by the shoulders and shaking him across the music room floor.

"I don't know!" James pleaded. "I just hear the notes and match the right colours together, alright?!"

Sirius stopped his incessant shaking immediately. "Colours?"

"Yeah! I just figured out which colours go with what sound. Makes things easy, that way."

Remus squinted at Sirius, then Peter. "Prongs, what do you mean by 'colours'?"

"You know, like the colours you see when you hear certain stuff? Like... a dog barking is this weird orangey-brown colour, but a trolley honk is like more rusty? You can just see it, yeah?"

They all blinked at him, and finally Sirius leaned forward, slowly shaking his head. "We... don't see colour when we hear a dog bark, mate. We hear a dog. Barking. That's it."

James frowned. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"Honestly, think we should be asking you that," Remus said. "You really just like... see colour when you hear shit?"

"Not everything has a colour," James babbled. "Just like—specific sounds. And names. And... notes. It's how I remember 'em! Been doing it since I was a kid... You sure you guys don't see anything? Like at all?"

They all shook their heads.

James' entire body relaxed, as though a thought were just occurring to him for the very first time. "Wow. Shit."

"Wait, I think I've heard of this," Peter said excitedly. "Mozart had it. They said he could see specific words and colours in his mind while he was playing. It helped him write. That happens for you, yeah James?" At his question, James nodded dumbly, and Peter used one of his drumsticks to point at Remus. "Moony, go on and pluck a string for him. See if we're right."

Perking up, Remus readjusted his seat on the risers and plucked a single chord off his bass. They all turned straight for James, who licked his lips and nodded again, this time a little more sure of himself.

"That's an E. It's purple. Not like bright purple, but more soft. Like a lavender."

"And this one?" Remus plucked a D-sharp.

"Definitely green."

"But what note is it?"

"D-sharp."

Remus looked to Sirius, who's mouth was hanging open. "Wow, alright. And this note?"

At the sound, James nearly smiled. "That's an A. A's are always yellow."

"Holy shit!" Sirius gasped. "You mean you really just see that? He plays an A and you *see* yellow?"

"I thought it happened for everyone," James said, looking just as shocked. "My mum used to joke that my gran would make this egg casserole that tasted like the colour of day-old rubbish so she hated eating it. Made perfect sense at the time."

"Maybe he doesn't have perfect pitch," Peter said. "Maybe he's just a mutant."

"More like superhero! That shit's like magic!" Sirius grinned, picking up the Rickenbacker himself and sliding the strap over his shoulders. "I'm gonna play something—you say what it looks like."

“Sure,” James chuckled, appearing more than happy to play along.

Excitedly, Sirius ripped into one of his favourite Zeppelin licks, which had them all leaning forward to get a better listen. When he was done, James arched a single eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. "You're gonna play Jimmy Page and tell me that it don't sound exactly like bright red? It was just one big swirl of it. Like a tornado."

"Amazing!" Sirius cried. "This is so cool, imagine what we could do with your superpower. We're gonna writing songs that sound *and* look like masterpieces! C'mon, we could start right now. I have that that little diddle I did up in our room yesterday—you know the one, goes like—” Sirius began plucking away at a fun selection of notes. “Hey? Hey?!”

"Alright," Remus said, unslinging his bass and standing up for a stretch. "You guys can start without me, but I'm gonna go get a drink from the fountain. Be right back."

"Actually me too," James said, slipping over to Remus' side.

"Look at him," Sirius pouted, "he's already running."

"I'll be right back," James assured him. "While we're gone, why don’t you do the band a favour and break in our dear drummer boy a little bit more? Oh and—that 'little diddle' of yours was hot fucking pink.”

Grinning happily, Sirius arched a cheeky brow and turned to Peter, who was busy yawning and rubbing the sleep from his eyes with a drumstick in each hand. “Aw dammit,” he mumbled after, which only made Sirius cackle as he crossed the risers to him.

“C’mon, Wormy, Pot’s right. You’ve been doing an awful lot of ' just watching' at these practices of ours—now it's time we see what you’re really made of. Got any wicked drum fills to show off? No weird brain-colours necessary, honest."

"Don't bother me," Peter whined. "I'm happy going at my own pace."

"Aw, but I already know you’ve been practising in secret—perfect time to fess up! Now let's hear that talent!”

As Sirius tugged another stool up alongside the drum kit and Peter sheepishly sorted through his sheet music, Remus let James follow him out of the room. A clamouring sounded just as they swung out into the hall—the sound of a snare being knocked over and Peter

moaning in response.

“We’re lucky that teacher of yours lets us practice here after class and weekends,” James said, “don’t think we could get away with having a drum kit in the dorms.”

“It’s gonna be hell trying to find someplace to rent in London,” Remus said snidely. “Can you imagine drums in a flat? Ha.”

“So you’re serious then—about moving back home and being in a band together?”

Remus felt suddenly self-conscious. “Well, it’s a funny thought, sure, but there’s not much else I wanna do right now. And with you and Sirius, how can we go wrong?”

James looked down shyly, before reaching out to let his hand trail along the cinder block wall of the hallway. “So you don’t want to go into politics like your dad then?”

“Fuck no.”

“Ha. Fair.”

“Do *you* want to be a lawyer like your dad?”

Stopping next to the water fountain, James leaned up against the wall and rubbed his arm. “Not really,” he confessed, “but if I go to university I’ll get to play football on an official team. In our meeting the other day, Bilshin told me he figures I have a chance at a scholarship actually—s’long as I don’t bollix it up and get myself tossed off the team next year.”

Remus cracked a smile. “Better put out a restraining order on Black then, just to be safe.”

“I better,” James said, matching it.

“So you want to play sports professionally?”

“Maybe,” James shrugged. “I did when I was a kid, but it never really felt like the best thing. Dad loves football but didn’t like the idea of me pining over it. Says you break your body before you’re thirty—and then what, live as a cripple?”

“A filthy rich cripple.”

“Only if you’re good.”

“Trust me, Prongs, you’re good. Even I know that.”

“Even you?”

Remus sighed. “You finally gonna make me say it? I fucking hate football, mate.”

“I know,” James laughed. “It’s such a shame really. I’d kill for your legs.”

“Thanks, ‘Legs’, I’ll take that as a compliment.” Smirking, Remus bent forward and took a drink from the fountain.

“So what was it Sirius said to Snape again?” James asked, and Remus drew back up, wiping his mouth.

“He not tell you?”

“Nope, heard it from Lily actually. Surprising right? Sounds like just the thing he’d brag about.”

“Maybe he’s maturing.”

“Don’t bet on it.” James replaced him at the water fountain, speaking between gulps; “So what’d he say?”

“Told him off for Lily’s sake mostly. There was something about Snape *literally* making new friends like Frankenstein, but then Sirius apologised.”

James straightened up, water dripping down his chin. “To Snape?”

“No,” Remus answered in amusement, “to Lily. For ‘every bad thing he’s ever said, thought, or briefly wondered’.”

James wiped his mouth on his sleeve to reveal a curious smile. “Wonder what’s brought that on. Maybe she’s got something on him.”

“I told you, it’s maturation.”

“You really believe that?”

“No, but they say if you say things out loud enough times eventually they’ll come true.”

“And who’s ‘they’?”

“You know—*them*—people.”

“I see. Could you also ask *them* who’s gonna win the Cup this year? Pretty sure Dad’s bet most of my inheritance on Manchester.”

Remus’ smile broadened. “Ah, but what do you need that for when you’re gonna be a famous rock star?”

James surged forward and slung an arm around his shoulders. “Oh, Moony, I like the you that comes out when Sirius isn’t in the room. He’s so playful, that one.”

“Oh stuff it.”

They walked back together, following the paintings of various instruments that led back to the music rooms. “What even is that?” James asked, pointing at the image of a boxy string instrument.

“A crwth,” Remus answered smugly. "What—your superpower not tell you that?"

"It has its limits," James said. Then he sighed, but like with most things concerning him, it was a happy sigh. “You know, I do sorta wish we could just say we were gonna be in a band. Might make things feel less—I dunno—uncertain.”

“Which things?”

“You know—*things—”* He echoed Remus teasingly; *"*the future. Boring stuff.”

“Maybe we’re just going about it wrong,” Remus offered lightly. “Maybe we gotta stop saying we’re ‘gonna’ be in a band, and just say that we ‘are’ a band. Sirius’ll at least be happy about that.”

“Hm. You know you’re so smart, Moony. You better kick his ass come exams.”

Remus bit his lip to hide a smile, and offered his fist. “Count on it.”

James returned the fist bump and they rounded the corner toward the music room. As they approached, the sound of drums drifted toward them, uneasy and staggered at first, but eventually dropping into a cool and gentle beat.

“ ‘Little Wing’,” James said, recognising the song, “he’s playing Hendrix, too.”

Remus pushed the doors open to find Peter across the room, playing with his eyes closed while Sirius stood behind them. When he noticed them, Sirius waved his hands in the air and pointed vigorously to Peter, mouthing; *‘This guy, man!’*

Finishing the drum fill, Peter let the notes filtered off at the end before opening his eyes and slowly looking back at Sirius. “So?”

“It was GREAT!” Sirius shouted.

“Pete!” James called immediately after; “Were you actually playing with your bloody eyes closed?”

Peter clutched the drumsticks nervously. “Well I—”

“It *was* great,” Remus said quickly, as James practically vibrated at his side.

“It was,” he agreed, before throwing his hands up in the air. “And guess what, Moony says we’re in a band!”

“WE ARE?!” Peter said, at the same moment Sirius shouted; “HE DID?!”

James nudged Remus in the side. “Tell ‘em, Moony!”

Remus looked to James, rolling his eyes over a smile, before throwing his arms up too, albeit a little less enthusiastically. He had to save face somehow.

“Guess we’re in a band, lads.”

Sirius’ arms immediately shot skyward to mirror his. “FUCK YEAH WE’RE IN A BAND!” He wailed, streaking down the bleachers until he met them at the doors. “This is fucking brilliant! It's vita brevis! Oi Pete—get your mousy butt down here and join our band already!”

As Peter scrambled down from his kit, Sirius looped an arm around both James and Remus' necks. “This is gonna be great,” he swore, *“we’re* gonna be great.”

Peter reached them and James loped an arm around him to gather him into the circle, but Remus couldn’t look anywhere but at Sirius. He could feel the ghost of Sirius’ thumb as it stroked the side of his

jaw and sent shivers down his entire back.

I like you so much, he wanted to tell him—wanted to scream it. He'd been so distracted since they'd gotten back, but how could he have been when Sirius was always the most distracting thing in the room? He wanted to drown in it—to satiate the need or stop it, he wasn't sure. And now Sirius' eyes, which were never not alight with cheeky mischief or mad passion, were filled with promise. In them, Remus saw what might've been a glint of their future and when Sirius finally looked back to him, smiling like he'd just been handed the key to Heaven, he knew he'd found his answer. And just like Tonya, it wasn't in London.

It was right there.

Chapter End Notes

'Upper sixth' refers to year 13, which would equate to the 12th grade in North America. Lower sixth is therefore year 12/11th grade.
'Jeter l'éponge' literally means 'throw the sponge' but it's a French idiom meaning 'to give up'.

What James has is a form of synesthesia (specifically 'chromesthesia' or sound-to-colour synesthesia) which means that sound invokes an involuntary visual representation in the user's mind when they experience a certain thing or feeling. Synesthesia is different for everyone who has it, and not much is known even today about how it is caused. It makes sense that James would've gone his whole life without realising he was different, as testing for this sort of thing did not exist and information on it was slim to none.

Because I'm finally getting ready to finish up my semester for the holidays, I've put together a release schedule all the way up until Christmas. No news yet on if I will have as consistent updates following these dates, but I wanted you to have something to look forward to leading up to then <3

As always, I love-love-LOVE your comments, and I read and re-read every single one. Thank you so much for reading the silly words I come up with in my head. You're all rock stars as far as I'm concerned ★ ☆ ★ ☆

Next chapter: Dec 11/12 (all dates vary depending on your time zone)

Follow-up chapters: Dec 15, Dec 18, Dec 22, Dec 25 <3

Chapter 60: Paws Off, Padfoot

Chapter Summary

Remus Lupin, you're so embarrassing. Almost embarrassing as Sirius and his new nickname.

Chapter Notes

CW: 'F' slur used in exposition to refer to smoking. Drinking. Crude language.

Meant to have this up way earlier, but my term isn't technically over until April, so even though we've broken for holiday I've still got loads of work. So, you can have this now! Sorry for any spelling or grammar mishaps, lol <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Trying to make some sense of it all,
But I see it makes no sense at all;
Is it cool to go to sleep on the floor?
I don't think that I can take anymore;
Clowns to the left of me!
Jokers to the right!
Here I am, stuck in the middle with you…

"Stuck in the Middle with You" Stealers Wheel, 1972

In a lot of ways, dating Marlene had been easier than not dating her at all. Back then Remus could be trusted to better hold himself in check, but without a girlfriend to procure notions of guilt over, his feelings for Sirius had begun to run rampant. He'd remembered what it was like to be jealous of James whenever he and Sirius went off together, or began talking about anything moderately close to music—which was more often than not, now that they'd actually agreed to make their 'band' official. He caught himself glaring at the girls that stared at him when he walked past, and laughing a little louder at his jokes just to be sure that Sirius heard him over the others. Remus didn't want to laugh. He felt more like crying, and the jokes were usually shite anyway.

He tried to keep everything at bay by edging himself into denial—

meditating on pensive thoughts such as how his feelings could just be that of those forged in friendship, now blown out of proportion due to his failed relationship, boredom at school, or general disinterest in his current reality. Surely he was just mistaking 'like' for something more substantial, and the turn-around period for such ridiculous things was simply much longer than anticipated. It even occurred to him that he could be mistaking his ideas of Sirius as leftover affection for Tonya. After all, the likeness was uncanny. From the inexplicable desire to have drama follow them from room to room, down to their inky-black tresses, the similarities were almost endless. Perhaps he was simply feeling this way because Sirius was there and Tonya was not. Every time he thought he'd begun to miss her again, Sirius was by his side, offering him smiles and distractions by the armful. *But it would never work,* Remus would tell himself. No matter how guilty he'd felt while dating Marlene, it was nothing compared to the guilt he now faced alone. The Twelfth of Never would fall upon Tibb's Eve before the two of them could ever be anything more than friends.

And why's that? That devil on his shoulder would say, whenever he thought he'd made peace with it. *Sirius said it himself, he likes blokes. And he ain't dating that love-sick, primrose Chastity Bell anymore. What's a'matter, chap—afraid you might like it?*

Yes, Remus thought back a million times. Some might deny it, but 'like' and envy went hand in hand. There were plenty of people who didn't *like* Sirius Black, but they certainly envied him. Whether for his looks or his smarts or his money, or that bewitching devil-may-care attitude of his. Sirius was bold and daring and Remus, he... wasn't. He was just Remus. He was happy being the tag-along, the sarcastic friend with a fag and a half-decent music recommendation in his back pocket, the kid with a crappy dad because nine out of ten dads were crappy anyway. He could be 'Remus and his books'—'Remus and his fags'—'Remus and *GODDAMMIT WOULD YOU ALL JUST LEAVE ME ALONE?!'*

Maybe it was a hard realisation, but it would've been worse to lie to himself. He just wasn't willing to risk it all like Sirius was, and if he were being truly honest with himself, he *was* afraid. Afraid that Sirius would ask him to.

Though... that didn't mean he couldn't look, right? Sirius made that part easy, what with his, well—*everything.* Between Remus' own romancing and the way things had gone down with Tomny, he'd somehow missed it, but where Sirius had been handsome before, the shape he was growing into now was downright stunning. He had a

side-profile that made Remus want to punch him if just to add a dent to the perfect ridge of his nose. Unlike so many other musicians, his fingers were long and delicate—a realisation that had come after they'd received a lecture in art class about the Sistine Chapel. Remus had thought crudely that compared to Sirius, Michelangelo's depiction of Adam's hands were rather ugly. And then because it was so embarrassing, Remus rushed back to the dorm for an ice-cold shower.

I must be going insane, he thought, while drowning himself under the showerhead. *No sane person thinks about someone else this much. Maybe I should just tape a bag over his head—see him try and look so bloody fit then. Bastard.*

Oh, he blamed Sirius, alright. Not just for his looks or his inability to be missed in any crowd he was ever in, but for his kindness. And for keeping his secrets.

A full month had passed since that phone call with Tomny. More often than not it hung over Remus' head like a dark cloud, but thanks to his friends' goodwill, he was finally starting to feel okay again. He dreaded summer, but at least he would have James and Peter. Mary and Marlene too, if he could put up with their primping and preening. He was more worried for Sirius, who'd had such a horrible time over Christmas, but they would both find ways to distract themselves. Sirius was wreak his havoc, and Remus would read his books, maybe even venture out on occasion. Not to the End, no—he refused to obsess over people who had no interest in him, no matter how many pretty words they used to justify it. Even now, Remus wasn't sure what Sirius had done with Tonya's letter, and he didn't ask. He'd been right to hand it over. Secrets like that only made him and Sirius closer, and when he was ignoring his more ludicrous emotions, he supposed it only made them better friends too.

You have my everything, he thought, each and every time he found himself staring at Sirius from across their bedroom, classroom, or dinner table. It didn't matter how much distance was between them, or how stupid he knew he was for doing it, Remus was always staring at Sirius. It as though he put him in a trance. It happened so often that some of the others had even taken notice, and Remus had had to make up a few imaginary bees just to get himself out of it. But it was okay now—*he* was okay—except he still wasn't sure how he was going to keep himself from ruining a friendship that meant *everything* when a single glance from Sirius left him thrumming from top to bottom. It made him apprehensive to let Sirius come close, but he also couldn't bear to let him drift away. It was like some horrible game of cat and

mouse, without knowing who was playing what. Remus had never fancied himself a wolf, but playing cat and reaching for the stars didn't sound all that more pleasant.

* * *

Thursday 19th May 1977

After several weeks of practice, Hawkings' first (and likely only) rock band, 'The Marauders', were finally starting to sound half-decent. James and Sirius found it rather difficult not playing over one another every other song and Peter still dragged behind in tempo sometimes, forcing Remus to make up for the lost rhythm with his bass lines, but for a couple of wannabe rock stars with only Sirius' formal training to split amongst them, they'd certainly done alright.

Tuesdays and Thursdays had become unofficial practice nights, along with the occasional Sunday if they were feeling up to it. With the incident involving Snape long behind them, James eight-week ban from the football team was about to be lifted, which would probably change how often they could get together, but Remus had Sirius had already been assured: this was for real. All for one and one for all, those Marauders. Remus couldn't wait until they were making music of their own.

For now though, it was just any other Thursday. Remus was supposed to be meeting the guys for another practice, except he was running late after getting sucked into a conversation with his new biology partner, Jillian, who seemed a bit too eager to get a jump start on their project. He'd made the mistake of using the band as an excuse to try and leave, which had only opened up an opportunity for Jillian to pepper him with more questions. It'd taken a while to shake her, and he doubted his friends would've found it as interesting a conversation as Jillian seemed to. They'd probably have just made fun of him for not being able to say no to the girl—but it didn't matter much anyway, as the moment Remus rounded the corner leading up to the music building's front doors, he was drawn to an immediate halt.

All thoughts of biology and Jillian evaporating instantly, Remus watched as Sirius leaned out of door, one foot crossed in front of the other at the ankle. He was talking to a girl—just chatting really, but he was leaning back against the open door so casually that not even a blind man would have mistaken it for anything other than flirting. A

moment of pathetic doubt flitted across his mind—*Maybe they're also talking about a... biology... project*—but then Sirius smiled and touched his thumb to the side of his mouth and Remus knew he was right.

Uncomfortable with the idea of walking right between the two of them, he skirted to the side of the pavement and bent down, pretending as though he was riffling through his guitar case and having to retie his shoelaces. Half of him wanted to crane his ear just to catch a snippet of their conversation, but that jealous Moony that had been living under his skin for who knows how long wanted nothing to do with it.

It took far too long for the conversation to end for it be anything innocent, and by then Remus' ankles were beginning to ache from the three-dozen times he'd tied and untied his shoes. When the pair finally said goodbye and Sirius slipped back inside the music hall, he stood and stiffly made his way to the front doors, bass guitar in hand. He passed the girl, whose uniform was made up of Rowena House colours just like Lily and the other girls'. For a split-second Remus was so caught up by the navy blue of her skirt that he'd nearly missed the little wave she gave him. Not that it wouldn't have mattered—he did not return the gesture.

Throwing open the doors to the music hall, he muscled his bass inside and took a deep breath. Sirius was just ahead of him down the hall, walking with his hands in his pockets and—*was he whistling?*

"Oi! Black!"

The cherry tune cut out immediately as Sirius turned around, a wide grin on his face. "Oi, yourself, Moony. Thought we were gonna be waiting on your sorry arse all night."

Feeling strangely apprehensive after the quip, Remus approached Sirius, who'd stopped to wait for him, and swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Who was that?" He asked, indicating to the doors with a jerk of his head.

Sirius looked around him before scratching his nose. "Oh, you mean Tess? She's in English with James and I. Was just asking me about the homework."

"Just homework? Nothing else?"

Sirius gave him a funny look, which was ironic because Remus felt anything but funny.

“We talked about the band too," he said. "Can you believe it? Guess word’s getting around. We’re already famous.” Sirius stepped forward and clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly manner, but Remus hardly noticed.

“You were flirting,” he said sharply.

Sirius' funny look returned, this time accompanied by a self-satisfied smirk that made Remus want to punch his lights in.

“Was I?”

“Yeah, you were. So what, you gonna date her?”

“Would it be a problem if I did?”

Remus’ mouth opened, temporarily dazed by Sirius’ brazen response. “N-No. You just—might as well fess up to it if you’re interested.”

“Why, you got a thing for Tess?”

Say no, a voice screamed.

“Would it be a problem if I did?”

Idiot.

Sirius glanced down and then shoved his hands back into his pockets. “No… no problem. Didn’t realise you and Tess knew each other all that well, that’s all. But yeah, I’ll back off. Not worth risking your best mate for some girl, right?”

Remus felt his stomach sink.

You fucking idiot.

“I don’t have a thing for Tess,” he confessed. Sirius squinted at him.

“You don’t? Then why the grumpiness?”

“Jus'... in a bad mood. Sorry. Date her if you want.”

“You're so weird. I never actually said I was gonna date her,” Sirius said, trading his confused look for a smile.

Great, now he thinks you're weird, Remus thought.

You ARE *weird,* jealous Moony said.

The thought was enough to leave Remus panicking.

"You think I'm weird?" He demanded.

"Uh—yes?" Sirius looked him up and down. "Or no. Actually, I'm not really sure what the right answer is here. Can you give me a hint?"

Mortified at his own lunacy, Remus forced a smile. "…Was only joking. We both know Potter's the biggest weirdo anyway, right? I mean, I don't know any other seventeen year-olds ready for marriage, do you?"

Satisfied by the response, Sirius laughed in agreement. "Nope. Now who'd have thought it—the only tosser among us with a well-adjusted family and *he's* the weirdo."

They laughed together, albeit awkwardly, and Remus rocked back on his heels until his fried nerves gave way.

“Wanna get to practice then?” He suggested.

“Sure, Moony. We were waiting for you.”

Sirius turned and motion for him to follow, and Remus did, feeling horribly stupid. Who was he to police those Sirius did and didn’t date? Best friends didn’t do that. He had to get control of these embarrassing outbursts.

Back in music room #2, their friends were waiting for them. Peter was already tucked up behind the drum kit, licking his thumb as he flipped through a book on music theory. James sat next to him on a stool, spinning haphazardly in circles while holding the 1964 Strat Sheila had so graciously lent out to him for practice. As the door clattered shut behind them, James looked up.

“About time Cinderella arrived for the ball,” he called; “Clock’s just about to strike midnight, you know.”

“Yes, and he’s broken a glass slipper so don’t test him,” Sirius cheeked.

“I’m fine, let’s just play,” Remus grumbled loosely.

James exchanged a wary look with Peter, who just shrugged and added his own sound effect with the drums; *ba-dum-tsss!*

Remus ignored it, setting the Fender's case down and popping the lid. "Black, you got those music sheets?"

"Right here," Sirius said, dropping a paper folder down on a music stand.

“Hell yes, what we playing tonight, Maestro?” James asked.

“Maestro is not an acceptable nickname,” Sirius scoffed, shoving the sheet music into his chest. James took the paper—which they all knew now he couldn't read anyway—and began toddling after Sirius with a coddling smile.

“Ah, c’mon—you were just complaining yesterday that you don't have one. I’m really trying here.”

Sirius handed Peter his music sheets. “Try harder.”

“I think it’s fine,” Remus said, from across the room.

“That’s ‘cause you’re a shit.”

"Since when are you supposed to like a nickname? You were the one who forced those stupid names onto us in the first place."

"My nicknames are art!" Sirius cried, balling up Remus' sheet music and throwing it at him. "You're an *arse."*

“So you don’t want one?” Peter asked, while Remus chased his paper ball down the music stand.

“Never said that,” Sirius said haughtily. "But honestly—who are we right now? We got Moony, Wormtail, Prongs, and *Black.* What the fuck—that’s so lame!”

“I'll remind you again that you're the one who came up with all of that crap in the first place,” James added snidely. "If you don't like any of our suggestions, just give yourself one."

Lifting his guitar strap over his head, Sirius paused long enough to flip James the bird. “I can’t just give *myself* a nickname. That’s worse than lame, that’s bottom of the fucking barrel-level embarrassing.”

“Okay I got it, how about Moony, Prongs, Wormtail and ‘that other

asshole'?"

"I appreciate the menial effort but that's not exactly snappy enough."

"How about 'The Hair'?" Peter suggested.

"Oooh—! I like that one!" James grinned, while Sirius scoffed.

"Fuck you guys, you're not taking this seriously at all."

"We could always call you 'Trouble'! Or how 'bout 'Starboy'?"

"That sounds like the name of a cheesy superhero," Remus called.

"Exactly!" James shouted gleefully; "He could be the sidekick to Bowie's 'Starman', eh?"

"Fuck you, not a chance," Sirius hissed. "I ain't anybody's sidekick, so let's just get going on 'Honky Tonk Woman' before you're kicked out of the band for being absolutely useless."

Sighing wistfully, James returned to his stool, rumpled music sheet in hand.

"It's okay, Prongs, I liked that one," Peter said out of the corner of his mouth.

"Thank you, Wormtail. Wanna walk me through the rhythm?"

Peter rolled his eyes. "Honestly, when you gonna actually learn to read music? What good's a super power if you can't read?"

"Meh, reading's for you normal blokes. Call me when your dad's voice starts sounding like the colour of chocolate chip cookies."

As James scooted in closer to the drum kit, Remus walked himself and his bass back across the orchestra risers, setting his paper down on the stand next to Sirius' and picking up the Fender. Sirius watched him out of the corner of eye, while tuning the Rickenbacker.

"You've been awfully quiet," he said to Remus. "What, no stupid nickname jokes?"

"Nope," Remus shrugged, picking out the notes of the song's chorus.

"Nothing? What happened to that creative mind of yours?"

“I don't work for free.”

“Stingy arsehole. Your D's out of tune by the way.”

One corner of Remus’ mouth curled upwards and he tucked his pick between his lips. "Maybe *you* have perfect pitch," he muttered, but before he could even look up to gauge Sirius' reaction, the other boy appeared in front of him, nose only a few millimetres from his. Almost spitting out his pick, Remus jumped backward on the stands. “What the—back off, you idiot!”

“Not until you suggest something,” Sirius pushed, pushing way beyond the limits of personal space.

“I don't care, tell James you're flippin' Maestro and let's call it a day!”

“Ha—Try again.”

“Fucking—I don’t know!”

Sirius reached out and grabbed Remus’ face on either side, practically shaking his head back and forth. “I’m gonna rattle your snarky gob until something decent falls out!”

“Get off me!” Remus hissed, pushing him off. “God, you’re incessant—like a bloody dog!”

“Good, keep it going!” Sirius encouraged.

“You want me to call you a *dog?!”*

“I want you to suggest something! Join the club already, Moony! It's only been two years!”

"Oh, fuck off," Remus bristled.

Sirius didn't seem to care. "C'mon, we know you've got dogs. You name them—now name me!"

“Fine!" He threw his arms up. "Zenyatta, Seabiscuit, Padfoot—"

"Padfoot and Zenyatta?" Sirius grimaced. "Those are terrible names."

"UGH! Take your pick, I don’t care, just don't—”

Remus drew up short, his breath leaving him all at once.

Just don't touch me.

A beat passed and then Sirius huffed, clearly unsatisfied. “Guess it’s true, you can’t force perfection—or a half-way decent nickname.”

“Dogs this, dogs that—there was so clearly a bitch joke in there,” James said to Peter, almost as though he were trying to diffuse the sudden tension.

"I thought 'Padfoot' was kinda cute," Peter returned.

Ignoring them, Remus bent over to pick up his dropped pick and wipe it off on his shirt before returning it to the corner of his mouth.

“Bloody lunatic, it's just a nickname. Have mine if you’re so pressed,” he grumbled to Sirius, who’d turned away to plug his guitar into an amp.

“You can’t just recycle a nickname," Sirius lashed, "that’s horse-shit.”

“Given this enough thought, have you?”

“Blame Lottie. She was the one who brought the utter lack of equality among this group of lads to my attention in the first place.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Peter scoffed.

“I’m sure he isn’t,” James sang, “but if you two are done with your little spat, I actually want to make it in time for dinner, so let’s just shut up and start playing, yeah?”

Remus stood up and pulled the pick from his lips. “Yes, *let's."*

They all dispersed a bit to ready themselves, and Remus did his best to ignore Sirius' presence. Despite this, he could tell Sirius was watching him again; his gaze felt like a million tiny little pin pricks staring him in the back. Too stubborn to give him a reaction and too rattled to call him on it, Remus walked over to his own amp and tested the volume. He made sure to bring his music sheet with him, so he didn't have to be next to Sirius while they practiced.

You never make things any easier, he told him telepathically. *Just for Christ sakes, stay away.*

"You got the basics already, Potter?" Sirius called, still eyeing Remus as though he was the toy he’d wanted and hadn't got.

"Basically," James shrugged. "You guys just give it go. I'll follow you."

"Alright. Moony, you good?"

"Let's just play," Remus muttered.

"Fine. Pete, count us in."

Peter squinted at the sheet music. "Okay, but I don't have a cowbell..."

* * *

Friday 20th May 1977 — The Next Day

They didn't always fight. Some days were good—like the Monday before when they'd taken all the freshly-dissected frogs from the biology lab and hid them in Professor Flitwick's desk just before class. The shriek he'd given when he opened his drawer while looking for a pencil had been enough to leave Remus and Sirius in stitches for hours. It'd been ages since they'd pulled a proper prank, and Sirius seemed eager to bring one to fruition, even if it wasn't on such a grand scale as those they'd managed to pull off before. If Sirius had known what was coming, he probably wouldn't have been so eager. But that was the fun of practical jokes, Remus supposed; full of surprises. Though, he wasn't sure what cow-tipping had to do with pranking.

"Well, it's not really a prank, we've just never done it," James amended, as they made their way down the lane in the dark, one half-drunk bottle of whisky in hand. Skipping out on curfew had been his and Sirius' idea, but with a little liquid-courage, Remus and Peter had been just as eager to join in.

"You sound pretty lax for someone who is not only counting on getting back onto the football team, but also wants to be dorm monitor next year," Remus said, never one to let his friends off easy. Smirking around the rim of his gin bottle, he threw back a final gulp before passing it to Peter, who finished it off and tossed it into a bin along the side of the road.

"I'm not counting on anything—I'm on the team! And I told you, I'm only *considering* it," James insisted.

"Nah, he'll do it," Sirius started, punching James lightly in the shoulder. "Imagine the parties—and he can declare his undying love

for Evans at every one. Don't that sound great, Prongsy?"

"That *sounds* like a surefire way to get fired," Peter added.

"Really, Wormtail, do you think he'll be the first dorm head in history to throw a party? It's time you started thinking bigger and better, my friend."

"Hmph."

"How did you even come up with this 'cow-tipping' thing anyway?" Remus asked. "Thought they only do shit like this in dumb American television."

"As a matter of fact, that's exactly how we found out," Sirius said, before going on to explain how he and James had been forced to watch some horrible 'coming of age' movie in their Classics class. "There's always cows in that field just around the eastern lip of campus, right? James and I saw them this morning from the top floor of the science block."

"We did," James confirmed. "They're there."

"Don't cows bite?" Peter asked.

"Sure, they got teeth," Sirius shrugged, "but I'd be more worried about getting trampled. Cows and buffalo aren't that distantly related, you know."

"I'm gonna tip the most," James said, before hiccupping. "I shall be the —" *HIC!* "—King of cows!"

"Now that's a nickname," Sirius said.

Remus was sceptical, and didn't fancy dragging any of his friends back to the medical room when they got trampled, but after emerging through 'Moony's glory hole' ("Sirius I *will* murder you.") there was no going back anyway. Their only real regret was that James' torch had turned up dead and they were left with only a single torchlight to guide them.

"What, why aren't we tipping the school's cows?" Remus asked, squinting ahead of them down the dark dirt road that followed along the outside of the school wall.

"Kettleburn never leaves them in the field overnight," James

explained. “Probably for this exact—" *HIC!* "—reason.”

"Prongs, try holding your breath."

"Okay—" *HIC!* "—Moony."

“I wouldn’t try messing with the school’s herd anyway,” Peter supplied, flashing the torch around. “They’re all hairy and have horns that look like they could disembowel a grown man. Talk about buffalo.”

“Yeah, but not these guys,” Sirius said, “they’re dairy cattle. Now c’mon, it’s this way.”

Nudging James, who had just managed to stop hiccupping, Sirius took off across the road toward a barbed wire fence and carefully placed his hands and feet along the wire. Making sure to go slow, he stretched it out for each of them to slip through and let James trade with him so he could do the same. Afterwards they were all left standing on the soft ground of the Highland field, staring out with nay a cow in sight.

“Why are we here again?” Remus asked, only because he felt like complaining. It was pitch black and all he could smell was cow dung. At least they'd all worn boots.

“ ‘Cause Moony,” Sirius sighed, “when you think back to your school days ten years from now, you’re not going to remember sitting in class getting lectured by Binns, or the papers you wrote, or even the people you liked and the people you loathed—but cow-tipping with your favourite lads? That you’re gonna remember.”

It was a good argument, so Remus resolved himself to stop complaining and just gestured for Sirius to go on. He did so, winking at him and grinning in that shameless way of his that left Remus feeling exhilarated and tired all at once.

No, you’re already over this, you toff. He’s your friend.

Then why does he have to look like that? And look at me *like that? It’s not fair.*

Life’s not fair, idiot.

Remus pinched his forehead. He needed to stop having imaginary arguments over Sirius in his head or he really was going to lose it.

“I don’t mean to be the voice of reason or anything,” Peter said as they walked, “but I don’t actually see any cows.”

“They’re here!” Sirius insisted. “We just saw them today, you were Prongs.”

“Is this the right field?” James asked, sounding sceptical himself now.

Sirius began turning around, searching desperately. “Yeah—I mean, I think so..."

“You think so?” Remus echoed.

“Well all fields look the same, don’t they? And it’s bloody Scotland—there’s fields everywhere! All I know is the cows were out behind the science buildings on the opposite side of the fence and now so are we.”

“Cows do have feet, you know—they can move.”

“Thank you for that startling revelation, Lupin.”

“We know they were here because we can still smell them,” James said, pinching his nose for dramatic effect. “How ‘bout we just walk a bit more? Who knows, maybe we’ll find some sleepy sheep instead and we can tip them.”

“I think sneaking up on a sheep might be a little harder,” Peter said, but because they were lightly buzzed and without anything else to do other than return home and head to bed (which was totally unacceptable and totally not cool) they kept walking. Eventually James and Sirius fell into step with one another, sharing the last bottle of whisky and surging on ahead while Remus hung back with Peter and his torch, not interested in breaking an ankle in some stray foxhole. As a result, Peter had taken the chance to share with him his most pressing dilemma: what he was going to get Moira for her upcoming birthday.

“I could always call mum and she could send something, but that almost sounds a bit lazy, don't you think? I was supposed to look over Easter, but she came to visit so I didn't have to time to sneak off, and Moira wouldn't be impressed if it weren't a surprise. You didn't have to buy Marlene a birthday gift while you were dating, did you?”

“Uh-huh... sure...”

Sirius' hair looks a bit blue in the dark. It's the moon. The moon must make it blue.

“Are you even listening, Moony?”

Remus blinked several times. “Oh yeah, sorry Pete. Why don’t you just make her something then?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know—you’re a great artist, and Moira loves your art, right? So…”

“You’re right,” Peter said fondly, “I guess it could be that easy then, but what could I make her? Maybe a collage?”

“Mhm.” Remus drifted off again, unable to help himself only because it was nighttime and Sirius was still ahead of him and Sirius *always* looked best under the moonlight. It made every inch of him light up like real star-shine. He had his back to him, but Remus knew without looking that his stormy eyes would have turned clear, and his smile—just absolutely blinding.

“He’s your friend…” Remus told himself under his breath. “He’s your *friend.”*

“James!” Peter shouted, making Remus jump and snap out of yet another daze. “I meant to ask earlier, what’d you get Lily for her birthday this year?”

“A bracelet,” James called back, “the one with the little charms on it. You were with me, remember? At Harrods.”

“Oh yeah,” Peter said sorely, before biting his lip.

“Gifts don’t have to be expensive to be meaningful,” Remus told him, quietly. “Just get her something you know she’ll like.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Peter said, looking down. “Oh, watch out, Moony, or you’ll step in a—”

“EUGH—! OH MY GOD!”

The cry came from ahead of them, where Sirius was now standing with his legs splayed apart, waving his arms like they were on fire, his left boot now ankle-deep in what could’ve only been a very large puddle of cow shit.

“Gross!” He wailed, before letting loose a string of horrible retching noises.

James and Peter instantly dissolved into breathy laughter, holding their stomachs while Sirius bent over and heaved.

“Aw, Sirius, did the poor cow pat attack you?” James asked, before having to shoot backwards as Sirius took a swing at him.

“Just help me!”

“Why don’t you try pulling your damn foot out,” Remus snapped, approaching Sirius with a huff.

“It’s stuck—!" Sirius moaned, before retching again. *“EUGH*—It’s like the shit’s suctioned-cupped to my foot!”

“Where there are cows there are shit,” Peter offered enthusiastically. Even in the dark Remus could tell the glare Sirius gave him was particularly nasty. Rolling his eyes, Sirius grabbed hold of his pant leg and sucked in a breath before giving one good tug. Unfortunately, the tug was a little *too* good, and his foot shot up right out of his boot, leaving him to sprawl backward in the muck before finally catching himself with one more horrible squelch.

All colour drained from Sirius’ face, and he looked down to find that he’d stepped in a second cow pat, only this time, with his bare foot.

“Oh fuck,” James gasped, “you didn’t *actually* step in another one, did you? That's prime comedy, mate!”

Sirius gave a wail so loud he could’ve been heard from Castle Hall. Holding a hand to his forehead, Remus fought back a smile. Seeing the normally composed Sirius dance around like a chicken with its head cut off was almost too much.

“It’s just a little cow pat,” he started, barely holding back laughter now. “Could you be any more of a prissy prat?”

Sirius gaped at him, horrible offended; “Would you like to try it?! Because there is *cow shit* between my *toes!”*

That was it for Remus, who broke down with laughter so hearty it brought real tears to his eyes while Sirius waddled around, desperately wiping his bare foot on any bit of clean grass he could find. James and Peter joined him, laughing at the whole thing but

mostly Sirius, before James shot upright in realisation.

“Cow pat—oh my god, Moony, what was it you called Sirius in the music room yesterday? Pat-foot?”

Sirius’ head turned to them so quickly it almost looked like he gave himself whiplash. “No way,” he hissed.

“Oh hell yeah!” Peter gasped. “That’s it—that’s your nickname! Patty-foot!”

“No *fucking* way!”

Remus crossed his arms with a shit-eating grin on his face (pun intended); “Oh c’mon, I know you don’t take being the butt of the joke so well, but you didn’t actually think we’d let you pick your own nickname, hm… Pat-foot?”

“That is your DOG'S NAME!" Sirius roared.

“No—he's 'Padfoot'. Though I suppose we could call you that instead on the days where we're feeling generous,” Remus said smugly.

"You dicks! You vicious, betraying *les roi des fille de putes! Je t'emmerde!"*

"You're right, Pat-foot, the name does have its own sort of *'je ne sais quoi'."*

“HA!" James howled. "So good!”

Fuming, Sirius stopped forward and grabbed hold of his boot, yanking it free with one hand and pushing his hair up over his eyes with the other. As he did so, he raised the boot high, primed for throwing.

“Oh fuck,” Peter yelped, already turning to run.

James did the same, shouting; “Run, Moony! He’s gone mad!” And Remus turned, cackling as raced away, a single shit-covered boot arcing over his head while Sirius screamed after him.

“Your accent is *ABYSMAL AND YOU’RE ALL DICKHEADS!”*

“Watch your step on the way home, Padfoot!” James answered. “Wouldn’t want to become ‘Padfeet’ now would we?”

“AUGHHHH!!!”

* * *

Saturday 21st May 1977

Sirius might've not been as impressed by his new nickname, but the girls certainly were. They spent the several hours of the following afternoon laughing over it, plus the fact that Sirius had to walk the entire way home with cow shit between his toes before washing off under the hose outside their dorm. The boot, sadly, could not be saved, as they never recovered it from wherever Sirius had thrown it in the field.

"So you're not gonna go back to look for it?" Lottie asked, popping a grape into her mouth.

"Nah, let the cows keep it," Sirius grumbled. He had an arm draped over his eyes as he laid back on the picnic blanket, and his head was propped up on Mary's shin. It was just after dinner and all eight of them were currently crammed on the single blanket, making up a single messy knot of limbs. Occasionally one of them complained of a knee to the back or shifted and crushed someone's hand, but it was the first nice day in weeks since the April rain had fled, and there was a real sweetness on the breeze that made everyone want to be outside.

"I wish you'd taken a picture," Marlene laughed.

"It happened too fast, was much too dark," James sighed. "It exists now only in our memories."

"It wasn't that funny," Sirius said. "Lupin just took the lazy-way out and picked a dog's name and these numpties pretended it fit. It's practically slander."

"You're just lashed because it is funny," Peter snorted.

"It's not funny!"

"Oh yes, it is."

"Okay, if we don't talk about something else right now I'm gonna go mental," Sirius warned.

“Did you ever settle on the name for your band then?” Lily asked, flipping through Peter’s sketchbook. She’d had to practically wrestle it out of his hands, but after promising to correct his maths homework, he finally handed it over.

“Oh, that’s still a thing?” Marlene asked after her.

“Yup. Naw'stop movin', Cherry, m'almost done.” Remus said around the hair bobble in his mouth. He hadn't meant to be roped into doing her hair, but really, he didn't mind.

As Marlene straightened her back for him, Mary lifted her sunglasses up. “So you can all suddenly play instruments now?”

“What do you mean ‘suddenly’?” Sirius asked. “The four of us have been practising together for weeks now—me and Moony, for years.”

She shrugged. “Calvin keeps me busy.”

Sirius grimaced and word of Mary's latest beau. “You’re still dating that guy? He looks about thirty-five.”

“He’s only a year older than us.”

“He’s got chewing gum for brains,” Marlene added, grimly.

“Yeah, but he’s got just the right amount of opinions to make him tolerable and his dad runs a hedge fund, so who cares. Plus, he's not all that bad in the sack,” Mary smirked.

Remus couldn't see it, but he got the sense that Marlene was rolling her eyes.

“Are you guys actually any good with those instruments of yours?” Mary asked.

“It’s a work in progress,” Sirius said staunchly. “Elvis wasn’t born a musical genius, you know.”

“Even if Sirius was,” James snickered. Sirius saluted him.

“Well, have you written any songs yet?” Lottie asked.

“Not entirely,” Peter answered.

“Do you even have a name?” Marlene drawled.

“YES!” All three boys answered together, before Sirius cleared his throat and answered; “The Marauders!”

Remus looked up. “You mean that was official?”

“Unless you’ve got any better ideas, name-giver-extraordinaire,” Sirius ragged. He took a moment to look him up and down, but Remus just returned to his task at hand—braiding Marlene’s hair. Too bad all it took was one glance away for him to lose his place and get all muddled up.

“I messed it up again,” he sighed, releasing Marlene’s blonde plaits and letting them unravel down her back.

“S’okay, you gave it your best shot,” Marlene giggled, before crawling across the checkerboard blanket to Mary and plopping down in front of her expert fingers.

“Where’d you get the idea for ‘Marauders’?” Lily asked. Remus looked down at the sketchbook in her lap to find she was looking through several beautiful sketches of Moira. She wasn’t facing the viewer in any of them, which meant Peter must’ve done them without her knowing.

“From Mrs. Buchanan, actually,” James said, leaning back on his hands next to Lily. “She sprung us from Filch after a failed prank. It was one of the words she used to threaten us out of doing it again.”

Lily smirked down at the sketchbook lightly. “Fitting.”

“I think it sounds a bit naff actually,” Mary said, the picture of honesty.

“Gee, thanks. Does that mean you've got any bright ideas under that big hair of yours then?” Sirius asked, reaching over to poke at Mary’s hair, which was so big it nearly blocked out the sun. Her choice to ditch the braided hairstyle she’d been sporting since Christmas had left her with an afro to rival Diana Ross, but Mary had the confidence to pull anything off, so of course it looked good.

“Paws off, Padfoot,” Mary hissed, batting Sirius away while she continued to braid Marlene’s hair. “I just mean that no one’s gonna get it. It’s funny to you, sure, but to everyone else? Nu-uh, it’ll be a missed opportunity.”

“A missed opportunity for what?” Peter asked, pulling his t-shirt away

from his neck to fan himself.

“To make a statement, of course! ‘The Marauders’—no, way too many syllables. Don’t you want people to remember you? Well, people are stupid, and they ain’t gonna if your name don’t roll off the tongue."

"I didn't think choosing a band name would come with so many conditions," Remus said sarcastically, while stretching out his back.

"Of course it does. It's like the cover of a book—it tells people what you're about. Take Sirius’ favourite pop band for example, Small Faces —”

Sirius scoffed; “They’re a *rock band.”*

“Shush. What I’m saying is, is that they may have had a few hits as ‘Small Faces’ but they didn’t really get good until they were just calling themselves ‘Faces’. And how about ‘T. Rex’? Could you imagine shouting ‘we want Tyrannosaurus Rex at a concert? No, you shout for *T. Rex.”*

“So you don’t like it at all?” James asked. “Because our backup was 'The Vaudeville Pantsers'.”

“No, I—” Mary grimaced; “Actually I don’t even want to know where you were going with that one.”

“Read it off a gum wrapper,” Sirius snorted, nudging Lottie with his elbow.

“The name is fine,” Mary clarified, “almost great even. You just need to lose one little detail.”

“And that is?”

“Duh—lose the ‘the’! No one’s about to go and pay to see a group declaring themselves as ‘The Marauders’ like some cheesy daytime comedy sketch. But ‘Marauders’, maybe—so just refer to yourselves directly and move on with it.”

“But that’s just bad grammar,” Sirius insisted.

“And since when do you care so much about grammar?” Marlene asked, smugly.

“I think Mary’s right,” Lottie declared. “Shorter might not always be ideal, but I think it’s acceptable in this instant.”

“Lottie’s filthy mind aside, I actually think Mary’s right too,” Lily added, before glancing up from the sketchbook. “You do have a lot of sketches of Moira in here, don’t you, Peter?”

Peter shot forward and snatched up the sketchbook. “I told you not to go that far!”

“They’re beautiful though,” Lily said kindly, turning back to the rest of them; “I guess the question the problem begs is this—are you describing yourselves as a collective or a concept?”

James squinted at her; “Huh?”

“Well ‘The Marauders’ implies that you’re all a singular marauder forming one unit, but ‘Marauders’ is more like a statement. Like ‘The Beatles’ are each a singular ‘Beatle’ on their own, I suppose, but the members of ‘Led Zeppelin’ aren’t all claiming to be flying lead balloons.”

“Exactly!” Mary agreed, getting so excited she almost dropped the tail of Marlene’s braid before she could tie it off. “Plus ‘the’ isn’t sexy.”

“You’re all nutters,” Sirius said. “There’s nothing wrong with ‘the’.”

“Should we put it to a vote then? All those in favour of ‘Marauders’—the *concept*—raise your hand.”

All four girls raised their hands, and eventually so did James and Peter. Sirius gaped at them. “You didn’t have any complaints yesterday when we let Pete paint ‘The Marauders’ across the side of Andy’s guitar case!”

James grinned at him and shrugged. “ ‘The’ ain’t sexy, mate.”

Done deliberating, Remus also raised his hand. “I’m with the girls.”

“There’s a shocker,” Sirius huffed.

Remus just smiled at him. “C’mon Black, you don’t want to be a Marauder, or even ‘the’ Marauder. That name feels too tangible for you—too touchable. Wouldn’t you rather be *un*-touchable? Be a concept people have to work to understand? What even is ‘Led Zeppelin’? It’s a million different things because no one pictures a concept the same way.”

Sirius drew back a bit, and Mary rocked her head in his direction,

pointing back at Remus. “I’d listen to him if I were you.”

Sirius peered at him for a long time, but then finally relaxed, as if all the fight was draining out of him, one cheeky quip at a time. “ ‘Marauders’,” he echoed, before sighing, “alright, you’ve convinced me, but it better be a bloody good concept.”

“ ‘Cause how could it be any worse than ‘Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs’,” Lily smiled.

“Har, har, you’re so funny, Evans,” Sirius said, but he too was smiling.

“I don’t know why you’re so upset about the nickname in the first place, Sirius,” Mary said, fiddling with the end of Marlene’s braid. “Us girls don’t even have them and you don’t hear us whinging.”

“Actually we do,” Marlene said.

“We do?”

“Well, Lily and I do.”

“What’s yours then—you mean ‘Marls’?”

“No, it's ‘Cherry’,” Remus said automatically, before catching Marlene’s eye. Blushing a bit, she gave him a cheeky wink before sipping out of her water bottle.

“And here’s ‘Daisy’,” James grinned, jutting a thumb toward Lily, who cupped his chin and pulled him in close to plant a kiss on his cheek.

Mary turned on Lottie. "And you?"

Lottie considered. “Well, strickly speaking, I’m fine with ‘Lot’. After all, ‘Lottie’ is already a nickname. Though Mickey did used to call me ‘Barbie’ sometimes.”

Peter grimaced. “Oh bloody hell.”

“What the fuck?” Mary demanded. “You mean to say that I’m the *only* one here without a nickname?”

“Well, ‘Mary’ is already pretty short, ain’t it?” Marlene offered.

She scowled at her. “Sirius is right, you guys *are* lazy twats.”

“You mean you don't like 'Macdonald', Macdonald?” Sirius teased.

“Up yours, *Black*. A surname’s *not* a nickname.”

“Okay, then how do you fancy ‘Nymph’?”

Mary paused; “Like a fairy?”

“No, I was thinking more like *‘nymphomaniac’.”*

Snatching Marlene’s water bottle from her, she tossed it at Sirius, who flinched and caught it in the stomach with a groan.

“ ‘Fairy Mary’ does sound kind of cute though,” Lottie suggested.

“Do not encourage him.”

Beaming very suddenly, Sirius clutched the bottle to his chest. “Oh, I know,” he started, “how about ‘Mingy Mary’? Or ‘Suzy Snatch’ if you want a bit of ambiguity. Or even better yet, just Snatchy? Gotta make it short and snappy so all the stupid people can remember it, right?”

After taking a second to glance around and see if there was anything else she could throw at him, but turning up empty, Mary settled for a venomous glare. “I hate you.”

James chuckled. “Well, if *Padfoot* here can be named after an unsavoury memory as well as one of Lupin’s dogs, then why not try that? Moony—what was your favourite dog’s name back home?”

Remus felt like he was walking into a trap. “Er… Dusty.”

“That’s PERFECT!” Sirius exclaimed. “Dusty Snatch!”

Chapter End Notes

'Twelfth of Never' and 'Tibb's Eve' are idioms to express something that'll never happen.
'Harrods' is a London department store.
'Naff' means lame or unfashionable. Can also be used to tell someone to "f*** off".

I really like this chapter, especially the beginning. Felt a lot like a character study into who Remus is right in this moment. To me, Remus and Sirius' behaviour is also very telling of what they're feeling on the inside, and just react in different ways. Sirius is very external, while Remus internalises everything. Does this

make sense??? I hope so, lol.

Cheers and love. Next chapter out soon!

Next update: Dec 15/16 (Depending on your timezone).

Chapter 61: Liar's Dessert

Chapter Summary

> Remus Lupin wants two things: a distraction from how aware he is of his best friend, and to pass his exams. Lucky for him Barty Crouch can help with at least one of those things.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Mentions of suicide and homophobic language. Brief violence, and a generally not-so-happy Remus.
>
> I'm so tired, but happy I got this out! If you can't tell by the end, I'm really ramping up for some new developments, so I hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You know I've seen a lot of what the world can do,
And it's breakin' my heart in two;
Because I never wanna see you sad, girl,
Don't be a bad girl;
But if you wanna leave, take good care,
Hope you make a lot of nice friends out there;
But just remember there's a lot of bad and beware, beware…

- "Wild World" Cat Stevens, 1970

Wednesday 25th May 1977

Sirius was terrible with anything spicy.

Remus knew this because more than once he'd watched him dip his sticky fingers into one of James' regular care packages, only to complain for the next several hours that he'd never be able to taste anything ever again. Now, with only a month shy from the end of term, Euphemia Potter had sent her famous homemade chocolates as an early exam reward. Only thanks to having more kick than your average sweet, the chocolates felt more like a punishment rather than a reward.

"Maybe it *is* a punishment," Peter said, staring down at the tin and its

unassuming tissue paper. “Like a warning—fail your exams and she’ll force-feed you the fire-chocolate.”

“She makes ‘em with bhut jolokia seeds,” James explained. “Ghost peppers. Evil stuff. But the salsa and vindaloo are great. If you've have the stomach for it, that is.”

“Which ninety-nine percent of the population does not. One bite is like licking the bottom of Satan’s flamin’ ball sack,” Sirius said, already pale.

Despite being under the impression that putting anything in chocolate that might bite back was a terrible shame, Remus couldn’t resist clapping Sirius on the shoulder. “Well, Padfoot, your name was on the card too, and I’m sure you don’t want to disappoint ‘mum’, so go ahead—give it a go.”

“You’re mental if you think I’m going anywhere near that stuff. My eyes are watering just with the bloody lid open.” Taking the chocolates from Peter, Sirius snapped the lid shut and slid the tin beneath James’ bed.

“They only get spicier with time, you know,” James said, grabbing his school bag. “Dad calls ‘em the ‘fine wine of chocolate’.”

Sirius held up a hand. “Out of sight, out of mouth, Potter.”

It was just as hard in forms not to tease him, so Remus didn’t bother practising much self-control. They sat around the room in a staggered formation in desks that Sheila had brought in for studying in preparation for their exams, which would commence the following week. She had the radio going as well, letting the quiet classical music drift across the classroom to 'stimulate their minds' and 'help wake them all up'. Rather than getting much studying done himself, Remus spent most of the short period watching Sirius, who was concentrating on the sheet music he’d propped up on a music stand next to his desk, scribbling and erasing notes while he hummed a tune to himself.

“Who would’a thought that the great Sirius Black would be frightened by a little chocolate,” Remus said quietly, eyeing Sheila, who was lounging across the room and doing class marking while wearing a dress so vibrantly purple she probably could’ve been seen from Mars.

“I didn’t see you jumping at the bit to take a bite either,” Sirius shot back, pulling one foot up onto his chair and nibbling on the end of his pencil as he glared at his work.

“What’s that?” Remus asked, pointing at the song.

“I’m calling it ‘Wag the Dog’. Just wish I could remember how this bit went when I wrote it.” He turned his glare toward their teacher. "Bloody Sheila. It's a music classroom—we should be playing music, not studying for maths."

“Does it have any lyrics?” Remus asked quietly, more intrigued than before.

“Mhm. Back at the dorm. You can have a look later if you want.”

“Okay, cheers.”

Sirius gave him a sideways glance. “Have you managed to write anything?”

Remus stared down at his English book a little harder. “A little. Not much though. It’s felt a little harder since… well, you know.”

Sirius nodded in understanding. “Okay. You just let me know if you want to collaborate again or something.”

Encouraged by Sirius’ calm response, Remus looked up again. “I might have this one song.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s... er—kinda sappy though.” *And not at all about you, so don't look too far into it.*

“That’s alright,” Sirius smiled, “every rock band needs a few ballads.”

“And a few poofs too, I suppose,” called a nasally voice from behind.

Remus turned around in his seat, instantly soured. “You know, eavesdropping’s actually considered a sin, Crouch.”

Barty sneered at him; “You’d know all about that then, wouldn’t you, fudge packer?” Beside him, Yaxley gave an ugly chortle and held out his palm for his friend to smack.

“You want me to lock you in the broom cupboard again, you little shit?” Snarled Sirius.

Ignoring him, Barty turned to Remus, looking him up and down with an evil look. “I heard something interesting from my dad the other

day, Loony. You see, he's a politician too, only he works for the Crown, making sure all those sleazy, two-bit politicians are doing their job. And get this, he went 'round a new office the other day and happened to pick up on a familiar name. Now I'm no expert on genealogy, but unless there's more Lupins running 'round London than I thought, then I'd say he found your dad."

"Wow! You're so obsessed with Lupin that you're already telling your parents about him?" Sirius said. "Careful Bartemius, your own closet's turning a bit see-through."

Barty did not laugh this time. He ignored Sirius' quip and kept his eyes trained on Remus like a predator waiting to strike. "You wanna know what my dad heard at that office?"

"No really," Remus drawled, "but I'm sure you're going to tell us anyway so why don't you just get on with it?"

"—He heard that Lupin senior's got himself a bit of a wild child at home!" Barty hissed. "That he's so embarrassed of you he won't even let himself be seen with you in public! That you've been tossed out of so many schools, Hawkings was the only place left to send you."

Remus shared a look with Sirius. "Yeah, and...?"

Barty laughed like he'd gotten them. "Ha! So you admit it then? You admit you're a complete loser—a waster and a disgrace of a son?!"

Sirius clicked his tongue bitterly; "Shit! I thought I was the disgrace, Moony? *You're* supposed to be the phoenix rising from the ashes—the one turning his life around."

"He's certainly not!" Barty said smugly. "My dad said he's a no-good waste of space that wouldn't amount to anything, and that Lyall Lupin's just waiting for the day he can dump your arse."

Remus turned to Sirius, feigning relief and delight. "Black, did you hear that, Barty says my dad's finally gonna kick me to the curb—can you believe it?"

"If only I were given such a gift!" Sirius declared. "Ah, woe is me. Whoever spanked you with that lucky stick, spanked you hard, Lupin!"

Remus snorted, but Barty had already realised they were just making fun of him. He leaned forward in his chair, practically foaming at the

mouth.

“I heard other stuff too,” he seethed, “like how you bashed up your face running with thugs and then they got tired of you and jumped you, leaving you for dead. That’s why you look like a cat used your face as a scratching post!”

“The drama!” Sirius gasped. “Moony, you told us it was a football accident.”

“I guess the pain made me block it out,” Remus shrugged. “Why Barty, were you looking for a way in? I’m not sure if anyone back home’s recruiting but with your face I’m sure they’ll think you look the part already.”

“You’re still laughing but that’s not all I heard, Loony,” Barty said very slowly. “A little birdy told me a rumour's been going around about you. Guess the nickname make more sense now that I know your—”

Interrupting him, Sirius waved a friendly hand; “Okay, Crouchie, go ahead. Just admit you’re in love with dear Lupin, here, so we can all move on and get our work done.”

Barty’s eyes shot wide. “What the fuck? I’m not—”

“Don’t feel bad for falling head over heels for the handsome chap, it’s okay. Most people can't help it. Moony’s a hot-ticket item, didn’t you know?”

“That's disgusting! You’re mental!”

“And you’ve *absolutely* pictured him naked. C’mon Crouch, just admit you’re in love with him.”

Sputtering, Barty launched himself to his feet, his chair toppling behind him. “I’m not in love with him!” He shouted. Everyone turned to look and a few kids began to snigger while Barty fumed, but before either Remus or Sirius could respond, Sheila cut the music.

“Mr. Crouch,” she called, standing up from her chair and straightening her dress. “I was just about to take a walk to deliver today’s attendance sheet, care to gather your things and join me?”

Barty turned his vicious glare on their teacher, and though it was obvious there was more he wanted to say, the giggling had spread. As though that weren't enough, Sirius held up his hands and drew a heart

in the air, before blowing Barty a kiss to finish it all off. The younger boy looked about ready to snap as the class's sniggering rose to even further heights, but either out of embarrassment or sheer lack of a clever response, he snatched up his school bag and obediently followed Sheila to the door.

"You didn't have to say that," Remus said after they'd gone and the class's chittering had died down. He knew his cheeks red with embarrassment, but Sirius only turned back to his song with a haughty expression.

"I say call a spade a spade. If he's gonna play dirty, then so will we."

Remus sat back with a huff. Making fun of Barty's arrogant spiel had been fun, but as he reopened his book to the correct page, he was left with the gut feeling that it wasn't the last they'd be hearing from Barty or his father.

* * *

Friday 27th May 1977

Remus wasn't exactly sure what for, but between their spat in forms and the following morning, Barty had somehow procured himself a set of detentions that left him unable to attend forms for most of the week. This meant he did not arrive in class the next day or the day after, and Remus allowed himself a sigh of relief. At least this way he could study in peace. AS-Levels were not taken as seriously as O or A-Levels, nor did their exam period last as long, but that didn't mean Lily wasn't completely losing her head over them. She flitted about campus, handing out detention slips to any rowdy students who much as dared to get within twenty feet of her while she had a textbook open, and once actually considered giving Peter a pink slip for merely mentioning the word 'fail' in her presence.

Remus didn't really mind. Lily had always been the best out of his friends to study with, and he preferred quizzing her than himself anyway. Though sometimes her particular brand of 'dramatic crazy' did bridge on Sirius-territory.

"How do they all keep disappearing?" She demanded, scrambling desperately through her book bag.

"It's nice to see you've finally figured out how to relax during exams,"

Remus drawled, busy flipping through his notes.

Lily looked up, hair frazzled and a pencil stuck behind each ear. “Wha—?”

“Not even sarcasm can reach you,” he sighed, before reaching over and plucking both pencils from behind her ears. “Here.”

Looking distinctly embarrassed, Lily took them and pressed her knuckles to her warm cheeks. “You’re right, I need to calm down or else I’ll just start bursting into tears on the spot.”

“Eugh. Do me a favour and hold out until Potter crosses the berm,” Remus said, pointing to where James and Sirius were making their way toward their picnic table, food trays in hand.

“Bit early for dinner, isn’t it?” Lily said, collecting a few of her library books to make room for them as they flopped down on the bench.

“We missed lunch,” Sirius answered, shovelling half a sandwich into his mouth. “Final detention for poisoning Snape.”

“Ah.” Lily smiled to herself as she set to tapping a stack of papers into order. “I at least hope some of the punishment sunk in?”

Sirius started to refuse around the mouthful of sandwich, but James just smacked him in the gut, making him cough. “Yes, definitely. I’m ready to get back on the pitch.”

“And pass your exams?”

“Yes, well, those too.”

Lily smiled and passed him a few papers. “There’s the history notes you wanted.”

Talking them, James gave them a quick once-over. “Ah, perfect! Thanks, Daisy.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Remus. I borrowed them from him.”

Both James and Sirius raised an impressed brow, and Sirius swallowed his sandwich. “And how is your studying going, Moony?”

“Fine,” Remus answered lightly.

“Just fine?”

“Swell.”

Sirius smirked. “Hm. Guess we’ll see how swell once exams are finished.”

Remus returned the expression. “Guess we will, Pattycake. When I beat you, that is.”

Flashing him the bird, Sirius took another bite of his sandwich. He liked to play the nonchalant genius, but Remus knew that he'd done more than just crack a textbook in the last several weeks. Sirius wasn't much of a studier, but he could be trusted to pull his own weight when his pride was on the line. It almost humbled Remus to think that the entire reason Sirius was taking exams seriously was just to ensure he didn't whip his arse too badly, but Remus was also determined. He expected he had a real chance of being first in year for History, maybe close to that in Modern Lit, but even breaking the top ten for MFL and geography would be enough to hold over Sirius' head. That's right, Remus Lupin was going to come out on top this year. This time, he wasn’t going to let anything or anyone throw him off his game.

Or, that had been the plan anyway.

“Oi, Loony!” Barty called, making his way across the lawn toward them with his hands in his pockets, moving at a pace that he must’ve thought was quite swaggy, except only made him look like a club-footed duck instead. He had a line-up behind him; Yaxley, Travers, who were both wearing expressions that made them appear as though they went around frying bugs with magnifying glasses for fun. Bringing up the rear was none other than Regulus, who held his nose high but at least looked the most adverse to be there.

“Oh joy, the gang’s all here,” Sirius said, holding his fork between his teeth and pretending to look bored. “Seriously, Crouch, we don't see you for three days and you miss us so badly you have to hunt us down on our lunch break? Pfft, get a hobby.”

"He has a hobby," James said wryly. "Pretty sure I caught him burning ants with a magnifying glass last week."

"Oh yes, I even like to name them first," Barty added. "Potter Jr. made such a lovely sizzle."

“What do you want, Barty? I really don't think you need another detention, but I'll oblige you if you insist on carrying on,” Lily shot, leaning protectively over her books as though she feared they’d get

splattered with peanut butter.

“Lupin and I have unfinished business,” Barty answered, stopping a few feet away and spitting into the grass. “You too, Black.”

Sirius waved cheerily.

“Having unfinished business with Remus sounds a lot like a death sentence,” James called in a lofty voice, but instead of looking unnerved, Barty’s face only split into a grin.

“Have some experience there, Potter? Though I suppose you would, being friends with such a nasty bloke.”

“Actually, I don’t have any business with you,” Remus said firmly. “In fact, if I could, I’d get a refund for every minute I’ve had to spend looking at your miserable face, so if you wouldn’t mind—piss off already.”

The enemy boys all exchanged looks, ranging from scornful to impressed, while Regulus just looked away as though the whole thing were beneath him. Remus supposed that that was exactly what he thought, being who he was. Regulus had never been *nice,* but he wasn't known for being a bully. His relationship with his roommates had always felt like a friendship of convenience at best.

“You always did have a bad mouth on ya, Loony," Yaxley grunted.

“Better than bad teeth. When was the last time the lot of you visited the dentist?”

That got the boys to scowl at least.

“You should hear the things they say about you Lupins," Barty tried.

“Can’t be all that bad compared to what all the year eleven girls say about you,” Sirius interjected. He was talking to Barty, but he couldn’t take his gaze off his brother. “And what about you?” Sirius asked loudly, forcing Regulus to look at him.

“Got nothing to do with me,” Regulus said arrogantly.

“You’re *here.”*

“So are you.”

“You think this makes you cool?” Sirius snapped.

“You think I care what *you* think is cool?”

“I think you care an awful lot, actually.”

Regulus’ glare could’ve cut glass. “I don't care what you think at all. If I could, I'd put you out on the curb myself. You’re the same as him anyway." His eyes slid to Remus.

Launching himself to his feet, Sirius slammed his hands down on the table, rattling his dishes. “You foul little git! What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It makes sense," Barty said. “Two fucked-up tossers, teaming up. You make the perfect pair—both loathed by your own parents? With naught but a five pence piece to rub between you on your own."

Sirius scoffed mockingly. "If you think you're going to get a rise out of me with crap like that, you've another thing coming, you shitty twat. Now why don't you turn around and run back to Mummy before I have to spank you myself."

"Ooh, that's cheeky. You offer that to all your enemies?"

"Only the ones that I feel are particularly desperate for it."

Barty's smile was feral. It might've been enough for him had he come for Sirius, but he was the wrong target.

"Speaking of Mummy..." Like some evil little doll, Barty's bulging frogs-eyes shifted to Remus. "Lupin, is it true you have trouble sleeping?”

Remus set his jaw. “What’s it to you, *Barty?”*

“Oh nothing, really, it's just—" Barty gave an exaggerated sigh; "I get it, you know. I’m sure it’s mighty hard to fall asleep without Mummy around to tuck you in at night. At least you've got the summer and Christmas. But oh, wait... you don't *have* a mummy, do you, Loony? Hm. Sad.”

While Remus bristled, James shot to his feet next to Sirius. “You shut your dirty trap! That’s got nothing to do with you!”

“Yeah, why don’t you move on to someone who wants to hear you blow rubbish everywhere!” Lily fumed, pointing her pencil at the other boys in a very threatening manner.

“My Loony, the peanut gallery’s awfully loud today, ain’t it? Reckon you could shut them up for a little bit so we could chat?” Barty crooned.

Remus gripped the edge of the table until his knuckled turned while. “I told you Crouch, we’ve got nothing to talk about. It's time you pissed off.”

“Aw, don’t be like that.”

“Barty, I’m gonna give you and your shitty band of cronies one last chance to move on,” Sirius hissed, “after that I’ll—”

“You’ll what—sing us a song?"

"Can we at least pick the tune?” Travers added enthusiastically.

Having had enough, Remus stood from the table and strode straight up to Barty, who balked slightly when he realised just how much height Remus had on him at such a short distance.

“Barty, I know your English marks are shit, but do me a favour, and read my lips. *I'm done with you.* You hear me? You’re pathetic, and you’re done. Now *fuck off.”*

Barty let out a high trill from the back of his throat and smiled again, eyes wide as saucers. “Oh I’m pathetic, am I? Well, at least I’m not so terrible that my mum had to go and kill herself.”

There was a small gasp from behind him—Lily—but Remus was frozen. The words had hit him like a bucket of ice water, and Barty quickly grew giddy off his shock.

“Yeah—Yeah!” He cackled, dancing backward a few feet to hide amongst his friends. “Dad confirmed it for us, ha! Apparently your old man's got as big a reputation as you—did you know that, Loony? A right bastard, they say he is! There's rumour he offed his wife himself! But really, who could blame him? Not when he's got a missus with one foot in the grave, the other in the loony bin, and a kid who's hell-bent on serving at her majesty's pleasure! *Ohhhh,* the stories they tell about you... Tell me, Loony, how'd he get you a place here, huh? How many strings did Dad have to pull? Did he finally offer that old bat McGonagall the shag she'd been missing all her life?"

“You sick fuck!” Sirius shouted, culminating all of his friend's horror with a few words. Unfortunately his anger only served to egg Barty

further on.

"No? A sob story then, maybe? Don't tell me you cried to her. How'd it go? Maybe like—'Please Professor, please let me in to school, I'm sure my dad'll beat me if he catches me on the pipe again! He's afraid I'll end up like me ma, hanging myself in the closet'!" Barty stopped to cackle some more, and nudged Yaxley to the left of him. "Oi, none of you would happen to have a picture of the old bird, would ya? Loony's good for a laugh, but I've always wanted to see *real* crazy in the flesh."

With a scream, Lily ripped herself up from the picnic table and threw herself toward Barty. Only James stopped her—catching her round the middle as she kicked out at them. "Just get away!" She screeched. "How dare you say such vile things!"

"Get the fuck out of here, Crouch!" James hollered over her shoulder.

"Oh c'mon, don't tell me you guys didn't know?" Barty crowed. "I mean surely you all knew! You're 'friends', right? Any *real* friend would want to know that they're living in the same room as mental-made-flesh! Any of you got any juicy details so we can fill out the story a bit more? I heard it was actually the pills that done 'er in, but was it more Hollywood than that? Drowning? Oh! Did she throw herself off the parapets? Now c'mon, don't be shy, we'll be sure to get everything right when we pass the story along!"

"REG, PUT MUZZLE ON YOUR FUCKING FRIEND!" Sirius cried, making Regulus actually jump backward.

"Muzzle yourself!" Regulus hissed, before grabbing Barty by the arm. "Barty, let's just go."

"But I ain't done!" Barty announced. "Lupin's been awful quiet, and I wanna hear him make some noise. Am I not speaking the right language, Loony? Shall I try a bark? *Woof! Woof! Arf!"*

Emboldened by their friend's nerve, Yaxley and Travers began to bark too, crowding in until they were but an arm's length away. Remus couldn't react to the mocking, he could barely even speak—all he felt was the white-hot coils of rage. He sensed his friends at his back, each of them pulled taut as a string as they hurled obscenities back at the nasty boys. Barty only laughed. So did his friends. Regulus wrapped his arms across himself and rolled his eyes. In the beginning, the shock had been enough to make Remus feel and see white, but now as he watched Barty's face contort into bouts of hideous laughter that only left his ears ringing, he saw red.

“Say, Lupin, who is it you take after, mum or dad?”

Stop.

"I’ll bet it’s mum."

Stop it.

"Did you get to see the body after they dragged her out? Did you get to keep the rope?"

STOP IT!

"Did she even love you?" Barty frowned. "Seemed in a real rush to get out. Bet you don't even care."

Remus’ fist came up in a single fluid motion. All it took was a single punch for Crouch to hit the ground.

* * *

By the time Remus came back to himself, he was sitting outside the Headmistress’s office with a bag of ice taped over his hand. His knuckles stung, but it was nothing compared to how he felt inside. Barty’s words had hit like Tonya’s, only where he’d had time to prepare himself for hers, Barty’s were all too unexpected. They’d made him feel as fragile as glass but as cold and numb as stone.

It’d been a while since he’d lost himself like that. Punching Mickey back in January had been an instinct, but this was pure rage. He’d *wanted* to hurt Barty. It was smart of James and Sirius to hold him back. If they hadn't, Barty wouldn't have been able to walk the next day. Remus would've done ten times worse than what had happened to him in that alley last summer. And he would've enjoyed it. Perhaps that was the worst part.

There'd been a lot of shouting, and eventually Lily had gone for a teacher, but the only thing Remus clearly remembered from the heated moment was a pair of grey eyes. Not Sirius', but Regulus'. Remus hadn’t had the time or sense to discern what sort of expression he was making with the rest of his face, but it was certainly shock mixed with something else. Regret or fear, maybe both.

The office door clicked open, and Barty emerged, looking spiteful as

he held a sack of ice to his own jaw. He'd been lucky not to bite his tongue, but Remus could still hear the sound of his teeth snapping together like an echo in his head.

Barty paused outside the door and they glared at one another until Sheila finally appeared behind him, looking tired and unimpressed. "You may go back to your dorm, Mr. Crouch," she said, and Barty turned to stalk down the hall, stubbornly dragging his feet the entire way.

After watching him go, Sheila finally turned on Remus. "Alright, mister, your turn."

Pushing up from the chair, he followed her inside and flopped down in a seat opposite to the Headmistress, who had her hands folded neatly in her lap. Sheila stood behind her, wisps of chestnut hair slipping out of her bun. Just seeing her made everything worse—the ringing in his ears, the trembling in his hands. It was as though an elephant was sitting on his chest.

"I'm not talking," Remus said staunchly.

"Well, that's surely a shame," McGonagall answered, "as we have much to talk about."

"Expel me then, I don't care."

"Remus, don't say that," Sheila sighed, but he just tore his gaze away, refusing to look at her.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "I told you at the beginning of last year, Mr. Lupin, that we take violence very seriously here at Hawkings. You've been doing very well here, all things considered, but I must enforce upon you the seriousness of what you have done. Student on student barbarity is not tolerated in any form, under any circumstances."

"Then expel me."

They were all quiet for a little bit, and the headmistress sighed, but before she could speak again, a loud clattering sounded in the hall. With a spectacular cry, Sirius, James, and Lily burst forth across the officer threshold, each of them out of breath before they'd even begun shouting.

"Professor McGonagall, you can't expel Remus!" Lily yelled.

“It was Barty’s fault!” James said. “He started the fight when he showed up spewing all kinds of bullsh—*all kinds of nonsense!”*

“Minnie, you can’t!” Sirius shouted. “Lupin’s the best we’ve got and if you can’t see that then you’re blind!”

Very calmly, McGonagall held up a hand to silence them; “I understand your compassion and distress, but right now I need to speak with Mr. Lupin.”

Lily threw out her arms. “But professor—!”

“Remus doesn’t deserve this!”

“What Crouch said was—”

“Ah, ah.” McGonagall shook her head. “That’s quite enough, thank you. I will hear all I need to from Remus.”

“Okay,” Sirius heaved, “but what’s gonna happen to him?”

The Headmistress’s smile was kind at least. “Go and be well, Mr. Black. Remus will rejoin you when he is ready.”

All of them deflating in various levels of relief, his friends turned and slowly shuffled reluctantly from the office, trying their best to offer him comforting waves as they went. The last to leave, Sirius grasped the door handle and pulled it closed behind them, but before he slipped out of sight he flashed Remus a wincing smile and a quick thumbs up.

Almost more tired now, Remus sunk further down into his seat and squeezed his face in his hands.

“It’s good to see that someone cares about whether you’re expelled or not. Enough to storm all of Castle Hall it seems,” McGonagall said. She had an amused expression, but even as he peeled his fingers away, Remus only stared at the floor.

“Professor,” Sheila started, biting her lip. “I wonder if you might let Remus and I take a walk together. I think it's best he be allowed to rest a bit more before the three of us chat and you decide on a course of action.”

Eyes squinted in consideration, the Headmistress glanced at him, mouth razor thin. “Yes, I believe that might be a good idea, Mrs.

Buchanan. A bit of fresh air might do us all some good."

Sheila smiled and gathered up her white frock coat, coming around the table and gently prodding Remus in the arm. "C'mon Remus," she said quietly, jutting her head toward the door. "Let's take a tour of the grounds, shall we?"

"I don't want to," he grumbled.

"I don't care."

Remus looked up sharply, but Sheila was still smiling. "Walk with me," she said kindly.

Every cell in his body wanted to scream in protest—*be stubborn, tell the crazy lady to fuck off!*—but that would just mean staying in the office, where they could poke and prod at him until he really lost it. So, Remus grudgingly pushed himself to his feet and followed her out. A part of him wondered if his friends would be waiting, but he saw no sight of them even as he was led out the back doors of Castle Hall and down the pavement toward the school's rose gardens. The flowers were already in full-bloom, casting a beautiful colour across the lush gardens and filling the air with a scent that made Remus' nose itch.

Sheila sighed happily, breathing it all in. "Ah. Much better being outside, don't you think, Remus?"

"I'm still not gonna talk," he answered stubbornly.

"Okay, we'll just walk then."

It irritated him that she was using the same method of de-escalation she'd used on Barty just a few days before—that she'd even consider putting them on the same scale—but as he stomped along, Mrs. Buchanan just walked quietly next to him, hands tucked behind her back. She wasn't a short woman, but he was still taller, and he wondered briefly if that imitated her at all—if she was worried to be alone with him like he knew other teachers at other schools had been.

But then as if to answer his unasked question, she started to whistle a cheery tune and Remus knew for sure that Sheila Buchanan had nerves of steel.

"You know sometimes, Remus, bad things happen to good people," she told him, after a good long while. "Don't misunderstand, good things can also happen to bad people, and okay things to just okay people.

They say life's a circle, but that's not what I've found. Instead I think it's rather more like a spider's web, connected with all these different paths, and we're constantly arriving at new crossroads, wondering which is the best path to take—which will get us out of the web fastest or safest or with the best possible outcome. We're built to believe the concept that one path is always better than another—that if we fail at something, we've failed for good, because there was only one right path and we missed it. We missed our way out. But I know now that that's all utter shit." She smiled up at him. "Sometimes things are just hard, and we must face them however well we can."

Remus looked anywhere but at his teacher. They'd reached the centre of the gardens and were just passing a trio of girls sat on a bench and comparing photographs in an album. Sheila paused her story long enough to say hello and greet each girl by name—she always knew everyone's name—before swinging her hands out from behind her back and returning her gaze to him once more.

"I know some things are hard, Remus, and I'm not going to tell you more crap like 'life isn't fair' or 'some people have been to war', though it might make a funny joke. Instead, would you like to tell me what was hard about today?"

No.

"Not really."

"How about yesterday then?"

He almost refused her again, but then remembered he'd managed to rip a hole in his trousers during second period. The story came tumbling out before he could stop it, and Sheila began laughing before he was even finished, holding her stomach and pushing the hair from her eyes. "That is unfortunate. I do hope that your trousers can be mended."

"I don't think so, Mary already declared them a lost cause. Which is sorta funny, considering I don't think Mary knows how to sew."

Sheila lit up again. "Mary Macdonald, right? Ah, you're right, she's a funny girl. Are you two close?"

"Sort of… We're friends."

"Well, it makes me happy to hear that."

Remus dug his nails into his palms. They were alone in this half of the garden at least. “My mum was sick but she didn’t kill herself,” he confessed all at once, feeling the words leave his body like a single breath.

Sheila gave a breadth's pause. “I know. I know what happened to Hope."

As if urged on further by her words, Remus stopped dead in the middle of the path and put his head in hands. “She didn’t kill herself,” he ground out again.

“I know.”

“She didn’t!”

“I understand.”

He moaned through his teeth, before sucking in a shaky lungful of air. Sheila approached him from the side, like one might an injured animal, and placed a hand gently on his arm.

“Remus, I have something for you. I’m a bit worried it might make things harder, but if it at all helps, then I think you should have it.”

It took a moment, but finally he pulled his hands away and sniffed. “What is it?”

“It’s... Well, it's your mother.” Slowly, Sheila reached into her jacket pocket and withdrew a small book—a pocket bible. From within its pages, she pulled out a single photograph, black and white and faded in some places, but still clear enough.

“It took me a while to find this. It is over twenty years old now, which makes me feel terribly old,” Sheila said, chuckling faintly as she carefully handed it over, “but I managed to uncover it during my last trip home to visit Colin, and I thought you might like to see it.”

Remus turned the photograph around and stared down at three people no older than he was now. It was Sheila, young and wearing her school uniform, along with Hope in hers, and another boy. They were all smiling, arms tucked around each other as they crowded into the lens. Along the bottom of the photo was a date, *April 23rd 1954*.

“Mum’s birthday,” he murmured.

“That’s right," she said. "We were around seventeen here, I believe. That’s your mum, and me, and our friend Thaddeus. Thaddeus Dean. We all grew up together—here at Hawkings. Thaddeus loathed his full name though, so everyone called him Tad. We really had so much fun at school.”

Remus’ hold tightened on the photograph. *Tad.*

“I’ll understand if this is too much,” she said, watching him cautiously, “but there’s one more.”

Prying his eyes away, he looked down to find her holding a second photograph, this one of a baby in colour. Taking it, he stared at the infant’s big blue eyes, before slowly turning it over. On the back was printed, *Remus John Lupin, born March 10, 1960. 2.9 kgs.*

“I…” Remus immediately looked up, fixing his gaze on a rose bush across from him. “You… have my baby photo…”

“I do,” she said softly. “Your mum and I were still very close when you were born. I'd just moved to London with Colin, and when she brought you to see me, it was wonderful. You were so were frightfully small then—a far cry from now—but I was so pleased to see that you’d been born healthy.”

Unsure of what to do, Remus passed the photo back, and Sheila took it, looking at him before tucking it back into her bible. “I’m sorry if this was strange or… or odd, Remus. I just wanted you to know that I understand, as much as I can. I miss your mother very much. She was very dear to me, and it’s alright to be upset sometimes, but you have a responsibility as a student here, and I know you know what that means. Your friends treasure you, and there’s nothing more valuable than that.”

He grunted—there weren't the words—but Sheila didn't seem to mind. She just clutched his baby photo in a tight grip, before wiping her eyes and smiling at him once more.

What mistakes have you made then? Remus thought. Eyes still downcast, he made to pass the first photo back, but Sheila pressed it back toward him.

“You can keep that one, if you’d like.”

It was her kind way of telling him to take it, and because he didn’t have it in him to argue anymore, he tucked the photo into his breast

pocket, feeling it's featherweight like a bolder against his chest. It struck him then how much easier things might've been if he'd been born Sheila's son rather than Hope's. But then a feeling of instant self-loathing overcame him.

What a horrible son, the nasty voice sneered. *How could you even think that about your own mother?*

Remus suddenly felt sick, but Sheila was still watching him, her expression strangely concentrated—he had to say something.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Remus smoothed his hand over the pocket with the photo. "Thank you, Mrs. Buchanan," he mumbled, "for… being my teacher."

Sheila's smile softened. For a moment another emotion flitted across her face. It felt like longing.

"You're welcome, Remus."

* * *

When he finally returned to the dorm, his friends were waiting for him. James and Lily were both busy pacing ahead the length of the room while Sirius laid upside down on James' bed, tossing a hand ball up and down thoughtlessly. In reality Remus really only got a split-second image of the scene before he'd stepped inside and all three of them had rushed him.

"What they gonna do to you?" Sirius demanded.

"They're not gonna expel you, right?" James pleaded.

"It wouldn't be fair!" Lily added, though Remus was pretty sure she'd never once been under the impression that life was fair in the first place.

He shut the door and shook his head. "McGonagall says she's withholding judgement. And punishment."

"What the bloody hell does that mean?" Sirius demanded. "You shouldn't even be getting a bleedin' punishment in the first place—didn't you tell them what Barty said?!"

He shrugged. “I dunno what she's gonna decide, but they sent me back so…”

“So you’re not expelled!” Lily cried, before letting out a heavy sigh of relief and throwing her arms around his neck. “Oh, Remus, I’m so sorry! Barty had no right to say what he did!”

“I know. It's fine.” He pat her gently on the back—a sign that he wasn't interested in being fret over anymore—before pulling away. Lily withdrew shyly, and James stepped up to cup her shoulders as Remus stepped past all of them and strode to his bed.

“How are you feeling then?” James asked.

“I told you, I'm fine.”

James glanced sceptically at Sirius, who instantly began to seethe; “That git, Crouch. He knew exactly what he was doing coming at you! We can’t let him get away with it. We have to get the bastard back.”

“Sirius, Remus just got let off the hook—he could’ve been expelled!" Lily said. "Let's not push it, okay?”

“We didn’t do anything when the git and everyone else was coming after *you* for your scholarship,” Sirius pointed out, “so where’s the line then? When is enough, *enough?”*

Remus sat down on his bed and rubbed his eyes. Hearing Sirius come to his defence might've felt nice any other time, but right then he was too tired to think of revenge. The photo Sheila had given him was boring a hole in his pocket and all he wanted to do was sleep.

“Barty just wanted to start something, you said it yourself earlier,” James reasoned. “He knew he could hurt Remus by saying it like that so he did, but he’s just a stupid kid.”

“And we’re not about to listen to someone as pathetic as Barty anyway. Besides, Remus’ mum passed when he was little, you'd have to be ten-feet thick in the head to even consider that he could’ve had anything to do with it,” Lily finished.

Sirius gave a low moan; “Why aren’t we asking Moony what *he* wants to do? He should be the one who decides! Barty used his mum’s suicide as canon fodder! He can’t just get away with—”

Suddenly on high-alert, Remus tore his hands away from his face. *“My*

mum didn't commit suicide!"

All three of them froze, opening up the circle they'd gathered in to gape at him. Sirius, who'd been cut-off in his rant, looked the most horrified. He stared at Remus as though he'd just told them that he was a bloody wizard and could cast magic spells.

"Oh, Remus…" Lily tried; "We didn't…"

He shot to his feet; "She died of pneumonia for Christ's sake—*of fucking cancer!* What, don't tell me you all actually believed some stupid rumour that's been going around?"

The stunned looks on his friends' faces were enough to tell Remus that yes—yes they did believe it.

"How long have you guys thought this?" He demanded.

None of them answered.

"How long?"

"You never talk about it," Sirius said. "We… We just assumed that..."

"That she fucking killed herself?!"

The dots were starting to connect; the way they gingerly stepped around all mention of his mother, how they never asked about the records or about the estate—even Marlene's mum on Easter.

It's so hard when a family member just refuses to get better.

They'd all thought it then—believed some rumour and talked about it amongst themselves too. Remus suddenly found it hard to breathe, and when Lily stepped toward him with those big green eyes of hers, he staggered back so quickly that he knocked almost everything off his bedside table. The lamp clattered to the floor by his feet and he stared at it. The bulb had cracked.

"Remus."

When he looked back, he found Sirius just in front of him.

"We're sorry."

"You're sorry?" He echoed. "You're fucking sorry?"

“Yes, we’re sorry. *I’m* sorry.”

"FUCK YOUR SORRY!" He howled. "You never even bothered to ask me what had happened! And don’t you dare say ‘would you have wanted to’—*anything* is better than this!”

Sirius licked his lips. “I understand how you feel. Can you really blame us for not asking, though? You just... You never talk about this stuff, Moons.”

He wasn’t sure if this was Sirius’ way of inviting him to fight—to get it over with—but he took the chance anyway. “Well, what about you?” He snarled. “You never talk about anything unless you can make a joke out of it. So what’s your trauma then, your mum? Those burns on your chest? You said it was boiling water—what, misjudge your bath temperature, genius boy?!”

He didn’t mean to be so vicious. His words made even Lily flinch, but Sirius took the anger in stride.

“I guess you could say it was both, actually. It started with a kettle. Mum and I got into it in the kitchen one day—something about Reg. All I remember is she hit him and he was crying, so I got between ‘em. She didn't like that, you see, so she went and grabbed the kettle right off the hob. I guess it burnt her so she went to throw it, but Reg was... He was right there. It was a mistake, but the consequences stuck around, obviously.”

Sirius spoke so pragmatically, so unembellished and detached, that Remus could’ve believed it was a story he’d read off-hand in a paper.

“I was eleven,” he finished finally. “Same age as you when your mum died. But I mean hey, could’ve been worse, right? At least my scars missed my face.”

“F-Fuck you,” Remus hissed. It didn’t make him feel any better. Smiling sadly, Sirius held his gaze, brave and stoic and beautiful.

“I’m sorry, Moony."

No, they're not.

Lily stepped forward. There were tears in her eyes. "We're sorry, Remus."

They just pity you. Those are tears of pity.

"We really are sorry, Moony," James finished. "We didn't mean it. Please believe us."

Gritting his teeth, Remus squeezed until he could feel the pain in every inch of his jaw. Then finally, he slumped forward, hanging his head in acceptance.

None of them spoke for a long time, but when Remus covered his face again to hide any tears that might have squeezed their way out, Sirius stepped forward and enveloped him in a strong hug.

“We’re sorry, Moony,” he said.

“We love you, Remus,” Lily sniffled, grappling for the both of them with fingers that were tender and solid. James was next, and though his hands were rougher, they weren’t any less gentle.

"We wouldn't trade you for the world, Moons. You're our best mate. We love ya, man."

And because he loved them too, Remus hugged his friends.

Chapter End Notes

Being 'jumped in' refers to the beatings that youth gangs sometimes give to make sure an initiate is tough enough to join a gang.
'Serving at her majesty's pleasure' is an idiom for serving a prison sentence.

Also, yes, I firmly believe that Hope Lupin was a Taurus.

Next update: December 18/19 (depending on timezone and how tired I am, lol.)

Chapter 62: Loyalty

Chapter Summary

> The Marauders plan pranks. Barty loses his teddy bear. Remus worries for Sirius.

Chapter Notes

> I think I might've fucked up and posted this too early, but I'm not sure because I panicked and immediately deleted it, lol. This version is a RE-POST. Sorry if you got two notifs.
>
> CW: Smoking, references to abuse. Take care of yourselves first <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And these children that you spit on,
As they try to change their worlds;
Their immune to your consultations,
They're quite aware of what they're going through;
Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes!

- "Changes" David Bowie, 1971

Sunday 29th May 1977

Remus could tell his friends felt guilty after the incident with Barty. Even after he'd forgiven them, they still insisted on catering to him as though he were some wilted daisy. It was frustrating, but Remus didn't dare snap at them again. Not after what Sirius had said about his scars... And in the days that followed, Barty and the other boys stayed clear, which quickly became the sliver-lining of the whole thing. That, and the undeniable wake-up call that it'd given him. With everything finally out in the open, Remus was forced to reevaluate the way he'd been treating his mother when it came to his other relationships. He realised that not only had she become a skeleton in his closet, but a roadblock when it came to trusting his friends. They believed the rumour because he'd given them absolutely no reason not to, and it left him feeling ill. These were the people he trusted the most, and if he couldn't be honest with them, then who could he be honest with?

Marlene threw a legendary fit when she found out the truth, spending several hours begging Remus to forgive her for all the things she'd thought and—even worse—told her family. He forgave her on the first apology, but she cried until her voice turned hoarse anyway. In the end he was able to distract her with talk of her most recent read, some science fiction novel she'd devoured in less than a day. He was getting good at distractions these days, it seemed.

The boys, on the other hand, opted for a more stoic approach. Remus knew without asking that they wouldn't just accept his forgiveness and move on. Something needed to be proven—their loyalty, their support, their hatred for any and all things Barty. He let them only because it meant pranks—less time spent 'coddling Moony' and more time hiding out in their dorm room, pitching ideas back and forth while music played in the background. Remus had to admit, the plans they laid were some of their best yet; a whole week of exams interlaced with merciless pranks on not just Barty, but his roommates as well, who Sirius had generously declared guilty by association. It might've just been his way of punishing Regulus, who it turned out he'd had a nasty row with over Easter, but the pranks were harmless enough, so no one said anything.

No one except Lily of course.

"You guys are insane," she huffed, after arriving at their dorm to collect the maths notes she'd leant Peter.

"Not insane—*sensible,"* Sirius told her, while draped out over James' bed like a cat. "These things have to be nipped in the arse quickly. Can't let Barty think he got away with messing with Moony with only a small bruise to show for it, can we?"

"There is no way you have this much time to mess around while studying. You're going to fail everything at this rate."

"Au contraire, Evans, it's only lower sixth. Which means just a few AS-levels lay between us and sweet, sweet payback."

Lily pointed at him viciously. "AS-levels are important! Some of these tests help decide what uni's you can apply for next year! They're meant to set up your entire future!"

"Only if you dream of intellectual labour—which I do not."

"Well, what about you?" She demanded of James. "You've only just gotten back on the football team, I thought you were spending every

waking moment whipping those guys into shape?"

"I am," James said, from his place next to Sirius, the same cheeky look on his face, "we planned this stuff instead of sleeping."

"And you?! I thought you didn't want to retaliate." Lily whirled on Remus, who had his back leaned up against the side of Sirius' bed.

"I never said that..." he said, suddenly finding the stack of albums sitting to his left very interesting; "And besides... they're good pranks."

"... Ugh. Peter, at least tell me that you're taking this seriously?"

Peter held up his hands in surrender; "I'm just worried about my maths."

Shaking her head with a final moan of exasperation, Lily opened her bag and shoved her notebook inside. "Fine, do what you want, but I don't want to hear about any of it—from any of you!"

"Rest assured," Sirius promised; "it won't be us you'll be hearing it from."

She scowled lightly; "Alright, to hell with all of you then. I'm late for a prefect meeting anyway."

"See you at dinner?" James called, and Lily tossed him an irritated wave and shut the door behind herself.

"Ah, I don't blame her for being mad, I'd lash someone too if I was taking like, six A-levels in my twelfth year," Sirius said, snatching a piece of notepaper from the stack of school books at the foot of James' bed, and rolling onto his back. Crumpling the paper up, he began tossing the ball up and down methodically.

"She's only taking three," James amended proudly. "And she's working hard! She wants to get into Oxford."

Sirius whistled. "Shooting high, our little swot is. Couldn't be me. How 'bout you, Moons?"

Remus shook his head. Lyall probably would've bent himself in half just to get Remus' name on the applicants list, but fuck him if he thought he was ever going to be some 'scholar'.

"Wait..." Peter said, sitting up on his bed; "Does that mean you guys aren't thinking of university at all?"

"No," Remus said, at the same moment that Sirius snorted; "Of course not."

They shared a glance, and Sirius gave a wink that left Remus slightly weak in the knees. To distract himself, he cleared his throat and turned to Peter. "What about you, Pete? Does this mean you have plans?"

Peter shrugged and looked down at his hands. “Not really. Probably just end up doing business stuff like Dad.”

Catching his paper ball out of the air, Sirius gave a dramatic groan; “Dear fucking lord, I don’t know who’s worse—you or Potter. It’s always, dad’s this, dad’s that. Law or business, business or law—it’s all the same boring crap, and somehow we're still not getting the big picture here!"

"Which is what?" Asked Remus.

"Duh—our band!"

"We can be in a band *and* be educated, can't we?" James chuckled.

"Sure, but all of the *best* artists were drop-outs. Like Hendrix and Springsteen."

"So you're not even going to consider it?"

"Nope."

"But what about..." Remus licked his lips. "Going for something like... music?"

"There's an idea," James agreed; "You could find some conservatory—probably go for classical guitar if you really wanted. Or music theory—then you'd be just like all those composers you're always name-droppin'."

"No thanks. Don't care much for being the next Schumann." Sirius kept tossing the paper ball; *up and down, up and down.* "Besides, already been there, done that."

“What are you on about now?” Peter asked.

“Royal Academy of Music,” Sirius answered, sounding almost bored. “I auditioned for a spot in their piano department at the end of our tenth year. Turned it down.”

Reaching over, James snatched Sirius' paper ball straight out of the air. “You never told us that!”

“Yeah, well, I said no so what's it matter?”

“You mean, your mum didn’t try and make you go?” Peter demanded, finally scuttling off of his bed and coming to sit next to Remus.

“She tried a'course, but she couldn’t *make* me. I threw the audition. Ruined it before she had the chance.”

“Wow." Remus squinted up at him. "You mean you didn’t want to go at all?”

“Nope. In fact, not going was one of the few sweet victories of my life. Those poor sods are like robots. They live and breathe for music until they don't even like it anymore. Couldn't imagine a worse way to be.” Already withdrawing, Sirius turned over onto his stomach on the bed and began picking at the dark blue polish on his fingernails.

Not just any school, Remus thought while watching him; *but the Royal Academy of Music... They wanted Sirius, and he turned them down. Wow.*

Sometimes it was easy to forget that Sirius was a piano prodigy. Occasionally Remus would try to envision what it might look like to watch Sirius' elegant fingers drift up and down the keys. To listen to their sound and know that it wasn't pouring out of just any soul, but Sirius'—that it once had! Blimey, it must've been amazing, but all he could do was wonder, since Sirius refused to play.

Not that he blamed him.

Near the end of their first year together, Sirius had confessed that his mother had been his piano teacher. While people called him a prodigy outwardly, Sirius had dealt with hours of excruciating practice, playing until his joints locked together and his fingertips bled from the quick. He'd had nails split down the middle on him or else fall off completely, and still Walburga forced him to play. Sirius only confessed these things when he knew he could get away with framing them as a joke. Sometimes it would take Remus days to come to the realisation of what had actually been said, and then he was left with the guilt of it because he hadn't known how to probably comfort him. Maybe it would be different if Sirius had just said things like "she used to make me slam my own fingers in the fallboard when I played out of time", but instead it was always, *Mum used to think it was hilarious to shut my fingers in the key cover whenever I cocked things up. It's how I*

learned to keep time. Who needs a metronome when ya got punishment and reform?

Remus had never met Walburga Black, but he hated her. Viscerally. She'd left Sirius with scars inside and out, and still expected a thank you for granting him such talent. It was vile, and Remus doubted that anybody—not even James—would ever truly know the full extent of what went on inside the walls of the Black home. He couldn't even imagine being there—feeling so terrible all of the time, while simultaneously being forced to play such beautiful music. It was the sort of thing that rewired your brain; what should be beautiful, became a nightmare. If it were Remus, he probably would've never touched an instrument again; but Sirius was stronger. He never let his mother ruin the one thing he truly loved in this world.

"What's everyone gone so quiet for?" Sirius said eventually, eyeing the rest of them. "Thought you'd be happier. If I'd have gone to that poncy place, you would've had to deal with two new roommates. And you don't just get lucky with a Moony twice."

Yes, Remus thought, *I'm happy you turned it down.*

What was life without a Sirius Black? He wasn't even sure anymore.

"You're right," James said, "I, for one, am happy you chose to stay, Padfoot. If you'd have gone, I'd have a long life as lawyer to look forward to, just like me dad. All of it—the big house, the happy family, the nice cars. And now look at me—with only a life as a musical degenerate in the cards. Not everyone can say that."

"No they cannot," Sirius grinned.

"What a thing to look forward to," Peter ragged shaking his head. It made Sirius laugh, until he glanced back and began eyeing Remus up again. "What about you, Moons? You've been awful quiet about your own plans—thinking about getting yerself a degree in music then?"

"Nah," Remus said with a small smile, "what do I need that for? I'm already in a band."

"Oh really?"

"Mhm, yeah. S'just a little thing right now, so you might not have heard of us, but I expect that eventually I'll be too busy playing to thousands for normal, boring things like going to college."

Sirius' smile doubled, and he extended a fist for Remus to bump. "Let's make it hundreds of thousands."

"Alright."

Peter surged forward, clapping his hands over their fists. "Hey, I'm in this band too, aren't I? I don't actually want to do business, you know."

"Right you are, Wormtail." Sirius raised an eyebrow at James. "And you?"

James chuckled. "Fine, but if our first record's only got your face on the cover, I'll riot."

"Perish the thought of hiding your handsome gob from the rest of the world," Sirius said, pinching James on the cheek. James accepted, only because it meant Sirius was close enough for him to grab his cheeks in retaliation and stretch them out like playdough.

"AUGH—" Sirius clapped his hands to his cheeks before batting him off; "Okay," he laughed, "tomorrow might kick off exams for everyone else, but I solemnly swear that by the end of this week, everyone's going to think twice before messing with a Marauder."

* * *

Careful to save some time for studying so as not to incur the wrath of a certain Oxford-bound ginger-girl, they spread the pranks out on several days. On Monday, while Remus and Peter were sitting in on their first exam, James and Sirius managed to convince some seventh year Salazar kid to get a hold of Barty's shower bag for them. With it hand, they committed what might've been Sirius' worst nightmare—putting hair removal cream into Barty's shampoo. Remus wasn't even sure where they'd gotten the stuff on such short notice, but unfortunately it didn't matter much. The next morning when Barty appeared in the dining room for breakfast he was still sporting a full head of hair, and they had no choice but to declare the prank a failure.

"Maybe the git just never showers," Peter offered; "you know, like Snape."

James and Sirius began to grumble, already plotting their rebound

revenge when Barty pulled his jumper over his head and tufts hair shot off him like a dandelion. It took several seconds for anyone to notice, but eventually a clump of chemically-fried hair ended up in Yaxley's cereal, and the boys finally picked up on something being very not-right. A few confused and panicked moments later, Barty had nearly fainted in the middle of the hall and the Marauders got their first taste of sweet revenge as his friends helped him hobble to the nurse, hair breaking off in big clumps as he frantically ran his fingers through it.

On Wednesday, while the year eleven boys were in gym, Remus, James, and Peter snuck into the change rooms and picked the locks on Yaxley and Traver's lockers. Inspired by the girls' prank on Sirius' birthday, they took everything but their shoes and left behind bed sheets they'd painted to read "Godric Pride". Watching the two boys scuttle back to their dorms in red togas was certainly the highlight of their day.

Thursday they all found themselves busy with exams, but unlike the term before when all he'd had was Sirius-on-the-brain, Remus finished his day feeling rather victorious. So far he felt good about all of his exams, but whenever he asked Sirius how he thought he did, Sirius would give only sly or vague answers. It was enough for now, but Remus was just itching to get his fingers on their final marks.

"So what we doing tomorrow?" James asked, shouldering his bag as they all made their way back to their dorm from the Great Hall. "We could plant some weed in their room and tip off their dorm monitor?"

"I was thinking something else actually," Sirius said. "Something more... sweet. After all, tomorrow's Reg's birthday."

"Really?" Remus asked.

"Yeah. So maybe the little sod deserves a treat. Prongs, that tin of sweets from your mum still under your bed?"

"Should be. I haven't touched it."

They all looked to Peter, who pulled a face.

"Oh, fuck you guys. I didn't touch it either, James can keep his lava chocolate."

"Good," Sirius smirked. "Hope the boys are feeling hungry."

Waking up early the next morning, they got themselves sorted and left the tin on Regulus' regular table, lying in wait across the room as the four Salazar boys filed into the hall. While his roommates opened the tin, Regulus paused to pick up the card they'd planted, reading it over before scanning the room with a suspicious look. Immediately they all turned away, innocently picking at their breakfast.

"What'd you end up writing on the card?" James asked quietly, nudging Sirius with his elbow.

" 'To Regulus, my jewel-eyed prince. Happy Birthday, love from your secret admirer. Kisses. Hugs. Have my babies'—you name it."

"Cruel bastard."

"Look, they're eating them!" Peter said, and Remus turned around on his bench to watch as Barty—now sporting a severely short number 2 buzz-cut—Yaxley, and Travers began stuffing their faces. Regulus remained more sceptical, and got up from the table without so much as a taste, leaving them be.

"That little git, is he really not gonna eat it?" Sirius hissed.

"Maybe he hates chocolate?" Peter suggested.

"Nobody hates chocolate," Remus scoffed.

"Looks like he's getting himself a cuppa," James said. He was right too, and by the time Regulus returned to his table with his tea the other three boys were red in the face and rasping for breath. Half-screaming, Barty flew from his chair and downed a neighbouring girl's glass of milk, but it wasn't enough apparently, and he scrambled to find another while Yaxley and Travers made a beeline for the drink table, disrupting the line up of students and throwing themselves under the beverage dispensers to guzzle directly from the spigots. A horrified lunch lady came out from behind her counter to scream at them, but Regulus remained unperturbed, sitting quietly at his table and flipping through a textbook.

"That's it!" Sirius snarled, standing up and marching across the room. Exchanging worried looks, James, Peter, and Remus quickly followed, stopping next to Sirius while Regulus casually sipped his tea.

"Come to wish me a happy birthday, 'secret admirer'?" Regulus asked calmly.

“You knew it was us,” Sirius said.

“Of course I knew it was you. You’ve been pranking them all week.”

“And today was supposed to be *your* turn."

Regulus' mouth curved upwards haughtily. “Too bad your thinly-veiled gag was about as clever as a monkey holding a dull hammer.”

Sirius fumed; “You cheeky little git! You didn’t even tell your mates it was us, you just let them stuff their faces without saying a thing!”

“They’re the ones who fell for it,” Regulus shrugged; “Let them figure it out.”

“I think they did,” Peter mumbled, watching as Yaxley and Travers scraped their tongues with napkins on the other side of the hall, moaning and crying while other kids laughed.

Furiously, Sirius slammed his hands down on the table; “Don’t you have any sense of loyalty—*any at all?”*

"As if you know anything about loyalty."

"More than you. What kind of bastard lets his friends take a fall for him and isn't even sorry for it?"

Unmoved, Regulus just flipped a page in his text. “If you’re done, I have an exam to study for. Not that you would know what that's like either.”

Like a steaming bull, Sirius scoffed, but did not lash out. Instead he turned away and stormed back to their table, cursing his brother under his breath. Peter followed, but James stayed a moment longer, smiling genuinely.

“If it’s any consolation, happy birthday, Reg.”

Glaring, but admittedly more pink-cheeked than before, Regulus said to them, “It’s not.”

James waved awkwardly. “Er—cool… See you... around then…”

“That was really lame,” Remus whispered as they crossed back the way they'd come.

“Shut up.”

“Change of plans,” Sirius announced as they sat, “plant the weed. Throw a stink bomb into his gym bag. Leave a jar of bees in their bathroom. We can switch their water bottles out for pickle juice, and cut the hot water line and steal their towels and—" Sirius suddenly lit up. "Yeah that's it, let’s just steal everything!”

“And do what with it?” Peter demanded, looking quite uneasy at the daunting list.

Sirius smirked. “I hear the Dubh’s pretty nice this time of year. Reg’s always hated anything to do with water. He’d probably avoid bathing if he weren't such a priss. Maybe we should help him out—give him a reason to go for a little dip.”

Remus wasn’t really a fan of Lake Dubh either, but stealing stuff from their room seemed a lot more preferable than the charge of manslaughter that Sirius was bridging on. The prank also proved to involve very little water acrobatics on his part, with the hardest bit being breaking into their dorm and sneaking everything out without getting caught. They waited until later that evening while everyone was off eating dinner, and then strode right in the front doors.

"Shouldn't we trying to be more inconspicuous?" Peter winced, after they'd passed several boys on the stairway.

"Nah," Sirius said, "I want them to know it was us."

No one seemed too inclined to argue.

They followed each other up to the third floor, where Remus got to work on the lock with the others practically breathing down his neck. When the door finally gave way, they all slipped inside and found themselves in an incredibly average dorm room. A stray sock here, an empty tea mug there, three messy beds and one neat.

“I’ll give you one guess which bed belongs to my control-freak brother,” Sirius blagged, purposely snatching up Regulus' pillow and throwing it across the room.

"Okay, but I gotta be honest, I was sorta expecting something more... horrible?" James said. "Like, I dunno, maybe a few dead cats or a dartboard with our faces pinned to it."

"No, that'd be far too clever," Remus answered.

They got to work next, moving about the room and gathering up

whatever they could find that would inconvenience the boys the most; a left shoe, the bathroom light bulb, the window curtains, every third issue in Yaxley's comic book collection. Eventually Remus uncovered a nasty-looking switchblade from Traver's side table, and James also lifted the small jar of poorly-rolled spliffs he'd discovered in the back of the bathroom cupboard, but the real treasure was actually the worn teddy bear Peter had found hidden in between the wall and headboard of Barty Crouch's bed.

"What do you reckon his name is?" Peter asked, dangling the bear by one arm. "Mr. Cuddles? Sgt. Squishy?"

"No way, it's definitely something distinguished like 'Mr. Weatherby' or 'Sir Rutherford'," James snickered.

"Eh, my money's on 'Teddy'," Remus finished, taking the bear and shoving it into one of the pillow cases they were using as bags.

"What's your bet, Padfoot? You're the best with names, after all," James called, turning around just in time to see Sirius ducking his head under Regulus' bed. "Ooh, I wouldn't try that if I were you, mate. I only found dirty magazines under Yaxley's and half the pages were stuck together."

"Maybe he was just playing target practice," Remus offered snidely.

"Nasty," Peter laughed, but Sirius remained quiet, until finally he withdrew, bringing with him a small black case, which he flipped open to reveal Regulus' prized violin.

"Yes! Found it!"

"I'm not sure leaving an instrument like that to float in the middle of the lake is such a good idea," James winced, but Sirius just got to his feet, grinning victoriously.

"That little git values nothing more than this bloody squeak-box. If you want to get a reaction out of him, this is the way to do it. The dickheads should be grateful we're not flooding their room like they did ours."

James reached up to rub the back of his neck. "Whatever you say."

"Hurry up then, we've stayed long enough as it is," Remus said, grabbing a full pillow case and heading toward the door.

It took some time and even more whining and whinging, but together they managed to lug everything down to the lake side, where they tossed it into the nearest canoe and pushed the entire thing out into the middle of the Dubh. It floated nicely, barely even weighed down by the stolen goods, but despite being successful, none of them were jumping for joy.

“Feels a bit anticlimactic,” James observed.

“Well 'course, they're not here yet,” Sirius said proudly, crossing his arms over his chest. "But don't worry, I left a map."

“A map?”

“Yeah, got the idea from Moony, actually.” Sirius glanced in Remus’ direction. “After his map of hiding spots.”

“Copycat,” Remus said, digging the toes of his boots into the rocky shore.

"Anyone for a celebratory spliff? It's on Barty," James said, holding up the jar of joints from the bathroom.

They all appeared eager to partake, but when it began clear that James wasn't going to be able to get the lid off of the jar, Remus took it and threw it against the rocks, instantly satisfied when it shattered to pieces.

"That's our delinquent," James cheesed, as he and Peter went to work picking the crappy rolls out of the glass and rocks. Picking out one of his own, Remus checked it over for any shards before setting it to his lips and lighting it. He'd just gotten his first decent drag when he turned around to find Sirius a few feet away, staring out over the lake at the canoe, which was drifting quietly along on its own.

Careful not to slip on the shifting stones, Remus strode up to his side and took another short puff before offering it. "Wanna try?"

"Cheers," Sirius said, taking the spliff with two fingers and examining it. "Wow, this is shit. Doesn't even have a filter. Maybe you offer to teach Barty how to roll a decent joint, Moons."

"Maybe he'd hate me less then," Remus chuckled, before glancing at the canoe, now at least a hundred yards away. "You satisfied now?"

With the joint between his lips, Sirius breathed in deeply and exhaled

smoke through his nose. "I will be. Once I know we've really gotten them. What about you? You're the one they came after."

"It's whatever," Remus dismissed, squinting over his shoulder at James and Peter to avoid meeting Sirius' eyes. "I was angry, but Barty's just an idiot. What's he really gonna do to me in the grand scheme of things."

"You let them off too easy," Sirius sighed. "Sometimes a little revenge is needed."

"Maybe... but don't that mean that Barty wins again? If all I do is worry about getting him back, when will have time to make myself feel better?"

"Getting him back is *how* you make yourself feel better," Sirius said, gesturing at the canoe with the joint.

"You don't really believe that," Remus said.

Sirius shrugged. "Sure I do." He took another drag and went to pass the joint back, but Remus got caught staring at his fingers. How was it that everything somebody did became beautiful when you realised what they meant to you?

"Moony?" Sirius waved the joint. "Want some more?"

"No," Remus said. "Don't want to green out before we see the end of this prank of yours." *And I'd rather not touch you right now.*

"Suit yourself." Sirius raised the weed to his mouth again.

"GUYS!" James called suddenly. Both Sirius and Remus turned just in time to spot Regulus, Barty, Yaxley, and Travers crest the top of the shore. All of them were breathing heavily, no doubt from running all the way from their dorm, but they all managed to appear livid as well. Regulus was at the helm, looking more alarmed than Remus had ever seen him.

Instantly giddy, Sirius flicked the joint away and clapped his hands together. “Hey lads! You found our note then?”

“You!” Yaxley shouted. “Our—*our stuff!”*

“I knew something was up when you were all mysteriously missing from dinner!” Barty snarled.

Peter began a clap, smug and slow, and James gave a snide whistle while Sirius only laughed; “I’m impressed boys, you’re a lot quicker on the uptake than we would'a thought.”

“What did you do with it?” Regulus barked, a vision of rage.

“Oh, you mean—” Mockingly, Sirius played a quick air-violin *'wah-wah'* before clicking his tongue and pointing behind him at the lake. "Happy birthday, bro."

Realisation dawned on Regulus’ face, and he turned sheet-white and began skidding down the rocks to the very edge of the shore. With his shoes just barely grazing the water, he stared out over the Dubh as though his entire life was crumbling before him.

“You actually put our stuff in the lake?!” Travers bellowed.

“It’s safe in a canoe,” Peter promised; “You just gotta go get it.”

“Yeah, go on, Reg, it’s just a little swim,” Sirius said smugly.

"YOU BASTARDS!" Barty howled. "We'll get you for this! You better start sleeping with one eye open, all of you!"

"Big words from someone who looks like a chewed toothbrush," Sirius keened. "If you're so desperate for a proper row though, you could always try going a round or two with Lupin! Though, I'm not sure how eager I'd be if I had a bruise like that."

Barty hesitated, before wiping his hand across the dark bruise that had flowered along the top of his cheek. Perhaps the smartest decision he'd ever made, he did not take a running charge at Remus. Instead he surprised them all by showing actual control as he called out to his friend; "C'mon, Reg. We'll get it later."

Still utterly quiet, Barty's call was enough to prompt Regulus to turn back around and face his brother. His hands squeezed were at his sides, fingers tapping together as though he were timing something or counting down.

"What?" Sirius drawled at him. "You wanna fight then? Alright, I'll entertain it. Go ahead, have a go. Come at me!"

But Regulus did not fight. Instead he remained stoic, glaring with such venom that Remus could've believed that he might've had a real chance of winning said fight, should he actually attempt to rush one of

them. Remus could tell it was making Sirius antsy; he wanted a reaction, something that told him without a doubt that he'd won.

"Got nothing to say then?" He demanded. "Mummy's favourite boy lost his favourite toy and he just stands there—really?"

The goading did nothing. Regulus gave him nothing.

"Man, what a disappointment this is," Sirius scoffed. "You must have no feelings at all. Like an empty doll."

"Shut up!" Barty hissed.

"Oh! Look at that, your mate's defending you, Reg! Too bad you wouldn't do the same for him!"

Regulus gave the barest breath of a scoff, before finally turning away and marching off, back up the embankment. He did not stop and wait for his friends, but kept going back the way he'd come, leaving his roommates to stare after him.

"Where you going?" Sirius cried. "Violin's this way!"

"Sirius," James said, coming in close. "C'mon, man, it's done."

"Bloody coward," Sirius swore, ignoring him as he threw a dismissive hand at Barty and the rest. "Well? You gonna just stand there or you gonna follow him? Bloody sheep!"

“Fuck you!” Barty snarled, flashing them a double-bird as the other three boys turned and following Regulus off.

"Mission accomplished?" Peter said slowly, obviously relieved when James turned and high-fived him.

"Yeah, we did it," he said, smiling and nudging Sirius pointedly. "Don't gimmie that face Black, the prank was successful."

Sirius did not reciprocate the gesture. “The little buggar didn’t even *try,”* he said. “He just stood there—didn’t even get his socks wet.”

Peter reached over and gave Sirius’ shoulder a pat. “But their stuff’s still in the middle of the lake. We did it!”

“Yeah, sure… we did it,” Sirius said, obviously unsatisfied.

“So… how should we celebrate?” Remus asked, watching Sirius

closely. “Maybe we hold a band practice?”

“That’s a great idea, Moony!” James agreed. “Between exams and pranking we haven't had any time, and I’ve got the tournament next week. So what do you think, Padfoot? A nice evening of noise to lighten your unappreciative mood?”

Sirius blinked himself out of his daze. “Sounds great,” he answered, and James gave a firm nod, gathering Sirius in by the shoulder and starting up the shore with him.

“C’mon, Moony, Wormtail—we’re gonna finish this night off right!”

“Hell yeah!” Peter called, chasing after them. Remus followed, because what else was there to do, yet he couldn’t shake the knowledge that Sirius obviously hadn’t gotten what he wanted.

Ignoring the stilted atmosphere, James managed to wait until they’d made it back to House Lane before clapping Sirius on the shoulder. “Oh, that’s right! Forgot to mention it before, but you’re not gonna believe it. Yesterday, while you and Moony were taking your English exam? Yeah well, Pete and I were just waiting around for you and we sorta got to messing and guess what—we wrote something!”

“Like a song?” Remus asked, surprised.

“Yeah!”

“He means he *composed* it. I wrote it down,” Peter said to Remus as they walked. “You should’ve heard him—‘and then it could go, *da-nah-nah-nah, da-dum-duh-nah-nah!’* It was almost painful."

James scoffed; "I *still* don’t understand why I would need to know the difference between a 'breve' and a 'quiver' when I have you three.”

“It’s a *quaver*. Not *quiver."*

“Yeah, well, tomayto-tomahto, pina colada, and the other bit.”

Remus couldn’t help his smile. "What colour is this new song of yours?"

"It's a giant mash, but it's got this real soft melody that's mostly blue. Padfoot's favourite colour, even!"

"Yeah sure," Sirius said, obviously not paying attention.

"You told me your favourite colour was brown," Remus said. Sirius looked at him very sharply, and he nearly baulked.

"Brown?" James grimaced next to them. "Like what kind of brown?"

Sirius' eyes dipped, as though he were trying to scan Remus from head to toe. Finally they came to rest on his face again, looking him right in the eye.

"A very specific kind..."

* * *

Sunday 5th June 1977

Remus could hardly believe it. It was end of term, marks were finally out and after he'd managed to get his hands on his end of term report, he practically raced back to his dorm. There was little audience to be had, what with James off at final football practice ahead of her year-end tournament and Peter visiting with Moira for her birthday, for which he'd prepared a lovely portrait of her as a gift. But none of that mattered; all Remus had needed was Sirius.

Sirius and his final report, that was.

As he sat in the middle of their dorm room, scanning their reports from top to bottom, he found himself practically vibrating out of happiness. He'd really only been aiming for one, but there it was, printed in solid black and plain as day.

"Three?" He echoed. "I beat you in three classes?"

Sirius shrugged, acting startlingly fine. "It would seem so, my good Moons."

Remus lowered the reports. "Oh my god—*three!"*

"Congratulations." Smiling, Sirius held out his hand. "You're either a certifiable genius, or a slave to your textbooks."

"It's called hard work, Black. You should try it sometime," Remus gloated, before taking his hand and shaking it firmly. "Thanks."

"You did good," he told him again. "And as luck would have it, I've already prepared the perfect reward for you."

Remus felt his heart jump. “And what’s that?”

Taking a second to tuck the cigarette he’d been fiddling with behind his ear, Sirius plucked his marks from Remus’ hands and began folding them up into a paper airplane. “You get to play the part of the most crucial piece in our final *pièce de résistance.* And all you have to do to succeed is distract my dear little brother for a few measly minutes.”

Remus sighed. “You mean you actually want to do that?"

“Of course.”

"I thought we were over this. It's almost end of school, why bother?"

"Because it's the end of school!" Sirius cried. "We can't just leave without pulling the greatest prank this school's ever seen!"

"We didn't pull one last year?!"

"We were busy last year. We found the Shrieking Shack and then fancied ourselves a killer concert—but since there's nothing halfway decent going on right now..." Letting the paper plane fly, Sirius watched as it soared across the room toward his bed, and by an inexplicable chance, flew straight out the open window. “Aw man, did you see that?” He cried in delight, rushing the window and sticking his head out.

Remus didn’t bother to join him, thinking back to the way Sirius had returned to their dorm after the lake and declared that Regulus’ stoic reaction to the prank still wasn’t enough. To appease him, they’d come up with the same sort of stunt they’d pulled on Snape the year before—only this time the plan was to rig a bucket of water above the stairs of Salazar House and soak Regulus on his way out. It was Peter’s idea to dye the water Godric red with food colouring, which Sirius had loved, naturally. But they hadn’t talked about the prank since that night, and as a result Remus had stupidly let himself believe that Sirius was over it.

“Wouldn’t you be the best one to distract Reg?” He asked, as Sirius leaned back from the window.

“Nah, he’ll never give me the time of day, but you—you’re more neutral.”

“So you want me to be the one to lure him under the bucket?”

“Yup. And that’s not all.” Smirking, Sirius turned toward the bathroom, disappearing inside and reappearing a few moments later with a large mop bucket in his hands. “ We *may* have made a few upgrades to the plan. Ta-da!”

Remus looked into the bucket, but instead of water like they’d agreed upon, he found the same syrupy blood they’d used back on Halloween. It'd been innocent enough then, since the only people they'd chosen to soak in it were each other, but pouring a bucket of fake blood on someone who wasn't expecting it...

“You gave me the idea actually,” Sirius grinned, “or should I say, our dear friend Stephen King did. 'Carrie' was full of prime pranking ideas.”

“You can’t be serious..." Remus snapped his head up; “You can’t dump fake blood on your little brother—this isn’t a horror novel!”

Staring at him like he’d been slapped, Sirius stepped back and set the bucket down. “Oh c’mon, don't be such a wuss. It’s just a step up from the food colouring. I thought you would’ve loved it.”

“This is definitely more than a step up! We agreed on water! The was that he would get wet, not scarred for life!”

“Yeah—*was!* And then we decided that hosing the tosser down wasn’t enough!”

“We?”

“Yes, we! James and Pete agreed—this is funnier. Imagine the reaction.”

“It’s not funny,” Remus told him sternly; “Did you even read the book?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “As if my brother had suddenly gained the supernatural ability to snap all our necks with a flick of his wrist. Just think of it, Moony—this’ll be legendary!”

“This is *mean.”*

“No, mean was telling everyone your mum killed herself and that you’re next.”

“Barty did that.”

“And Reg just sat back and let him. Didn't say a single word. Know who does that? Cowards.”

Remus couldn’t believe his ears. “You’re taking this too far, Sirius. You’re becoming obsessed with hurting them even worse than they hurt you.”

“They hurt you, Moony!"

"And I told you, I'm over it! Barty couldn't make me feel any worse than I make myself feel! Soon it won't even matter anyway, it'll be summer and we'll be all be going away. Barty can't touch us then."

"You mean *you'll* be away. I'll be going *there."*

Oh... damn it.

"Sirius... if this is about all of us going home... then maybe—"

"It's not!" Sirius snapped. "It’s about the pranks—the fun! Watching ‘em squirm! We do something big at the end of year so we’re remembered the next—that's how it works! And you’re either in or out.”

Remus’ blood ran cold. “In or out, huh? That easy?”

“It can be. That depends on you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Stop telling me what I do and don't mean. You're not my fucking conscience. You're supposed to be my friend.”

"I am your friend!"

"You're not acting like it! You're supposed to be on my side, not theirs."

Remus bit down hard on his bottom lip. “I *am* on your side, Sirius, but why does it have to be this?”

“You just don’t get it.”

“Then explain it to me!”

“I can’t!”

“Why not? Since when can we not talk to one another?”

Pausing, a nerve jumped in Sirius’ jaw as he ground his teeth together. “Look, I know you’re still new here and all—”

“Fuck you, Black,” Remus snarled.

“Fine, you don’t get it then. You want out, that it?”

“No, but—”

“Brilliant, then we finish this tomorrow and the little brat learns his lesson.”

“Which is what, Sirius?”

“That not picking a side makes you just as guilty as the rest of ‘em!”

“Why can’t he learn that lesson with *water?!”*

Sirius stepped back, shaking his head, but Remus wasn’t finished. He reached out, grabbing his friend by the shoulders and forcing him to look at him. “Sirius, please. I’ll help you and it’ll be enough, I promise.”

“Why aren’t you angrier?” Sirius asked, eyes cold and grey.

“I’m always angry,” Remus confessed, “but that’s not anyone else’s problem but mine.”

“That can’t be true. You deserve someone to blame.” His words felt like a confession.

“I know you’re angry too, but... things won’t be like this forever.”

“How do you know?” Sirius spat. “They’ve stayed the same for the last seventeen years, why would tomorrow be any different?”

Now Remus knew it was a confession.

“Because," he told him, "we get to choose what tomorrow means. Not anyone else.”

Sirius turned his head, looking at Remus’ hands as they clutched his shoulder. For a split second Remus thought he might pull away and that would be the end, but thankfully, all he did was sigh, deep and heavy, and close his eyes.

“Alright. Fine Moony, we’ll do it your way.”

Remus slumped in relief, and squeezed tighter. “Okay... Thank you, Sirius.”

“Don’t thank me, idiot,” Sirius scoffed, rolling his shoulders and pulling away. Remus instantly cracked a smirk.

“Oh, I’m the idiot? You forget I’ve seen your marks—they’re abysmal. You might be losing your touch, Black.”

It was the spark they needed to bring them back. At his words, Sirius’ eyes flashed devilishly. “You sure about that, Lupin? That I'm losing my touch? Mm, no... I’m pretty sure I know at least a few ways to convince you otherwise.”

For a split second Remus forgot how to breathe. A muscle jumped in his neck and he forced a laugh before clearing his throat and picking up the bucket of fake blood, glancing down at his murky reflection. “I’ll… get—get rid of this then...”

Saying nothing, Sirius turned away. He crossed the room to his bed, plucking the cigarette from behind his ear and pulling his zippo from his pocket.

Remus couldn’t help it; he called after him.

“Sirius?”

Sirius turned around instantly. “Yeah?”

“You… You said it yourself, right? It’s about fun?”

Usually Remus was able to discern what people were thinking by their expressions, but the look that Sirius gave him next was both vague and all too open. Licking his lips first, Sirius set the cigarette between his teeth and clicked his lighter to life, breathing in deeply and then out, filling the air in front of his faze with a soft haze.

“Yeah, Moony. Fun...”

Chapter End Notes

AS-Levels are taken at the end of year 12.

I headcanon Regulus as a Gemini so his birthday would've fallen on June 3rd within this fic ^^

Next update: Dec 22/23 (depending on your timezone).

Xoxo

Chapter 63: Memory

Chapter Summary

The bucket tips.

Chapter Notes

CW: Swearing, mentions of child abuse. Sad times, but happier endings!

(also lmk if you spot any glaring mistakes. I'm posting this while sleep-deprived xx)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh no, not me,
I never lost control;
You're face to face,
With the man who sold the world…

- "The Man Who Sold the World" David Bowie, 1971

He probably should've been angrier with Sirius. Much angrier. It should've been easy—Remus was an angry person after all. For the last several years of his life, his anger had left him feeling as though he were on an ever-revolving merry-go-round with no way to get off. Every now and then he would fool himself into thinking that he had escaped it—that the memories had finally stopped chasing and hounding his sleep—but then he'd go home again, or get a letter, or someone would say things like his mother had killed herself, and the entire thing would start up again; *round and round.*

Out of all of it, the one thing Remus could never allow himself to be, was angry with his friends. It just didn't come naturally. He was annoyed by them often, sometimes livid even, but anger... true *anger*... now that was something reserved for people far worse than friends.

It was probably the reason why he'd believed Sirius would never *not* be true to his word. *Stupid.* Sirius was just as angry as he was, he simply... showed it in different ways. Remus had used to believe that James and Sirius were two different sides of the same coin, but even as close as they were, all it would've taken was the slightest bit of

foresight to realise how wrong he'd been. There was no room on a coin like that for someone as good as James.

"Shall we flip a coin, eh Moony?" Sirius had suggested once. "Heads you, tails me."

It was over something stupid, like who got the last fag in the box, but as the ten pence glittered through the air in slow motion, Remus found himself praying that it would turn up heads. He'd still share the fag of course, but it would be his and that would be more than enough reason to gloat.

Heads. Heads. Let it be me. Me. Me. Me. Me. Me.

He'd felt the same way as he watched their final prank unfold—after agreeing to play the key piece in the plan, granting him a front-row seat to Sirius' revenge. Just... *me. Me. Me. Me. Let it be me. Look at me —**watch me!*** But then reality finally dawned.

Sirius wasn't looking at him at all. He couldn't. There wasn't the space for him. Sirius was lost in his own memories—busy with a never-ending merry-go-round of his own. He had no time to think of Remus, or anyone else for that matter. In Sirius' mind it was the exact same. *Me. Me. Me. **Please,** let it be me.*

And really... who could hardly blame him for that?

* * *

“Sirius, I still don’t understand what I’m supposed to say to him!”

“Anything! Tell him you want violin lessons."

Remus gaped at him; “Violin lessons? Are you insane?!”

“You could always challenge him to a duel instead.”

“Could you try not being an utter dickhead for *two seconds?!”*

“Just say you wanna talk,” James supplied, looking quite giddy—a far cry from how nervous he’d been after they’d hauled themselves out of bed early to set everything up. James had always been an early-bird, but between football and pranking, he looked about ready to pass out on his feet most days.

“And then what?” Remus demanded. "Shall I suggest knitting to pass the time?"

“If you really want,” Sirius shrugged. "But c'mon, Moons, you’re smart—get creative with him. Just make sure he's on target before the first bell goes. And don’t worry, we’ll give ya a little whistle right before so you have time to get out of the way.”

Remus glowered. Lure Regulus away from his friends and breakfast with little-to-no bait—no small feat then.

“We’ll be around the side of the building with Pete,” James said, checking his watch. “It’s on you now, Moony. You got five minutes.”

While Sirius raised an enthusiastic thumbs-up, James gave Remus' shoulder a final comforting squeeze and then the both of them slipped out the dining hall's backdoors. Remus tried not to immediately throw in the towel, but his confidence was weaning. It was easy for the rest of them to be optimistic—they'd given themselves the easy job. They'd left *him* with the task of remaining inconspicuous and yet intriguing enough to guide Regulus into the very heart of their prank, which knowing the eternal stubbornness of the Blacks, was certainly easier said than done. Remus was starting to think that it was just as much a punishment for him as it was Regulus.

But ah well, not much else to do but get to work then.

As he made his way across the dining hall, he noticed the girls waving at him from their usual table, but instead of going to meet them, Remus rubbed his clammy palms against his trousers and strode straight toward Regulus with a stern expression. He gave the boys no time to be surprised by his presence, shutting down their breakfast conversation with a severe; *“I need to talk to you.”*

Looking unnervingly unsurprised to see him, Regulus looked up with a dismissive glare. “I really hope this ‘I need to talk’ business doesn’t become a habit of yours. Because I. Don’t. Care.”

Remus swallowed. “You—You might if you heard what I had to say.”

“Oh Reg, you’re really so popular,” Barty started, “even dogs chase you now.”

Remus had been expecting this. Intervention from friends was Sirius' reason #2 factor in letting the prank fail (the first being the stick Regulus had stuffed a mile up his arse—*fuddy-duddy)* which meant it

was important to get them to fuck off.

“Hey Bart, didn’t see you there," he sneered; "How’s the teddy bear? Not too waterlogged I hope?”

Barty scowled, but Remus looked past him, bending down toward Regulus slightly. “I need to talk to you,” he said again; “it’s about… erm... Sirius.”

Regulus made a frustrated face, like he wanted to tell him to stuff it and fuck off, but finally, after much teeth-grinding, he pushed back from the table and stood.

“Reg!” Barty called; “What are you doing? Don't listen to this wanker —he's mental!”

“I’ll be right back,” Regulus said. “Just wait here.”

Yes, success! It'd been easier than he thought even. Perhaps he was cut out for this. Insides positively buzzing, Remus led Regulus from the dining room and into the hall. He kept walking, his pace perhaps a little too quick in his desperation to make it outside, and finally Regulus snapped at him.

“Where are you going, Lupin? I thought you wanted to talk!”

“Uhm... Too many people—this way!”

He heard Regulus give a huff, but he was still following so the plan hadn’t failed yet. Though that didn't mean the universe was letting him off that easy.

Almost to the front doors, Remus rounded a corner and nearly ran head-long into somebody, only to realise at the last second that it was his biology partner, Jillian. As he fell back, she gave gave a little squeak of surprise which quickly became a beaming grin, showing off her braces and a deep pair of dimples.

“Oh—! It's just you, Remus. Hello!"

"Er... hey Jill. Sorry for almost running into you. Was in a bit a bit of a hurry."

"That's alright." She peeked past him. "You and your friend on your way somewhere then?"

"Yeah, actually we—"

"We're not friends," Regulus cut-in.

Jillian smiled awkwardly. "Oh, well I was just looking for you actually, Remus. Are you all ready for our final presentation today? The wonders of cell mitosis, right?"

“Yeah, totally!” Remus scrambled. "It's just, right now I'm a bit—"

“Oh, good! I was thinking we could go over our parts at breakfast together, that is if you're not too busy...?" Jillian’s gaze turned to Regulus again, who was standing a few feet behind them, arms crossed and glaring like the devil.

"Lupin, are we talking or are you going on your date?" He snapped impatiently.

Remus' heart gave a little start; "Ah—no! We're definitely not—"

"Date," Jillian giggled, biting her lip as she tucked her hair behind her ear; "Remus and I aren't—*heh!*—dating."

Simultaneously tired of being talked over and also worried about the prank, Remus cleared his throat and Jillian's attention whipped back to him. “Sorry, Jill, I got something going on right now. Maybe we could chat about the presentation during next break?”

“Oh yeah, sure. Biology isn't until last period anyway. Shall I meet you ‘the spot’ then?”

Remus hated how she’d dubbed the back row of the biology room ‘the spot’, but she’d already winked clumsily at him and judging by Regulus’ expression, he had about four seconds to get moving again.

“Sure, see you.”

Slipping around her, Remus looked back only to make sure Regulus was with him before finally emerging out onto the front steps of the dining hall. He glanced around, but found no sight of his friends, only the plastic bucket looming several feet over their heads. There'd been no way to disguise it, but Sirius hadn't wanted to just wait for Regulus to come walking out on his own and risk missing him—therefore: Remus, distraction-extraordinaire.

“Okay, spit it out. And this better not be another stupid prank,” Regulus snapped.

Remus couldn't help it; he laughed.

"What's so damn funny?"

Quickly he clapped a hand over his mouth. "Nothing! Just... thanks for agreeing to meet with me."

"I'm not meeting with you," Regulus scowled, "you're interrupting my breakfast. Now spit it out before you actually start acting like the lunatic everyone says you are."

It was hard not to rise to the bait and react, but doing so would just ruin the prank. Regulus had stopped just in front of the doors, several feet off-target, and with no time or patience left to scramble for something to say, Remus took Sirius' advice and rattled off the first thing that came to mind;

"Er—the violin!"

Regulus pulled back, nearly affronted. "Pardon me?"

"You play the violin!"

"Are you trying to be funny or are you actually this stupid?"

Remus gave a nervous laugh. "Ha—funny. No, I only meant that you play the violin *well.* And so I… thought that maybe you could… teach me?"

"You brought me out here to ask me that?"

"I guess so…?"

Regulus turned back to the door.

"Wait!" Remus cried. "You're right, I was just playing—I really do have to talk to you though."

"I've already entertained enough rubbish to do with my brother," Regulus spat scathingly. A pair of students passed them, walking into the hall all while quizzically murmuring to each other and pointing up at the sky. Regulus stepped aside for them and went to look up, but before he could spot the bucket, Remus threw his hands up.

"But you still followed me!" He half-shouted. The freakish gesture at least got Regulus' attention again. He straightened up to his full height, which was not much shorter than Sirius' these days, and drew

back from the door, crossing his arms. Remus watched him, keenly aware of the few feet between him and the chalk 'x' marker Peter had left on the ground.

“I’m not going to help you,” Regulus said. “Sirius has made his own bed. Even if he doesn’t know it yet.”

The vague statement caught Remus by surprise. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I assume he’s figured it out and told you, but it was only a matter of time before she did it anyway.”

“Do what? You mean your mum?”

“Who else?”

“I don’t… What do you—”

Regulus took a step forward, almost menacing. “I *told* him to stop pushing her, that it was just gonna make things worse, but he never listens. Did he even tell you about Easter?"

"Only that you had a row," Remus shot. "How hard could it be to get along as brothers for one week?"

"We didn't have the row," Regulus hissed. "All he was supposed to do was give one stupid concert, and he couldn't even do that!"

Concert?

"It's just a bloody piano!"

Piano?

"He could've refused—ran off somewhere and avoided the entire thing, but no—what does he do? He smashes an entire bottle of vodka on it and lights the whole thing on fire in the middle of the bloody ballroom! Our entire family was there! Plus half of the British parliament and a member from every affluent family from here to Australia—and he burns an eighteenth century heirloom right in front of them! What did you idiots *think* she would do?!"

For a moment Remus was without words. Regulus' explosion had surprised him, not because Sirius had done, but because he'd neglected to mention it at all. Remus was pretty sure arson was on Sirius' bucket list for Christ's sake. And his mother... What was

Regulus even saying?

"You're saying he did this, because they... tried to force him to play?"

Regulus puckered. "One song wouldn't have killed him. But he always has to make a scene. It's impossible for him to keep his head down, and he's not the only one who pays for it."

It was as though a boxing bell had gone off inside Remus' mind. Regulus' words had driven a spark down his throat, and instantly his hackles were up, gearing for a fight.

" 'Not the only one'?" He snarled. "You're always on him for fighting back but I've seen his scars, you little coward! The ones he got when *you* were in the way—when he was defending *you!"*

A horrified look came over Regulus, and he faltered immediately, gritting his teeth as though he too were feeling the leftover burn of Sirius' injury. "He's not the only one who doesn't always want to go home," Regulus ground out, "but if he just *shut up* for a little while longer, then maybe things would be fine!"

"I—" Remus drew up short. It was at that moment that he began to realise just how similar the two Black brothers were. Both of them had put up a wall, but where Sirius' was sarcastic and aloof, Regulus' was withdrawn and stoic. They were both dealing with their pain the only way they knew how. For as long as Remus had known him, Sirius had been counting down the seconds until the day he'd be free from his family, and maybe Regulus was doing the same.

"I don't think you want to hate your brother," Remus said quietly. He shot a quick glance around the corner, where the lads would be waiting. *Can you hear this, Sirius?*

"I do hate him," Regulus said bitterly.

"No... No, you don't. In fact, I don't think any piece of you hates him, not really."

"You don't know anything about me."

"You're right," Remus agreed. "I don't know you at all, Regulus. I have no idea what it's like being you. I can tell you don't like that place though—home. Neither does Sirius. And that's just one thing in common, but I'll bet there are more. You *are* brothers, and if you just agreed to talk to one another, then I think you could be on the same

side.”

“And what side is that?" Regulus sneered. "You don’t exactly look like winners to me.”

Remus almost laughed. “That might be true, and I may not have any brothers, but I can tell you one thing—being on a side with friends feels a whole lot better than one without.”

Regulus looked down at the ground. It felt dismissive at first, but the longer Remus watched him, the softer his expression became.

“You should talk to Sirius, Reg," Remus pleaded. "This back and forth doesn’t have to go on forever. It can end.”

“He won’t talk to me," Regulus said in a small voice.

“Then we’ll make him talk. We could find some common ground and get it all out in the open. It’ll feel better, I promise. And hey, if he doesn’t want to listen, then we can tie him to a tree—and if he tries to talk over us, we can muzzle him. We have options.”

A smile flickered across Regulus’ face. It was so quick Remus almost thought he’d imagined it. “Stupid,” he murmured, “ 'common ground', what pish…”

"Better than a battle ground."

Absent-mindedly, Regulus began dragging the toe of his shoe ahead of him, blurring the chalked 'x' on the ground until it was little more than a smudge. Remus stared at it, and suddenly the reality of their situation came back to him.

Oh no.

Then, with all the terror of an air-raid siren, a single whistle cut through the air.

No... No, no, no, no, no, no—no!

Regulus glanced up; “Okay, Lupin, where’s my brother?”

Remus surged forward. *“REGULUS, WATCH OUT!”*

Overhead, the first bell of the morning blared above them, drowning out his desperate cry. He grabbed onto Regulus’ surprised shoulders just as the bucket tipped—yanked furiously and with sure glee. He

had tried, but not fast enough, and down came their revenge to splatter over the both of them. Only it was much thicker than water.

Sirius, you damn liar.

The blood was in his hair, his eyes—*everywhere*—it was as thick and warm as though it'd been drained from a real animal only moments before. It was all he could taste and see and smell. He scooped the red cornstarch from his eyes and shook it from his hands, spattering the front steps even more. The space around him was a crime scene, the front doors and stone steps soaked with gore, deep rivers running down into the grass. Dancing around it, Remus' friends emerged from around the side of the building, whooping with victory and only stopping to gape in horror once they'd spotted him.

"Moony, you were supposed to get out of the way!" Sirius wailed. "Didn't you hear the whistle?!"

Remus had no words. It only took a few seconds for students on their way out of the dining hall to begin gathering. They appeared at the doors behind them, whipping the open and going cross-eyed with shock as others crowded around to get a look. He felt disgusted and horrified, but not because of the blood. Watching Regulus was like taking a punch to the gut from an elephant. He simply stood there on the front steps, mouth open and breathing shakily as though he were afraid to move. Blood soaked his dark hair, dripping down the side of his face and staining his fine features. Seeing him stunned and covered head-to-toe in gore was a million times worse than watching *Carrie*.

"*Christ*—out of the way already!" Remus heard someone shout, and a moment later Lily had muscled her way to the front of the crowd, stopping just shy of the puddled blood. Marlene was with her, and as they came to sudden halt, both girls whipped their heads up, having gone as white as sheets.

"Oh my god," Lily shrieked. "Remus!"

"Don't worry," Peter called, maybe more for the crowd's benefit; "it's not real blood!"

Looking past them, Lily gaped at the three boys. "You lunatics!"

Sirius bent down and stuck his fingers into the blood dripping down the hall's steps, sticking them back into his mouth. "S'just sugar," he grinned, teeth stained red.

Some kids laughed, but a few moaned in disgust, hardly believing the truth. Sirius didn't care—the prank had worked. Remus wanted to scream at him—*You promised!*—but there wasn't time.

"Is this what you meant?" Regulus asked in the barest whisper, one only Remus could hear. "Is this what you meant by 'finding a common ground'?"

"Reg..."

"You're all the same," he spat, his voice a mixture of anger and betrayal. "And I hate you both."

Turning away, Regulus tore down the cafeteria's steps. He passed Sirius, who spun around to watch him go, leaving behind bloody footprints in his wake.

"Just back up, don't step in it!" Lily was shouting, trying her best to usher students back into the dining hall. Some would not be deterred, and as they began skirting around the muck, Sirius started up the steps, walking right through it until he reached Remus' side.

"Sorry, Moons, didn't mean to sacrifice you! But you didn't get out of the splash zone fast enough."

Smiling, Sirius clapped a hand over Remus' back before withdrawing it, grimacing at the sight of the sticky blood now staining his palm. Remus was too numb to yell at him; he was still watching Regulus. As the youngest Black brother turned a corner and disappeared out of sight, it occurred to him that Sirius had sacrificed a lot more than just a friend.

* * *

It took longer than expected for Remus to scrub the fake blood from his skin. Longer even, to rid it from his hair. The sugar soaked into his scalp and stained his face, leaving him red-washed like some sad circus clown. He supposed that for someone who'd been in on the prank in the first place, he'd almost gotten off easy. While Lily had ordered the other three to stay behind and clean up their mess, he'd staggered back to their dorm room like a true victim. Though generally victims weren't supposed to feel so guilty. Even if Sirius hadn't broken his promise, and the bucket had been filled with water, it still would've ruined everything. He couldn't help but think that

Regulus must've hated him even more than his brother now. After all, he was expecting a stunt like that from Sirius, but Remus had lulled him into a sense of security and then betrayed his trust. It really was the epitome of a mess.

As Remus made his way out of the bathroom, scrubbing his hair with a towel, he found Sirius waiting for him on his bed. Up until that moment it'd been easy to ignore all other feelings thanks to the guilt he felt over Regulus, but as Sirius sat up and smiled ruefully at him, Remus began to sense a heedless rage well up within him.

"Glad to see the dye came off your face," Sirius said, as Remus pulled the towel from his head and stiffly marched to his wardrobe.

"What are you doing here?" He ground out.

"Evans ordered the other tossers back to class, but I thought one of us ought to check in on you so I snuck away. Good thing too—looks like you missed a spot."

Getting up, Sirius reached for the side of his face and Remus ripped away, startling the both of them. *"Don't!"* He snarled.

Sirius' smile waned, and he bit his lip. "Ah, Moons, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to get covered in muck. I'll buy you new clothes."

Remus couldn't help his huff of incredulous laughter; "That's what you're sorry for—that I got hit too? You lied, Sirius! You said it'd just be water!"

"I know, and we filled it with that first. Just—didn't feel like enough."

"It never does, does it, you stupid wanker?!" Remus spat. "Nothing's ever enough for you! You *always* have to take it too far!"

Sirius stepped away, looking sore. "Look, I know you're mad but—"

"Actually, I'm furious! You should've heard what Regulus was saying, if you had you never would've pulled that rope!"

"Well, whatever it was must've been real eye-opening if it's prompted this sort of reaction."

"You prompted this reaction, Sirius! You did when *you* decided to lie to me! Regulus was ready to try and make up—he was gonna talk to you and you ruined it!"

“Oh I did, did I?” Sirius barked. “That’s funny ‘cause I was totally trying to fix things in the first place!”

Remus flung his towel at the wall with an angry cry. “AUGH—You’re insane!”

“Fine—I’m insane, whatever! But I was only doing this for you!”

Remus rounded on him. “Oh my god—are you actually for real?”

“Friends don’t let friends get utterly walked over!" Sirius hollered. "We were protecting you! No one else—just us! Those shits deserved everything they got! And we did it for you!”

“I NEVER BLOODY ASKED YOU TO!”

Sirius drew back, a vein bulging in his neck. Remus returned his glare, almost panting. He waited for Sirius to whip out another stinging response—one that would leave him feeling raw for days on end—but instead Sirius just walked out of their bedroom, slamming the door behind himself.

* * *

Remus did not see Sirius in forms. Remus did not see Sirius in first period. Remus did not see Sirius at break or lunch or even biology, which he’d promised not to skip only to ensure that he’d get to watch him squirm during the song Jillian had written for their presentation on cell mitosis; *If you fall down and scrap your knee, if your nails grow long and strong inexplicably, if you wake up in the morning as tall as a tree, have no fear, that's just cell mitosis, baby!*

Because they deserved some punishment too, Remus avoided James and Peter as well. They tried to keep up, apologised profusely every chance they got, but Remus told himself that it wasn't enough. Freezing out his friends made him feel bad, but not that bad. After all, they only thought they were apologising for dousing him in fake gore. He doubted that even Sirius, despite their argument, understood what had really happened.

Arguing with Sirius always felt good in the moment—well, not *good,* more like a release—it was the bit that came after that was harder. In the absence of others all he could think about was how things could’ve gone differently—gone better—just like Sheila had said. He'd resented

plenty of people: his parents, teachers, doctors, anyone dumb enough to think they had a hope in hell of "changing him for the better"—but those were all different. Sirius was his *friend.* Tomny was his friend too, and though he still held some sense of a grudge, really he just missed him. And now that they were so close to going home for the summer, he couldn't afford to miss Sirius too.

He tried the astronomy building first, then a few other hiding spots, but still no Sirius. He hadn't shown up for any of his other classes either, and none of the girls had any idea, though Lily was trying to track him down herself to slap him with a detention slip. Even James and Peter didn't know where he was, and Remus refused to let them help look.

Finding him in the music room had been a coincidence. He'd left one of his books under the risers that morning and was returning to fetch it when he stumbled upon Sirius in a place he hadn't seen him in a very long time—sitting at Sheila's grand piano. He hadn't noticed him yet, and unable to help himself, Remus paused in the doorway, waiting to see what he'd do. But Sirius just sat.

Sat and stared, in utter silence.

"Fuck man—just make it for you already," Remus said finally, making Sirius spin around as though he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. When he saw it was only him, he deflated, turning back to the instrument.

"What are you doing here?" Sirius asked, hunched over on the piano bench. Remus could see the entire shape of his shoulder blade outlined underneath his school shirt.

"Just... looking around," he mumbled from the doorway.

"We don't even have class today."

"Classes are over anyway. And I forgot my book in forms."

"Oh." Sirius began rubbing his fingers like an arthritic old man. "Want to... Want to sit?"

At the offer, a sliver of hope lodged itself in Remus' chest and he shuffled into the room. Sirius made room for him on the bench and he sat, though it felt awkward; his legs stuck out past the pedals and the keys felt too low to the ground to be within comfortable reach. Next to him, Sirius was the picture of a perfect musician. He sat with his

back straight and his hands neatly tucked into his lap like it'd been drilled into him, which of course it had. For a while they just existed there, staring down at the open piano without a word. Sirius regarded the ivory keys like they were the fangs of a cobra ready to strike, but to Remus they were only ghosts.

“Are you… still mad, Moony?”

Remus looked to his right, where Sirius was watching him with tepid eyes.

“I should be, shouldn't I?” He said; then, “But no, not really... You?”

Sirius shook his head. “No. I'm mostly just sorry for lying. And for breaking my promise.”

“Well, I'm mostly sorry for yelling.”

"And *I'm* mostly sorry for upsetting you."

"I'm mostly sorry for calling you a stupid wanker."

“Nah... I deserved it.”

“You're right, you did.”

Chuckling half-heartedly, Sirius looked down at his lap. Remus wanted so badly to take his hand—to trace the soft pads of his palm, the ridges of his knuckles—but there were things unsaid between them.

“I'm not mad,” he said again, “but that doesn't mean I've forgiven you.”

“Okay,” Sirius murmured.

“What you did was…" Remus sighed. "It just made things harder.”

“Seems to be all I'm good at.”

“That's not true. You set a piano on fire in front of your entire family —that takes real talent.”

Another smile touched Sirius' lips. "I'd been saving that one. It felt good to watch that hunk of wood burn—worth every punishment that witch could come up with. I just wanted it to feel like a husk. Like everything else in that house..."

Looking down at the piano keys, Remus swallowed thickly. “Do you remember last year when I picked that fight and you threw out that list of everything you knew about me?”

Sirius nodded in recognition; “Yeah why? Looking for volume two?”

“No, wanker. I only meant to say that I never told you that I have a list too.”

“Oh? For me?”

“Mhm. It’s alphabetised, even.” Remus held his hands out and spread them apart as though he were reading off a giant billboard. “Starts with, ‘absolute dickhead’. Shitty wanker's a bit further down.”

“Ha. You know me so well.”

Lowering his hands, Remus nudged Sirius with his shoulder. “Seriously though. I do know you. You can cause bad, but you also do good sometimes too."

"Nah. I like to deny it, but I'm a Black through and through, Moony. I'm stained black, even in here." Sirius tapped his chest.

"No," Remus shook his head. "Could a stained person, make people smile even on their worse days? Could they start a conversation with a stranger and end it with a friend? No one's good all the time, Padfoot, but that doesn't mean you don't have good parts. Like... how you always give everyone your undivided attention when you’re talking to them, even if it’s just to be a sarcastic asshole."

"I have a reputation to protect," Sirius supplied cheekily.

"Yeah, well you’re loyal to a fucking fault too—don't I know it—and you can't sleep when you know others might be crying. You say you hate school, but you come anyway and you still manage to get all the teachers to like you."

"Mm, some more than others."

"You hate reading for class but secretly enjoy reading for yourself—"

"I like the 'happily ever afters' what can I say?"

Remus smiled. "I know you’re really good at crosswords and that you work hard, even if you’d prefer to pretend that you don’t. You whistle when you think nobody’s around and sing when you know they are—

you're a *wicked-hot* musician. And you call James' parents 'mum and dad' because you know *he* likes hearing it!"

Sirius chuckled a bit at that. "I like it too."

"I know. I also know you don't let anyone tell you off for the nail polish or make up or jewelry, and I admire that, and…" Remus smiled lazily down at the piano keys; "and you *do* care about school. You like school."

"I like my friends," Sirius amended. "I can like anywhere, as long as we're together."

"Anywhere, huh?"

"Anywhere."

"Am I your friend?"

Sirius' head shot up. "You actually need to ask me that?"

Yes, Remus thought, *but am I* only *your friend?*

"Sorry…" He murmured, coming back to himself; "I was being stupid."

"You're never stupid," Sirius said. He looked away, back to the keys that might bite him, and Remus began to feel the familiar hammering of his heart in his ears.

"My mum used to play the piano, you know," he said plainly, to drown out the noise. "She was really good—classically trained like you. Before she got sick, she was always saying how she would teach me, but I don't think I would've made a very good piano player anyway. My posture's too shit."

Out of the corner of his eye, Remus saw Sirius crack another smile. "We should've got you on something long, like the bassoon. Put your lanky git body to good use."

"In that case I'm getting you a ukulele."

"Do it. I'll bash ya in the knees with it, you giant."

Remus chuckled weakly, and his eyes caught his own reflection in the piano's silky surface. "Sometimes at night... it's as though I can hear her playing."

“Like... in a dream?”

“Must be. I don’t think I have any real memories of hearing her play, even though I know she must’ve. She got tired easily, and the pills made her hands shake. It was hard for her so she sort of just… sat by the window of the music room. She used to just watch the piano for hours, staring at it like it was some sort of living thing that might come alive and, I dunno… hurt her." He looked back at Sirius. "Kind of like you’re doing right now...”

Sirius tightened hold of his hands, crushing his fingers in his lap until they went white. "I know it shouldn't be this hard, it's just..."

"You don't want to play?"

"I dunno... It hurts in a way. Remembering."

"I understand," Remus told him. "It hurts because it was their job, but instead they put all their shit on us, didn't they?"

Sirius ran a nervous hand through his hair. "You're... You're startlingly self-aware sometimes, Moony."

"It's part of the guilt-complex."

"God. Not the guilt-complex..."

Remus smiled again. It was easy around Sirius. “You can play if you want, Padfoot,” he told him, “you just have to make it for you.”

Sirius released his strangled fingers and for a moment it looked as though he might stretch them toward the piano keys, but he choked, hesitating long enough to let out a frustrated sigh.

“I can’t.”

Sighing softly, Remus reached up to rub the back of his neck. As his hands came down, he stopped to stare at them, and then glanced back at his friend. “Well, do you trust me then?”

“Yes,” Sirius said, without hesitation.

Nodding, Remus took a nervous breath and set his own fingers on the keys. He pressed the first note, a high little ding that echoed out around them like a cry, and looked to Sirius for approval, but Sirius was only staring at his hands on the keys, forehead creased in concern. So, Remus kept going.

He pressed another key, then another, until his fingers were clumsily hopping across them one at a time. When he reached the last he hit it several times; *dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun* and then proceeded to fly back up to the other end, reaching past Sirius with a cheeky grin. Eventually te was slapping the keys—hammering them—drawing noise from the instrument in every unfathomable way he could. Beethoven would've been appalled, Mozart would've had him drawn and quartered—he didn't care. It was noise and neither of them could bear silence—never could, never would.

"Okay, okay! I get it, you really can't play!" Sirius laughed eventually, catching him by the wrists and choking out his sinner's symphony.

"Guess you're going to have to teach me!" Remus grinned, pushing past him to reach a few more notes.

"I can't!"

DUH-DUN; "You must!"

"No, I really can't!"

DUH-DUH-DUNNN! "Then we suffer!"

"You're such an idiot, Moony!"

Yes, oh yes, Remus thought, his face overtaken by a grin. "I think my fingers are possessed, Padfoot! I need an idiot's instruction!"

Sirius laughed some more, and it was more beautiful than any song. The best composer in the world couldn't have matched it.

"Bloody—Alright!" he said finally. "Give the ivories a chance to breathe first!"

With a final; *DUH-DUH!* Remus sagged against him, laughing as he drew back. Sirius shoved him lightly.

"That was a total train-wreck."

"I'm a beginner," he said shamelessly, "I've never been shown what to do."

"Clearly." Sirius licked his lips and raised his hands, actually letting them hover over the keys. If Remus looked close enough he could see his own muddled face reflected in their polished ivory shine. He wondered what Sirius saw.

“Hey,” Remus said, leaning in until he could see both of Sirius’ eyes. “Do you trust me?”

Sirius looked to him, jaw clenched, and nodded.

“Okay then.” Slowly he drew up off the bench, giving Sirius enough room to stretch out and reach every key. He stood behind him, holding his breath, and Sirius did the same, almost frozen. “You can do it, Padfoot,” he urged him. “You don’t have to be the Sirius that played before. You can start anew.”

Looking back at him, Sirius opened his mouth. It would’ve been so easy for Remus to lean forward and kiss him.

“Okay,” Sirius breathed quietly, before straightening up on the bench. Even his back looked beautiful, and Remus was nearly lost in the image of him alone, but the moment Sirius began to play, he was truly transported.

Sirius needed no sheet music, instead the notes flew out of him by either muscle memory or pure invention. The song was beautiful and terrifying all at once. Light and airy like a summer breeze blowing through sheer white curtains, but just beyond that, distant thunder clouds rolled closer and closer. It made goosebumps rise over his entire body. It made Remus want to flee the room. It made him remember the sound of his mother crying when she could no longer get out of bed on her own. The clatter of pill bottles as her shaky hands spilled them across the floor. The emotion that came with seeing her blue eyes well up with frustrated tears.

But it was also those nights Hope would leave the radio on, and they’d dance around the parlour until they were laughing so hard they had to sit down. Of sitting in Giles’ lap and watching him turn the paper and pointing out the pictures. Of hearing Tonya say I love you. Of being hugged by Tomny. Of seeing James and Peter smile. Of hearing the girls laugh.

Of Sirius' everything.

Remus wasn’t sure what the song was named—probably something French—but if he'd have gotten to choose, it would've been 'Memory'.

He was still miles away by the time Sirius finished the song, and he came back to himself to find his friend breathing so hard his shoulders were trembling. Remus heard a sniffle, and swallowed, afraid that he’d made a mistake in pushing him.

“Sirius…”

“God,” Sirius said, “I fucking *hate* Bach. Mum used to make me play the Partitas for hours, yelling or hitting me with this fucking stick—a real narrow one, like a whip—every time I played too fast or hit the wrong key. Sometimes I would do it on purpose too, just to have a real reason to glare at her—then she’d scold me again because, *‘how dare I look at her that way’.* But she looked at me, Moony! She looked at me and it was never enough—it’ll never *be* enough. Why can’t I play for myself? For only *me?”*

Sirius sagged inwards like he was trying to make himself appear very small and Remus surged forward, sliding onto the end of the bench and catching him as he began to break down. He squeezed, so tight that he could feel Sirius’ trembling in his own bones. “I hear you,” he told him, “I hear you.”

“It just fucking sucks,” Sirius whimpered. “I hate all of it. It was horrible. I sounded horrible.”

“No, it was beautiful. You were so beautiful.”

“Not beautiful enough.”

“What’s enough?" Remus swore. "Who decides when anything’s enough?”

Through his choked sobs, Sirius laughed bitterly. “The audience, I suppose.”

“Well fine, but right now I’m your only audience and I say it was enough, Sirius.”

Sirius reached up and clung to him, holding his arm so tightly it should’ve hurt. Remus barely felt it.

“I won’t play for her anymore. Not any of them,” Sirius told him, head hung. “But I’ll play for you.”

Remus squeezed even tighter. “I’d like that.”

Neither of them said anything for a while, and slowly Sirius' breathing began to even out again. He sniffled a few times, and Remus didn't even mind if he was wiping snot on his shirt.

“Remus…?”

Chills. Sirius hardly ever called him by name.

“Yes, Sirius?”

“I meant it, you know—what I said before... You’re glorious.”

“… I’m just happy you’re here, Sirius.”

With his face pressed into Sirius’ shoulder Remus couldn’t be sure, but he thought that Sirius just might be smiling. They hugged one another for a long time still, an awkward jumble of limbs that were too long and yet not long enough. Briefly Remus began to wonder what it was he was doing—*you're too close! Get away now before it ends badly!*—but the thoughts left him the moment Sirius shifted and he let go. They turned to look at one another, grey eyes and brown, and for a moment the world almost made sense, but then Sirius looked away.

“That was embarrassing,” he murmured, wiping his face on his sleeve.

Remus tipped his head back to look at the roof of the music room—anywhere but Sirius’ mouth—and shrugged. “Not as embarrassing as watching you hop around with cow shit stuck to the bottom of your foot.”

“Or showing your bare arse off to the entire school.”

“And just how does our gym class equate to the *entire* school?” Remus demanded, looking back to him. Sirius grinned guiltily. Remus sighed happily.

Then for a split-second, Sirius’ eyes darted downwards. Remus didn’t miss it. An explosion could’ve been happening right over his shoulder and he still wouldn’t have looked away. He didn’t, not even to see for himself how Sirius’ pinky was now brushing up against the side of his hand as it rested on the piano bench. He almost shivered, but then Sirius bit his lip and leaned in ever-so-slightly. Remus did the same, and suddenly they were closer than they’d ever been...

No! We can’t!

Fuck that—yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Ye—

“YES!" James shouted from the music room doorway. "Told you we’d find ‘em, Pete!”

Sirius whipped around so fast the ends of his hair swatted Remus in the face as he flew backward, nearly toppling off the piano bench. He caught himself on the keys, making a dreadful twang of noise as James and Peter skipped into the room.

“You jammy bastards!” Sirius cried, forcing a stilted laugh. “You just about scared the living daylights out of us!”

“Not as if we were sneaking,” James said. “What were you even doing?”

“Playing piano,” Remus answered quickly. Sirius glanced at him, and he noted with relief that his cheeks were also red.

“You were actually playing the piano? I thought you hated the thing, Sirius,” Peter said in surprise.

Sirius stretched his arms out sheepishly. “Yeah, well... someone convinced me to give it another go.”

Remus blushed harder. *Fuck me, really.*

“That’s great news, mate!” James cried. A second later he was bouncing across the room and grappling Sirius in a hug from behind. It almost made Remus jealous to see James do it so easily.

“We totally missed hearing you play,” Peter agreed, coming to join them.

Lightly shoving his best friend off, Sirius spun around on the bench. “So what are you two doing here—come to practice?”

“Nah,” James waved, “we were looking for you actually.” He looked at Remus pointedly, brows raised. “Does thisss... erhm... mean you and Moony have made up then?”

“Well—”

“Yes,” Remus answered. Sirius turned to him, looking hopeful, and bit his lip over a smile. It was irrational, but in that moment Remus had never resented James and Peter more. Curse their eternal friendship. Curse their horrible timing *more.*

James clapped his hands together. “Brilliant, now we can tell you our good news!”

“What good news?” Sirius asked.

Peter cleared his throat. “We talked to McGonagall about our schedules for next term, and she approved it. We're gonna switch a few classes around.”

“You can do that?” Remus frowned. “They made us choose weeks ago.”

“Yeah, well, we sorta realised that next year’s our last year at school—all of us in the same place—and who knows what’s gonna happen after,” James said kindly; “So Pete and I figured, might as well make the most of the time we’ve got left.”

“You make it sound as though we’re all gonna hop the twig the moment we leave school,” Sirius smirked.

“No, nothing like that—but life is unexpected right, so we thought that—”

“That we’d switch into music with you!” Peter announced.

Both Remus and Sirius were stunned. “Like take music with Sheila?” Sirius eventually echoed. “In class? With us? The two of *you?”*

“No,” James grinned, “the *four* of us.”

“It’s just a spare. Might as well make it fun,” Peter shrugged.

Remus was utterly slack-mouthed; “But Pete, what about your art lessons?”

“Meh, not like I was gonna do anything with it anyway. I can still draw on my own time, and Madame Aubert's already said I can use the art room whenever I want.”

He whirled on James. “And you, you’re just gonna give up gym?”

“I can run during breaks. S’not as if I’m gonna suddenly lose all athleticism by sitting in here for a few hours a week. Who knows, maybe I'll learn something.”

"Like how to read sheet music," Peter snorted.

While James shouldered his friend, Sirius shot to his feet, almost glowing with excitement. “This is brilliant! Albeit a bit unexpected, I'll give ya that—but still, absolutely fantastic!”

“Thought you’d be happy!” James cried.

“Of course I’m happy!” He grabbed his best friend by the shoulders. “This is a real chance—we can actually make something out of Marauders now! We could even perform!”

Peter blanched a bit. “Hold on, we’re hardly the Hawkings’ Philharmonic Orchestra."

“Bah, orchestras are just glorified cover bands anyway.” Sirius turned back to the piano, almost breathless. The look he gave Remus was pure happiness. “This is amazing, isn’t it, Moony?”

“Yeah,” Remus said, “it really is.”

Chapter End Notes

'Hop the twig' is a euphemism for dying.

I don't normally like getting sad in these comments, but it took a lot just to get this chapter out on time. Something happened to my computer and a portion of the notes I would've been using to write upcoming chapters were lost (along with many tears), so if you would be so kind as to share your thoughts/some love in the comments/kudos I would really appreciate it, as my motivation really took a hit this week *cries*

On the bright side—next chapter (posting on Christmas! Eeee!) is the last chapter in this term! Keep looking out for the summer chapters after that, I promise they won't disappoint :')

Chapter 64: Crescendo

Chapter Summary

It the Marauders' final day of the 1976-1977 school term, and they're going to celebrate.

Chapter Notes

You guys were literally so sweet in the comments on last chapter. I actually cried while reading some of them *cries again*. Thank you so much for enjoying this story. Hearing that people want to read these words is truly the best motivator.

Now, without further ado... on with the show!

CW: Drinking. Cringing. Friendship and... more?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't mind other guys dancing with my girl,
That's fine, I know them all pretty well;
But I know sometimes I must get out in the light,
Better leave her behind with the kids, they're alright…

- "The Kids Are Alright" The Who, 1966

Thursday 16th June 1977

When Professor McGonagall asked him to come to her office on the eve of their last night at school, Remus assumed it was because she'd finally decided on his punishment for almost sending Barty to an early grave. After two weeks with no word on the matter, he'd almost let himself believe that she'd forgotten the whole thing, which was laughable. Their Headmistress had a memory like an elephant and a penchant for justice much stronger than any London police officer. That, combined with her calling him in to the main office so close to summer holiday could mean only one thing: that he was not going to be returning to Hawkings Independent School next term.

It was pleasing at least, to look up at the glass cabinet behind McGonagall's desk and see the shiny new first place trophy the boys' football team had earned at their end-of-year tournament. James had

been ecstatic over the win and arrived back at school the day before, waving the thing over his head while the whole team cheered. He'd spent the rest of the day touring the grounds with it and accepting praise from all the teachers before promptly passing out for a nap that was now going on eighteen hours long. Peter had stopped packing a few times just to make sure James was still breathing and afterwards Sirius had gotten the bright idea of sticking a pair of tampons up his nose to see if they'd make him snore even louder. (Where he'd gotten the tampons, Remus had no idea, but his hypotheses was correct; by the time Remus had left the dorm, James was snoring like a chainsaw.)

In the time since, Remus had started his walk over to Castle Hall, resolving not to tell any of his friends about his sure-to-be expulsion while they were still at school. He didn't want to be the one to ruin their last night together; instead he'd write them each a letter once he was home. At least that way they'd have the summer to forget about him. Only, Remus hadn't been counting on McGonagall's personal peculiarities, and unbeknownst to him, was walking into a much stranger conversation.

"You want me to do *what?"* He demanded.

Professor McGonagall gave him a tight-lipped smile. "It's very simple, Mr. Lupin. I want you to spend your final year at Hawkings as a school prefect."

Oh Christ.

Remus slapped his forehead. "You've got to be joking."

"Oh, but I assure you, I am not."

"But I thought you were going to expel me—I punched a kid!" Two, if he were being honest.

"Do you still wish to be expelled, Remus?"

Quickly, he shut his mouth. "No…"

"Then I assume this is an arrangement that works for both parties."

"But I am not prefect material!" Remus blabbed. "Prefects are—are—smart!"

McGonagall cracked another smile, this one of the snide sort that said

she knew everything. “You are very intelligent, if your marks this term are anything to go by. In fact I believe congratulations are even in order, good show. Are there any other prefect-like qualities you don't claim to adhere to?"

“Yes! They care about things like—like extracurriculars, which I do not—no offence. They're like professional babysitters, and I'd probably kill a baby as soon as it looked at me."

"I assure you, there will be no babies," McGonagall chuckled. "Only your fellow classmates."

"Okay, but—but prefects are just *so* uncool—and they're also stuck-up and bossy!”

“Is Ms. Evans stuck-up and bossy?”

“Well, she’s certainly bossy but she…” Remus trailed off, caught up in his own web. With nothing left to do, he let out a heavy sigh and leaned forward to beg. “Please, Professor McGonagall, can’t you just give me detention? Or assign me lines to do over the summer? I'll post them to you and everything!”

“I could, though I’m not sure the message would sink in properly come September, but if you were to have something constructive to fill your time, like becoming an acting prefect, where you’ll be expected to uphold the school rules rather than break them—then I’m sure it’ll stick.”

Remus used to think that all gym teachers were sadists. Now he was coming to the conclusion that the assumption extended to Headmistresses as well.

“Mr. Lupin,” McGonagall started again, “I stand by what I told you when you arrived here nearly two years ago, we here at Hawkings do not admit lost causes. You are a prime example of a student who has flourished under proper tutelage and the creation strong bonds between yourself and your peers. Now I implore you to use your final year at school to think on what it is you’d like to do with yourself in the future, and how you might best go about it. You have had many successes here—even if those successes were dotted with a few brow-raising complications.” She punctuated the statement with a brow-raise of her own, and Remus avoided her gaze guiltily. “But... I expect that you will have many more to come."

“Complications?”

“Successes.”

“... As a prefect.”

McGonagall nodded, a clever smirk on her face, and Remus let out another long sigh.

“Fine...”

“Excellent. As you may know, you will be required to arrive at school on August thirty-first in preparation for the other incoming students to arrive the following day, but apart from that, I hope you have a very happy summer, Remus.”

“Thank you professor,” he said, standing, “... you too.”

Remus left the office feeling conflicted. He didn't want to be a prefect, he *wanted* to be left in peace. Okay, so maybe the prefects weren't *all* of the things he'd said they were, but they certainly weren't made up of kids like him! Ugh, it was all so messed up.

By the time he'd made it back to House Lane, Remus had moved past the 'denial' stage and had gone straight to bargaining, attempting to look on the bright side, of which there were three main points:

1. His friends were going to have a heyday when they heard the news, but at least he wasn't going to be expelled.

2. As a prefect, he would be able to give them detention for said heyday.

3. He would at least have Lily. Having her by his side would be better than nothing, and with Snape finally out of the picture, perhaps they could even be prefect partners.

By happenstance, Remus ended up stumbling upon Lily first, as she was just getting out of her end-of-year prefect party. She'd been making her way up the lane toward the boys' dorm when they met up, and was wearing a pretty violet dress with matching ribbons in her hair.

“You look nice,” he said, and she beamed at him.

“Thank you! The dress is actually from James’ mum. She made it for me for Christmas—apparently there isn’t anything that woman can’t do.”

She gave a little twirl and he clapped for her, before shoving his hands into his pockets as they finished making their way back to the dorms.

“I met with McGonagall today," he confessed. Better to tell Lily first than anyone else. "She's decided on my punishment for hammering Barty."

"Oh no. What'd she say?"

"She's asked me to be a prefect."

Lily gasped; “She did?”

“Well, more like *told* me.”

“That’s brilliant! You’ll be so good at it!”

“You’re mental. She only wants me to do it so she can claim that I’ve been ‘reformed’. The shitty kid with a bad track record and facial scars is now top of the school—'imagine what the board’ll have to say'.”

Lily smacked his arm playfully, practically bouncing up and down on the pavement next to him. “Who cares what the school board will think—this is a big deal, Remus! It’s recognition for all your hard work.”

“Feels more like an unpaid job I don’t want.”

“But it is paid.”

Remus’ head shot up. “It is?”

“Just a small stipend,” Lily amended. “But still, it’s something. And you’ll get an extra period in your timetable to study for A-levels.”

“Oh sure, that is when I’m not busy with me ‘prefectly duties’.”

“Those aren’t *all* the time. If you're lucky they'll give you a permeant position somewhere, like the library! I did that my first year, and I got to study all I wanted during the down-time."

"Yippee..."

"Just think of the other benefits though—you can give Black a detention every time he pisses you off!”

He had thought of that, but it was funny to hear Lily try to sway him.

“In that case he'll have so many detentions, you’ll never see him again.”

Lily giggled. “I’m going to miss that free period actually. Did I tell you I switched some classes around?”

“Oh? Did you suddenly find an interest in music too?”

“No, law actually. To prepare for university.”

“I thought you wanted to do psychology in university," he said, clearly surprised.

Shyly, Lily began staring down at her shoes as they walked. “Hm, yes, well, I’ve been thinking about it for a long time now, and there are plenty of ways to help people within the field of psychology, but none that really call to me. For so long I thought being a lawyer was unrealistic, but now I feel as though it might be something that I could actually be good at. You know... helping others when the law won’t.”

Remus looked up at the great expanse of blue sky above them, and suddenly felt very thoughtful. “You’d make an amazing lawyer, Lils.”

“You think?”

“I know.” He glanced at her. “You win almost every argument.”

Lily took his arm affectionately. *“Almost* every argument. I know a few stubborn jerks who are hard to crack.” She pinched him, and he jumped but didn’t shake her off. Instead they kept walking, arm in arm.

“So what kind of law?” Remus asked, when they were almost back at Godric.

“Civil litigation I think. I’d like to defend labour workers and women —maybe even medical malpractice. Somewhere I can really make a difference for those who might otherwise get walked over.”

Remus gave an impressed whistle. “You and James just gonna take over his dad’s firm together then?”

“I don’t know about that. Let’s just get into university first.”

“Ah, but you gotta aim high, Evans. Sirius’ll need all the help he can get, springing himself from whatever lockup he ends up in.”

“You’re all hopeless,” Lily sighed happily, shaking her head. They’d made it back to his dorm, and were walking up the front path together when Remus spotted Jillian waiting by the front steps. She perked up immediately and waved at him, making Lily cock her head curiously, a cheeky look on her face.

“What’s going—”

“Don’t say a word,” Remus ground out, as Jillian raced up to them.

“Hi ya, Remus!” She smiled.

“Oh, h-hey Jillian...”

“I was hoping to catch you! Do you have a moment or are you… busy?”

Jillian looked pointedly at the way Lily was holding his arm, but Lily just dropped it innocently. “ ‘Course he has time!” She trilled. “I was just on my way in to see the lads. He’s all yours, Jill. I’ll see you inside, Remus.”

Remus watched as Lily shot him a pair of finger-guns before flouncing up the dorm’s front steps in her purple dress, utterly abandoning him to his fate.

“Maybe you should give corporate law some thought,” he called after her, “I’m sure with your icy heart it’d be a walk in the park!”

Lily only waved, while Jillian gave a little giggle. “You’re so funny, Remus. I get why Lily likes you.”

“Ah. Thanks...”

“Are the two of you… I mean, she’s still dating James Potter, right?”

“ ‘Course,” Remus frowned. “Why, has anyone said otherwise?”

“No, of course not! I just…” Jillian bit her lip over a smile. “Remus, I was wondering if you wanted to exchange phone numbers to, you know, keep in contact over the summer?”

Remus’ stomach tightened. *No, no, please no.*

“Ah, well—you see Jill, I—uhm... I don’t actually have… a… p-phone…”

“You don’t... have a phone?”

“We—Well I-I do, it’s just I… erm... took a vow of silence?”

“Wouldn’t that mean you’re not supposed to talk at all?” Jillian asked, blinking at him.

“It’s er—well, it doesn’t start until the summer, actually. Yeah, that's right—not a single word the moment we arrive home. All us guys are doing it, in fact. It's... a political thing—sociopolitical! You know—fight the power and all that...?”

“So what’s your stance? Starving kids in Africa or something? Poor factory workers' conditions?”

He felt bad for lying to the poor girl, but they only had one day of school left—there was no way that whatever this was, was going to persist throughout an entire summer, so he winced and gave another crappy excuse. “Sorry, it’s kind of a personal thing so... it’s hard to explain.”

“Oh, alright,” Jillian said kindly; “In that case, could I write to you instead—like a pen pal? Or does your vow of silence extend to letters, too?”

Remus forced a laugh. “Ha... ha... Don’t be silly," he said through his teeth, "of course you can write.”

“Brilliant. What’s your address?”

With no other excuses left in the vault, he gave it to her, regretting every choice that had led him to that point.

Ha! You're so weak.

Shut up.

Can't even say no to a girl. It's your funeral, mate.

With his address tightly fisted in her grip, Jillian finally left him on the dorm’s front steps, waving goodbye and hurrying up the lane as though she were afraid he would turn around and snatch it back again. Feeling like an utter idiot, he watched her go before dragging his feet the rest of the way inside, only to find that Lily had been watching them through the door’s window the entire time.

“You’re evil!” He wailed, as she burst into laughter in the dorm's

foyer.

“But Remus, it was so cute!”

“It wasn’t cute, she’s bloody everywhere! I swear to god, yesterday she was waiting for me outside the toilet!”

Lily bent forward, howling and cradling her stomach. “Why haven’t you just told her you’re not interested then?"

“It’s not that easy!”

“Of course it is, you’re just a chicken!”

Groaning, Remus turned away and leaned his head against the public post board next to the phone lines. “She has my address now—what if she actually looks me up over the summer? *Oh god,* what if she shows up at my house?”

Finished with her laughter, Lily wiped the tears from her eyes and pat him on the shoulder. “She's only a girl, Remus. You may be popular, but you’ll have to work a bit harder than that if you want to claim you have your own stalker.”

“I’m not popular,” he grumbled, “*James and Sirius* are popular.”

Lily gave a great sigh. “Oh Remus, sometimes you can be so thick.”

* * *

Baby, I’m amazed at the way you love me all the time,
And maybe I’m afraid of the way I love you;
Maybe I’m amazed at the way you pulled me out of time,
You hung me on the line,
Maybe I’m amazed at the way I really need you…

- “Maybe I’m Amazed” Paul McCartney, 1970

Their last night at school was finally upon them, and being the loud, obnoxious seventeen year-old’s they were, they’d tried pushing for an end of the year party, but Kenny was adamant. After an entire keg of mulberry wine had split over the common room rug on James’ birthday, the dorm monitor had sworn off all partying for the rest of

the school year.

“He’s such a nark,” Sirius complained, hauling his packed trunk toward the door in preparation for their early departure the next morning. “The carpet was already red, it barely stained!”

“What about the clogged toilets on the first and second floor?” Lily asked from James’ bed.

"And the mattresses that ended up on the front lawn?" Remus pushed.

“And the curtains those eighth years set on fire!” Peter added.

“It was just the trim,” Sirius scoffed, ignoring the rest of them, “and they were god-ugly anyway. Glad someone finally did it.”

“Well,” James started, from his place next to the record player, the only thing Sirius had yet to pack up, “you’ll be glad to know that I don’t have anything against a bit of split wine—or arson.”

A gasp went up around the room.

“Does that mean you got it, Prongs?” Remus asked, still busy peeling his Queen posters down off the wall. To answer him, James turned around, rubbing his hands together.

“That’s right, lads—and lady—you’re looking at the next Godric dorm monitor. McGonagall sent the notice over this morning.”

“Fuck yeah!” Sirius cried, ditching his trunks to smack his hand against James’ in congratulations.

"The Headmistress is definitely going to regret that one!" Peter snorted.

“That's not all, Remus got prefect too,” Lily added, because she absolutely couldn’t help it.

All three of his friends turned their wide eyes on him, and Remus groaned inwardly.

“Moony, you didn’t!” James exclaimed.

“It’s my punishment for laying out Barty,” he said quickly. “It was either that or she’d probably have had me expelled.”

“This is so great!” Sirius proclaimed. “A dorm monitor and a prefect

under one roof—who's gonna stop us now?"

"Maybe I will," Remus said smugly, "if you continue to annoy me, that is."

"Ha."

The bedroom door opened and Mary stuck her head in. "We come bearing gifts!" She sang, before opening the door and revealing the several bottles of booze she'd hidden under her shirt on the way up. Marlene and Lottie came after, all of them wearing big smiles and casual clothes instead of their usual uniforms. They quickly made themselves comfortable, falling across the boys' beds as Sirius and James popped the top of every bottle they'd managed to sneak in.

"Dorm monitors say no parties, so fine," Mary declared, "we'll just have our own."

While Sirius set an album on the turntable, Remus quickly finished putting his posters away and shut his trunk before accepting his first drink of the evening from Lottie. After pushing the beds aside, they made a large circle on the floor and fit in together, each of them simply content to spend their final night in each other's presence. James had laid back on the rug with his head in Lily's lap and she began curling her fingers through his dark hair while Sirius sat next to them, Andy's guitar propped up on one knee. Remus found himself tucked in between him and Lottie, who'd begun to draw on his arm in pen. He let her, slightly bemused by the skull and crossbones she'd already doodled on the inside of his forearm. It was almost sad to see their room looking so barren, but with eight bodies filling it up it didn't feel nearly so empty.

Eventually word of his and James' promotions came to light and afterwards Marlene announced that she had news of her own. Apparently her summer plans included spending the entire month of August away in Morocco, where she'd be volunteering with a non-profit charity organisation to feed homeless women and children. This came to a great surprise to all of them, most of all Mary, who'd been banking on having Marlene come stay with her in Paris so she could avoid her family.

"I told you about it," Marlene reasoned.

"Yes, but you never said you were actually gonna apply!" She whined.

“Well, I didn’t think I would be accepted either. You should’ve heard how long it took to convince Mum and Dad to let me go.”

“Why Morocco?” Remus asked.

Marlene grinned, the excitement clear on her face. “Mr. Durrin has a friend who teaches English there and he connected me with a recruiter in London.”

“So they speak English?” Lottie interjected.

“Some do, but it’s mostly Arabic and French.”

“That’s insane,” Sirius said. “You’re gonna fly there—on a real plane?”

“Yeah, but I’ll still be around for a while. We don't leave until mid-July.” She looked at Mary, who had puckered and turned away, picking at the rug. “Don’t be like that, Mary. I thought you’d be happy for me.”

“You didn’t even mention it…” Mary pouted. “You don’t even speak French!”

Reaching over, Marlene took her hand. “Guess you have the next four weeks to teach me, then.”

Mary glanced down at their interlaced fingers, and sighed before squeezing back tightly and leaning her head on Marlene’s shoulder sadly. Remus knew exactly how it felt, anticipating how much she would miss her best friend after her departure.

“Now I suppose our summer plans pale in comparison, huh, Pete?” James said, nudging Peter with his foot.

“I believe you’re coming to visit me this summer,” Lily said, pulling her fingers out of James’ hair.

“Oh—not that! I just meant the summer house in Devon. I told you we were going there after I visited you, yeah?”

Lily smirked and bent down to kiss him on the forehead. “Yes, you did.”

“Jesus—get a room!” Lottie teased, finishing up several swirling lines on the inside of Remus’ wrist. He watched her, lifting a mug of whisky to his lips before glancing to his left and catching Sirius’ eye.

“You want one?” He smirked. “I warn you though, my tattoo artist is in very high demand right now.”

Lottie giggled but Sirius only gave a quiet smile. He had a drink in one hand and was quietly fiddling the guitar's tuning keys with the other. “What are your plans for the holiday then?”

“Got none,” Remus answered. “Unless you count avoiding my dad. I figure it’ll just be me, Giles, and the dogs mostly.”

“And us!” James chirped. “Nice try, but you’re not getting away this summer, Lupin. Mum says you can still come to Devon too—there's plenty of room!”

“Okay, Prongs,” Remus smiled, before looking back at Sirius. “I promise to write, though," he told him.

“Oh really?” Sirius casually sipped his own drink. “Songs or letters?”

“Dunno yet. Maybe both if you’re lucky.”

Sirius chuckled, before tucking his pick between his teeth and looking down again, strumming lightly on the guitar’s strings. He was wearing both nail polish and eyeliner today, probably because he knew he wasn’t going to have either while at home. The thought suddenly struck Remus, and he felt bad all over again. He'd tried more than once to bring up the odd things Regulus had been ranting about outside the dining hall, but ever since that day in the music room, Sirius had been dismissing any and all mention of his mother. Remus supposed it was because he didn't want to ruin the time he had left by discussing her, but it was still worth worrying.

“Sirius..." he started lowly, so only the two of them could hear over the stereo's music; "about that thing Reg said to me...?"

Instantly Sirius’ smile was gone. "I thought I told you not to worry about it."

"You did—twice. But if you could just tell me what Regulus meant, then maybe..."

"I *told* you already, I don't know what Reg was on about. He was probably just spewing shit because he was pissed off."

"No, no—it was before the prank. I think it was a warning. And after, that's when he was ready to make up with you."

"Yeah right. I think hell will freeze over first."

"Sirius."

"Remus."

Remus sighed. "Alright. But you're absolutely sure everything's gonna be fine?"

"No," Sirius snorted. "I'm going home—it's never fine. That's what makes it all so 'exciting'. Heh."

“You jackass—doesn’t that worry you at all?”

"Nope."

"Why not?"

With suddenly finality, Sirius clapped a hand over the strings, looking up at him. “ 'Cause Lupin... if I stopped to worry about every little threat my mum spat out, I’d never feel brave again.”

Remus' throat suddenly felt very tight. He held Sirius' cool gaze a moment longer, before finally breaking eye-contact and looking down at his lap. “Oh. I’m… sorry.”

“Don’t be. You worry too much, Moons. And you’re so much cuter when you’re smiling.” Reaching out, Sirius clapped him gently on the back before returning to the guitar. If he noticed the way Remus’ eyes were watering in embarrassment, he didn't say anything. Finally Remus let out a heavy breath; unable to look at Sirius anymore, and turned to Lottie.

“Lottie... why is there a cartoon dinosaur on my arm?”

Lottie beamed down at her handiwork. “Because it’s cute and *you’re* cute!” She bopped him on the nose with her finger, but in comparison to Sirius, his reaction was rather null.

Still tucked up between his friends, Remus focused on polishing off his drink—and then a second—until the turntable finally clicked off, giving him an excuse to leave the circle and change the album.

“Remus put on ‘Goodbye Yellow Brick Road’!” Mary called as he stood.

“No, that’s way too sappy,” James said, “go for ‘Moondance’ instead.”

“Try reading the room guys.” Sirius turned around and pointed to his bed. “Moony, I left ‘Electric Warrior’ right there.”

“The one who gets up off his sorry arse gets to pick the music,” Remus answered, before picking up *A Day at the Races* and showing it off. Sirius smirked, obviously satisfied, but Mary gave a moan.

“This is blatant favouritism.”

Setting the needle down, he joined the circle once more while the album’s long intro gave way to one of his favourite guitar riffs of all time.

‘Ooh, ooh yeah, ooooh yeah,
Get your party gown;
Get your pigtail down,
Get your heart beatin’ baby;
Got my timin’ right,
Got my act all tight;
It’s gonna be tonight, my little school babe!’

As Remus rejoined the circle, Sirius reached an arm out and looped it around his neck, drawing him so close he could smell the whisky on his breath. “Favouritism or no, you gotta admit, Moony has taste.”

"I wish there was actual room to dance," Lottie complained. "Potter when you're dorm monitor, I expect at least one party every week."

"You can't afford a party every week, what with the way you drink," Peter said.

"Ugh. Really, do you always have to be such a milksop, Petey?"

“I know what we can do! We should play a game!” Mary announced, before covering her mouth to hide a rather unladylike belch.

“Noooo,” Remus laughed immediately. "Please, not again. I can't play another silly truth or dare game."

“I don’t see why not,” Marlene teased, “after all, it is our last night together.”

"Yeah, c'mon Moons," James pushed. "Just one round."

“It doesn’t have to be truth or dare,” Lottie said comfortingly.

“Yes! It can be a drinking game,” Mary said. “I learned this fun one

from Calvin and his friends last week—”

“Wait, I thought you broke up with him like a month ago,” Lily started.

“I did, we weren’t actually playing, he just told me about it over dinner.”

“You’re still having dinner with him?” Marlene frowned. "I thought you said—"

“Everyone just shut up so she can tell us about the damn game!” Sirius cried, flapping his arms and setting his guitar aside. “Go ahead, Dusty. The floor's all yours.”

Shooting Sirius a sharp scowl for the nickname, Mary cleared her throat and raised her cup. “The game’s called ‘Cheers Governor’, and it goes like this. We go around in a circle, counting from one to twenty-one—*only,* the numbers seven and fourteen are switched. Whoever messes up the order has to finish their drink.”

“That doesn’t sound too hard,” James said, sitting up from Lily’s lap.

“But that’s not all,” Mary grinned, “whoever says twenty-one gets to make up a rule.”

“What kind of rule?” Peter asked.

“Any kind—as long as it has to do with a number. Like, instead of saying the number five, you have to make an animal call instead.”

“Oh you mean like—” Sirius leaned into James, rolling his tongue and purring into his ear. James immediately collapsed into Lily’s side, shrieking and shivering as the rest of them exploded with laughter.

“Exactly!” Mary shouted in delight. “This is gonna be so much fun. Okay, everyone come forward so you’re in the circle and make sure you got enough for a shot in your cup!”

Obediently, they passed the liquor around, topping everyone up before Mary kicked the game off; “One.”

“Two!”

“Three.”

“Four.”

“Five!”

“Six.”

“Seven—oh shit, fourteen!”

“Ah, ah, Lily,” Mary grinned, “you ballsed it up, so bottoms up!”

Sighing, Lily took a deep swig of whisky. “Okay,” she coughed, as James refilled her glass; “Now what?”

“Now we start over. You say one.”

“One," she said.

“Two.”

“Three!”

On and on it went, until finally the round finished with Lottie, who clapped her hands together; “Twenty-one!”

“Now we cheers!” Mary announced. “Everyone say ‘cheers gov’na!’”

They all raised their glasses, knocking them together in the centre of their circle; *“CHEERS GOV’NA!”* before downing the shot of liquor and shaking off the puckered grimaces it came with.

“Lot, you gotta make up a rule now,” Mary said; passing a bottle of gin around for each of them to pour another shot. It was hard not to imagine the hangover they were all surely going to have on the train tomorrow.

Lottie thought for a moment; “Hmm... Alright! Whoever says the number sixteen has to… say a dirty word instead!”

“Yes! Okay, you heard her. Lottie start us off!”

They all got going again, Marlene almost tripping up over ‘fourteen’, and Peter impulsively wailing *‘CUNT!’* before clapping his hands over his mouth when the number sixteen reached him. They all laughed, James nearly in tears, but they managed it a second time without screwing up, and when Lily shouted out twenty-one they all cheersed again and drank once more. Remus could already feel the booze going to his head, but there was enough music and noise that he no longer felt worried about anything—except for perhaps how close Sirius had gotten after they’d all shuffled in to make a better circle. Now their

knees were pressed together, and Sirius, unable to sit still as always, was drunkenly rocking back and forth between him and James, nearly leaning on them both.

“Number seventeen has to kiss the cheek of the person to their left!” Lily declared.

“But I’m sitting next to my sister!” Peter protested.

“It’s just my bloody cheek!” Lottie said. “If that’s so revolting then guess you’re drinking!”

It didn’t matter anyway. After James had screamed *‘BOLLOCKS’,* Lily paid the price herself and leaned over to plant a loving smooch on Marlene’s cheek.

“I think we’re getting good at this,” Sirius said, “but how is it we always end with Lottie?”

“Who knows,” Lottie purred, “but now whoever lands on six has to switch shirts with the person across from them.”

“That’s ghastly,” Mary said. *“I love it!* Go ahead, Lot.”

"One!"

"Two!"

Remus thought this was all quite funny, until he did the math and realised two numbers early that Marlene was number six, and he was the one sitting directly across from her.

“Go on, Moony,” Sirius cackled, “it’ll look great on you!”

He looked Marlene up and down. She was wearing a rainbow-coloured t-shirt which she whipped off with zero hesitation, leaving herself only in a bra. It might've been the alcohol, but he'd never seen Marlene so bold.

“Oh shit—McKinnon!” Sirius gasped as Peter clapped his hands over his face to hide his eyes and a grin. Bursting out laughing, Lottie shoved him.

“My brother the gentleman!” She sneered.

“Little does he know we girls stroll topless through our dorm on the daily,” Mary bragged.

James whirled on Lily; “You do?!”

She smacked him; “Of course not!”

“Oh, just give me your shirt already, idiot!” Marlene shouted at Remus, throwing hers across the circle.

“Don’t yell at me with your shirt off!” Remus laughed, catching it.

“S’not like it’s anything you haven’t seen before! Now hand it over!”

The boys rallied; *'Oooooh! Moony's a slag!'*

“Shut up!” He laughed, pushing Sirius as he pulled his t-shirt over his head and tossed it at her. To no one’s surprise, it turned out much too big on Marlene’s narrow frame, but Mary immediately grabbed the front of it, pulling the fabric to her nose.

“It smells good!”

“Remus always smells good,” Marlene said haughtily, lifting the collar to get a whiff for herself.

"Oh yeah, it's that two-in-one he uses," Sirius ragged, "makes him smell like spearmint toothpaste. Like a leprechaun's ball-sack, really."

"Okay, Farrah Fawcett," Remus said, rolling his eyes playfully as he tugged the tight girls t-shirt over his head. He wasn’t particularly broad in the chest or shoulders, so he got it on, though there wasn’t room for much else.

“I told you it would look good,” Sirius sniggered, leaning towards him. “Guess rainbow’s your colour.”

“Just keep counting,” Remus huffed, pushing Sirius away by the cheek.

“It’s Mary’s turn!” Sirius grunted.

“Seven!” Mary shouted, then; “Oh shit!”

The game went on and on and by the time it took the record to finish its first side, they’d all taken so many shots that it was clear they’d be hammered for the rest of the night. No one had their own shirt on by the end, and Remus was distinctly reminded of his sixteenth birthday as he watched Sirius squeeze into Mary’s cherry-red tube top. When it was James’ turn to kiss Lily’s cheek, he went in for a smooch and

instead licked up the side of her entire face, making her shriek and push him off while they all howled with laughter.

They didn't get very many rounds in after that anyway, only able to drunkenly trip over the numbers. Peter ordered that you had to bark instead of saying the number twelve and James declared that everyone must strike a stupid pose in place of the number three, but it was Sirius' rule of switching directions every time one of them messed up really became the kicker. Then, just as it seemed like they were going to actually finish a round, James screamed 'FUCKFACE' in place of sixteen and Sirius turned to Remus, eyes alight as he grabbed his face and pulled him in for that kiss on the cheek. Only Remus was still laughing at James, and the eager grab surprised him so badly that he turned at the last moment and Sirius' lips hit him full on the mouth.

The instant their lips connected, it was like a bomb had gone off. Everyone screamed, even them, and Remus shot backwards, nearly toppling into Lottie's lap as he gaped at his friend.

Did that really just—

Yup.

Fuck!

I think you mean, fuck YEAH!?

As Remus was busy coming apart at the seams to the sound of his own internal monologue, Mary stomped her feet on the ground and squealed in delight; "Oh my god! OH MY GOD!"

"You kissed him!" Marlene shrieked after her.

Sirius laughed too while rubbing his lower lip which he had banged sharply on Remus' upper tooth. "Damn, Moony, if you wanted a real smooch you could've just asked."

Did he really just say THAT?!

"F-Fuck off!" Remus gasped. "It was your fault!"

"Nuh-uh! You turned!"

"You grabbed me!"

"It was part of the game, you numpty!"

Remus came up short again and held a hand to his mouth, as though he could still feel Sirius' lips there.

“Remus, your number!” Lily laughed suddenly, making him scramble.

“Er—nine—twelve? Shit!”

“Nooooo!” Everyone moaned in laughter, and Lottie forced his drink back into his hands for his failure. Remus took it and downed the shot without hesitation. He could hardly believe it—Sirius’ mouth had been on his mouth. Sirius’ Black’s mouth had *actually* been on his mouth. Remus didn’t know if he wanted to laugh, cry, or throw up. Maybe all three at once.

“One more round?” James asked, but Mary shook her head, turning the last empty bottle upside down.

“No more booze,” she said sadly.

“Ah, party’s not over yet though. Let’s have a song, shall we?” Hopping up from his place in the circle, Sirius crossed back to the turntable, flipping the record and resetting the needle. Remus watched his back, muscles standing out against the tight tube-top, and was struck by the sudden urge to reach out and wring his perfect neck.

You're really going to kiss me and pretend it didn't happen?! You bastard—why I oughta...

"Can I get a drumroll please?" Sirius called, Immediately everyone but Remus was drumming on their thighs or the floor, and when the noise reached its peak, he finally dropped the needle. A second later the stereo kicked on;

‘Caaaaaan anybodyyyyy!
Find meeeeeee!
Somebody toooooo—’

On ‘love’, Sirius turned around and pointed directly at him, and Remus felt his stomach not only flip, but start an entire circus in his gut. Marlene and Lottie continued to clapped, all of them oblivious to the world-ending event happening to him right in front of them.

“Oh, get a look at this shameless tosser!” Mary cried, but Sirius was not to be stopped. He danced toward them, not only mouthing the words but singing along, swaying drunkenly but somehow still so enrapturing that Remus couldn’t have looked away even if he wanted

to. It was embarrassing—it was mortifying—it was positively entrapturing.

“Ooh, each morning I get up I die a little,
Can barely stand on my feet!
Take a look in the mirror and cry,
Lord, what you’re doing to me!
I have spent all my years in believing you,
But I just can’t get no relief, Lord!
Somebody—”

Sirius pointed at the girls, who each screamed a ‘somebody’ back at him.

“Ooh somebody—!”

“SOMEBODY!”

“Can anybody find meeee—

Somebody to loveee…”

Jumping forward, Sirius grabbed James’ forearms with his own, and suddenly they were belting the entire song out to one another.

“I work hard!”

“He works hard!”

“—Every day of my life,
I work ‘til I ache in my bones!
At the end—”

“At the end of the day!”

“I take home my hard earned pay, all on my own!
I get down on my knees,
And I start to pray—”

“Praise the lord!”

“ ‘Til the tears run down from my eyes—
LORD—somebody!”

“SOMEBODY!”

“Oooh, somebody!”

“PLEASE!”

"Can anybody find meee—
Somebody to LOOOOOOOOOVE?”

It was heaven and hell watching them. Everyone stood, and Marlene took Remus’ arm, pulling him up with them. They danced around in their circle, screaming and belting the words. No one was really singing anymore, but the sound was beautiful enough anyway. On each *‘YEAH!’,* his friends thrust their fists into the air and Remus did too. He was delighted, but his eyes never left Sirius. How could they? He loved him. He was sure as the guitar solo that was echoing in his ears, that he loved him.

"Got no feel, I got no rhythm—
I just keep losing my beat!
I’m okay, I’m alright—”

“He’s alright!”

“I ain’t gonna face no defeat!”

Sirius spun around, so close Remus could’ve touched him if he just reached out. But as if he could hear his thoughts, Sirius touched him instead. With an iron grip he grabbed his arm, pulling him in close and wailing the lyrics;

“I just gotta get out of this prison cell,
Someday I’m gonna be free, LORD!”

Sirius held on. They began to chant;

“Find me somebody to love—
Find me somebody to love—
Find me somebody to love—!”

Remus grabbed hold of his other arm. They began to stomp;

“Find me somebody to love—!
Find me somebody to love, love, love—!
Find me somebody to love—!
FIND ME SOMEBODY TO LOVE!”

They were *friends.* And still Remus was in love.

“Somebody—SOMEBODY!

Somebody—SOMEBODY!
Somebody, find me somebody—
Find me somebody to love!
CAN ANYBODY FIND ME—”

And this was it. Sirius looked at him like he never had before. Smiling as he always was, but somehow different.

“SOMEBODY TOOOOOOO—
LOOOOOOVE…!”

The cymbals crashed, the tempo dropped, and each of them sagged with the effort of their singing. The girls swayed, Lottie hugged her brother close, James lifted Lily in the air, and as though he knew exactly how badly Remus wanted to touch him, Sirius fell forward onto him, hugging their chests together as the song’s crescendo flooded the room around them.

Sirius was so warm, so hot. He could the heat of him through his shirt like a scalding iron—feel that Sirius Black heartbeat in his own chest. Remus wanted to drown in it—drown the feeling of *him.* But then Sirius pulled away, breathing hard and looking just as tipsy as the rest of them. Remus didn't have time to get a word in—Sirius was already turning to James.

No, no—more, please more! Somebody!

“That was bloody amazing,” James panted, Lily still wrapped happily in his arms.

“That was rock and roll, mate,” Sirius answered, "now imagine doing it for the rest of your life.”

Chuckling, James released his girlfriend long enough to come forward and give Sirius a firm clap on the back. As he did, Marlene appeared at Remus’ elbow, smiling and flushed like the rest of them.

“Are you okay, Remus?” She asked, pushing her hair back from her face. “Your cheeks are really red. Are you burning up or something?”

She began to reach for him and he dodged her hand, shaking his head quickly. “Nah, jus’ drunk. M'gonna go use the toilet.”

She nodded and he slipped past her, suddenly desperate to put as much space between himself and Sirius before he could do something they’d both regret. Kicking the bathroom door shut behind him,

Remus bent over the sink and turned on the taps, gathering a handful of cool water and splashing it up onto his face and neck. The rushing water helped drown out some of his friends' frantic noise, but the music still cut through loud and clear behind him. His skin was radiating heat—*Sirius' heat*—but he'd only just noticed how hot it'd gotten in their bedroom. And it wasn't just the dancing.

"Oh goddammit—*fuck offffff,"* he moaned to himself, clutching the sides of the porcelain sink with his head hung low. "Just stop it, you idiot. *Stop.* He's not—he's just your friend, he can't be—"

"Moony?"

"BLOODY FUCK—!" Remus shot upright and to find Sirius' reflection staring back at him in the mirror. "God!" He hissed, turning around as his heart shot into his throat.

Did he hear me? Please just kill me if he heard me.

"Sirius," he breathed, "you shared the shit out of me. What do you—"

Sirius surged forward, grappling him by the neck and suddenly—*just like that*—they were kissing.

It was as though Remus' brain had reset. He was absolutely frozen, back pinned to the sink while he scrambled for what to do next, but then Sirius opened his mouth and there came his tongue, wet and hot and wonderful.

Remus couldn't take it.

Grabbing him back, he cupped his hands around Sirius' neck like it was the only thing he knew how to do, squeezing tight until Sirius sent breathy gasp hurdling into his mouth. It was clumsy and probably hurt but Sirius never stopped him. In their urgency they fell backwards into the bathroom door and Remus distantly heard the wood groan under their weight. It didn't matter, the music outside was far louder than any of their noise, and even if someone had noticed Remus doubted he could stop now. They were too busy scrambling, desperate for any taste of each other that could be had. Sirius' hands were in his hair and Remus could feel the faint teenage stubble along his jaw. His skin was on fire but nothing about it was uncomfortable.

Yes! Don't stop. Please don't stop!

His entire body hummed as their lips slipped against each other's,

desperate and hungry. For a moment Remus thought he heard the other boy say his name, but then Sirius' knee came up against the inside of his thigh and brushed against him. Instantly Remus dropped an arm to take hold of Sirius' leg, pinning him against the door until he could feel the beginnings of what could've been an erection through his trousers. Sirius gasped again and Remus took the chance to slide his tongue deeper, tasting the sour alcohol on his breath. In an intoxicated rush Sirius wrapped his arms around his neck, cradling his head and locking them together as Remus stroked his thumbs across his jaw. Then Sirius moaned around his tongue and he was finished.

Yes—yes, yes, yes, yes!

He might've never bothered to come up for air had Sirius not broken away from him, still pinned up against the door. He looked down, eyeing the guitar pick Remus had given him with the chain he'd given in return. If Remus were thinking straight he might've felt embarrassed by the fact that he was still wearing Marlene's rainbow t-shirt, but Sirius was in a tube top anyway and they'd both just done something they couldn't take back.

"Shit," Sirius said, almost breathless, "wonder where that came from, huh?"

Or maybe they could.

"You…" Remus trailed off, losing his grip on Sirius' leg.

"Yeah…" Sirius breathed, lips swollen and red. They looked so good that, for the first time since the night started, Remus began to feel afraid again. Afraid of what it meant for them as friends, but also what it meant for just him. What it *made* him.

"Sirius, I-I don't—" he stuttered; "I-I mean, that I'm not a—"

"S'fine, me neither," Sirius murmured just as fast, shifting quickly and making Remus jump away from him. Sirius kept his eyes trained on the ground. "Not really, like it's just—uhm… Sorry, m'just pissed. Utterly gassed actually. Just... forget about it… please?"

"Yeah sure," Remus promised, crumbling at the pain in Sirius' voice. "We're both drunk, so... no worries..."

"Still best mates?"

"Huh? Oh... yeah, course!"

Sirius gave him a sad smile. “Cool."

Fuck.

"Cool..."

"Okay, so I’m just gonna—well…” Jutting his thumb out behind him, Sirius turned away and slipped out of the bathroom like a shadow.

“Moony okay?” He heard James ask as the door fell closed.

“Sure—fine, totally,” Sirius answered. “Bastard’s—erm... He's just bent over the toilet. Nasty mess. Wouldn't go in if I were you.”

“That doesn’t sound fine,” Lily said, then a knock came from the other side of the door, making Remus flinch; “Remus, are you okay?”

“I told you he’s fine, Evans!”

"Remus? Do you need me to come in?"

“No!" He croaked; “Sirius' right, m’fine. Don't need any help, just—just stay where you are. I'll... be out in a sec.”

“Alright. I'll be waiting for you though,” Lily said kindly, and then the music got even louder. "Ooh, Black—*really?* Turn it down before you wake up the whole bloody dorm!"

Almost wincing at the noise, Remus leaned back against the sink to really take in the dull throbbing that'd become present in his chest. His mind was a mess, his thoughts whizzing by like flashing neon lights. Sirius playing the guitar, Sirius singing Queen, Sirius dancing around the room. Then the bathroom, where he'd kissed Sirius—or actually, where Sirius had kissed *him.*

Oh god, that mouth, those lips, that *TONGUE?!*

That kiss was all he'd been wanting for months, so why did everything suddenly feel so horrible? Perhaps it was because Sirius was actually drunk, and he hadn't really meant to kiss him—Remus was just the first person he saw. But then why not choose one of the girls? Why not Mary or Lottie or *anybody else?* Maybe it *was* supposed to be joke, but the punchline just hadn't stuck. Maybe it was all just a stupid, drunken mistake... Maybe Sirius hadn't meant for it at all.

Wow, a voice said, *that sucks.*

Lashing out, Remus kicked the bathroom door hard and slammed his toe against the wood. Immediately pain laced up his leg, and he had to swallow a moan that was more frustration than anything. Tilting his head back and burying his palms in his eye sockets, he began to focus on the sound of his own heart beat in his ears. He wanted Sirius to come back—to kiss him again and never stop. But they were friends, and they were all just about to leave for the summer, and he was *afraid.* And Sirius, he... he'd told him to forget about it.

In the grand scheme of things, Remus Lupin didn't know much, but if there was one thing he understood for sure—it was that he was never going to be able to forget kissing Sirius Black.

* * *

Remus didn't remember much of what happened after the kiss. He'd doused himself in water a few more times to cool off, but how he'd kept his face clear of all emotions when he finally emerged, he didn't know. He'd gone along with the 'getting sick over the toilet' story, so his friends had probably just chalked his grim mood up to the sudden onset of nausea, but it probably helped that they were all severely knackered themselves. Miraculously, Remus did manage to sleep some, but he couldn't remember getting into bed—or stacking his trunks by the door for that matter, either. But when James' alarm went off and they all rolled out of bed, moaning, Remus recalled enough to not look Sirius in the eye.

On the train, all of them mirrored the same despairing chant—*Thank heavens for Lily Evans.* She'd been the only one among them sensible enough to pack water for the ride home, and though Remus felt too sick to even entertain the idea, she had also made up a hearty supply of sandwiches as well. Having quickly realised how sweltering it was in a train car with seven other hungover teens, Peter opted to ride with Moira and her friends. And then somewhere between Edinburgh and Berwick-upon-Tweed, Mary and Lottie had also disappeared from the compartment. That left just five of them crammed in together as the train jostled along, which Remus was grateful for. The heat was terrible, even with the window open, and Marlene had taken to fanning herself with one of Mary's fashion magazines while chattering with Lily about her plans for Morocco. James dozed steadily with his head on Lily's knee and his legs draped over Sirius' lap. Perhaps the illest out of all of them—he never could quite hold his liquor—James had already fled to the toilet three times, and was still looking a bit

green in the face, but at least he was able to sleep some of it off.

Remus was not so lucky.

He'd hoped to get a seat on the bench beside from Sirius, rather than across, so at least that way he wouldn't have to avoid looking at him, but the moment they'd boarded Sirius had grappled onto James and Lily and that had set the seating arrangements for the duration. Now, with four hours down and still several more left to go, Remus was running out of things to keep himself preoccupied. Reading was a bust—his head hurt just looking at the page—and in his tiredness he couldn't keep up with the girls' conversation enough for it to be of any help. He'd managed to choke down some tea from the trolly cart, but that provided little distraction and staring at the window just made him woozy. Finally he'd settled on just pretending to sleep. The jostle of the train hid his movements every time he needed to readjust, and at least this way he could quietly spy on Sirius through the squinting cracks of his eyelids without him actually realising that he was staring.

Sitting across from him, Sirius had propped Andy's acoustic up on James' legs and was gently plucking the strings. He'd been keeping them muted with his palm so there'd be no noise, which almost felt disappointing. Even when they were at their most furious with each other, Remus always liked listening to Sirius play. But he didn't dare tell him that—didn't dare tell him a lot of things. After nearly four hours plus breakfast and the bus ride to the station (for which Remus sat with Marlene and Sirius sat with Lottie), they'd still barely made eye contact. It was obvious that neither of them were about to bring up what had happened in the toilet the day before. It made Remus wonder if it might be different had they been in the compartment alone and not surrounded by their closest friends.

"I still can't believe you're going to be in Africa for six weeks," he heard Lily say.

"Me neither, actually. I've never even been on a plane before. Mary said they aren't that bad—but it's just a tin box flying through the air. With my luck we'll go down before we're even flying over Madrid."

"Oh my—Don't say that! … Blimey. So are you all fit to go then?"

"Almost. I go for my vaccinations right when we get back. Then it's just a bit of immigration paperwork and voila—Morocco, here I come."

The girls kept chatting, but Remus tuned them out. What did he really have planned for the summer? James and Peter had invited him to tag along with them to their families' summer homes in Deven, but that wasn't until the end of July, and honestly, hanging out with his friends' parents didn't sound like his idea of a good time. He usually would've gone straight to Tomny's, but that plan was dead in the water. So it appeared that his summer was shaping up to look like a whole lot of nothing. It was depressing until Remus reminded himself that his version of nothing was still better than Sirius'. Once they reached Kings Cross, James would take Andy's guitar with him for safekeeping, and Sirius would continue on to Bath, where all he had was a big house filled with people who made no secret of hating each other. There would be no music, no laughter, for two and a half long months. And that was truly *nothing.*

Thinking about it, and watching Sirius soundlessly strum through his eyelashes, Remus thought back to the Christmas prior, when he and Sirius had parted on less than promising terms. He'd had a great holiday, but Sirius had felt so trapped he hurt himself just trying to get away, and that had only taken three weeks.

What are you thinking inside that big fat, genius brain of yours? Remus wondered. *Are you just putting on a brave face for the rest of us? Why don't you just follow James or Peter home? Why keep going back—is she really so scary?*

And why did you bloody kiss me?

Remus wasn't sure Sirius had those answers, but if he could take his mind off of it for even just a little while, then he wanted to try.

It took until they'd left Newcastle for him to work up the nerve to reach out and nudge Sirius with his foot. Sirius looked up immediately, still looking tired and rough after a night of boozing. He didn't smile or anything, but at least he wasn't ignoring him entirely.

"Thought you were sleeping."

“I was. Or—I was trying to," Remus said. When he spoke he sounded as though he had a frog in his throat, but a quick cough settled it well enough. "You never told me what your summer plans were."

Sirius had the gall to crack a lazy smile. “I didn’t? Hm, that’s right. Actually I was thinking Bulgaria. The people there are supposed to be very strong—even the women. I’ve always fancied me a wife that could throw me over her shoulder like it was nothing. Imagine the

possibilities in the bedroom. Plus I hear they've got great yogurt."

"You can't ever take anything seriously, can you?"

"Nope."

Remus sighed and looked down to his hands, only to feel Sirius nudge him back.

"Hey, don't you worry about me," he told him, "it's just a few weeks. Then we start our musical take-over with you as Mr. Perfect-Prefect and principal song-writer of Marauders."

"That's quite the upgrade from someone who was just collecting royalties."

Sirius smiled, and then turned his gaze to the window.

"Yeah well, I like you, so…"

Remus felt his breath hitch.

Sometimes Sirius could be so cruel.

Chapter End Notes

The song Remus puts on is "Tie Your Mother Down", the first track off of Queen's 'A Day at the Races' album. Sirius promptly follows it up with "Somebody to Love", which is the first track off of the album's b-side.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS!!!! And if you don't celebrate, then warm and cozy wishes from me to you <3

I really hope this felt worth the wait. Only took >350 thousand words—LOL
The pinning is far from over (I mean, obviously. Have you met Remus Lupin???) this is truly just the beginning.

This chapter marks the end of my holiday posting schedule, as I (again—OBVIOUSLY) wanted to release this chapter on Christmas for a reason ;)))) No news yet when next chapter will be out (it'll be our first summer chapter of 1977, and there are a handful this time!), but hopefully before the New Year! Depends on how many assignments I can grind out before then, lol.

As always, feel free to leave me your thoughts or reach out on

other social medias, and yes, feel free to spam bc ily <3

Chapter 65: Summer's Start, 1977

Chapter Summary

For Remus, this summer is completely unlike the last. He doesn't know what he's doing, he even fumbles his other relationships, but maybe it's not all bad.

Chapter Notes

CW: 'F' slur in smoking context. Violence, though nothing explicit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tax man's taken all my dough,
And left me in my stately home,
Lazing on a sunny afternoon;
And I can't sail my yacht,
He's taken everything I got,
All I've got's this sunny afternoon…

- "Sunny Afternoon" The Kinks, 1966

Dear Padfoot,

I hope your summer's going well so far—or as well as it could be in boring old Bath. You'll be pleased to know that I finally accepted I went out with Wormtail and Prongs the other day. We went to Piccadilly Circus. It was sorta It was fun. I haven't been in years. They mostly shopped for the girls, but we found this great new music store too. They had this guitar on the wall—a '69 Strat that the sales guy said had once belonged to David Gilmour. Sounded like a load of crap to me but it is London so I guess you never know.

I'm sure he's already told you, but Prongs' dad picked up this crazy steel-string acoustic for him from a jumble sale. It's an old model, but apparently he kept going on about how "all real musicians have to start rough". You'd have probably ate it up. Anyway, so now Prongs refuses to change the strings on account of this ' bluesy twang' it's got. Don't tell him I said this, but it really just sounds like someone took a hammer to it. He did bring the thing to Regent's Park when I saw him last though, and I gotta admit that it does look half-way decent. Has Prongs told you what he's started doing with his hair? He's using moose now. (Moouse? Mousse?—

Not the dessert, but the weird hair stuff that girls use.) Lily told him that it makes him look a bit like James Dean. Of course he loved it. You should watch out, otherwise he might just rob you of your title of handsomest maraud

Wormtail's been trying to persuade his parents to get him his own kit for his birthday. He says they're being stingy—you know, the noise and all—but Prongs said the Simeon's all for it. And Sim's pretty convincing. With his foot in the ring they might just go for it! How great would that be, hey? Though I doubt Wormtail could get it to school. Try sending a bass drum through the Scottish post. As if.

I still hate this letter-writing nonsense by the way, but I'll do it for you it's not all that bad I guess. I've also been going through the stuff of yours I brought back with me. I was looking for "Sticky Fingers" but I think Wormtail's got it. I'll have to trade him for it next time.

You've been pretty quiet Prongs says you've been quiet, which is strange because we both know you can't resist yammering our ears off even when we're guaranteed a ten week break from you. You don't have to post me back, but at least write him. He misses you.

Moony.

* * *

Dear Padfoot,

Went to the cinema with Marlene yesterday. You'll never guess who was the lead—Bowie ! Toff was playing some alien too, just like in those songs of his. The movie was decent—stupid long (I sorta fell asleep in the middle) but I'll bet you'd have liked it, Marlene did. She's really taking this whole 'sci-fi' thing to heart. I never knew she was so into it. Also apparently there's this big film that came out in America this year called 'Star Wars' . Dumb name, I know. It's not even out over here yet, but she's over the moon for it. (Thought you'd appreciate the pun.)

I took the car out with Giles for the first time the other day. And yes, you sarcastic ass, it went just fine. Giles might not agree, but he ain't writing the letter.

Are you doing alright? Prongs is getting really worried that you haven't responded to any of our letters. Lily phoned me yesterday and even she's nervous. Are you getting them? If you are, write us back before they start

looking for your obituary in the papers. Though that sounds just like the sort of stupid dramatics you'd love anyway.

Moony.

* * *

Dear Padfoot,

I feel like I'm writing to empty air here. This whole bloody letter business was your idea in the first place. Did the ancient and most noble House of Black suddenly pick up and move? Or did you just forget to pay the postboy?

My dad's been home a lot lately, which sucks because I have too. You already know why. Even worse though, he wants to talk. Lots of crap about 'the future' and what university I'm going to go to after we finish upper sixth. I think he's about this close to applying in my place. I haven't mentioned the prefect stuff and before you ask, no, I haven't said anything about the band either. I like fighting but not that much. Let him think I'll do what he wants while we figure out what we want, hey? We got a year to do it. Feels like enough time.

I know you can read my handwriting, so write us back.

Moony.

* * *

Dear Padfoot,

I think my dad might be seeing someone. I snuck a peek at his organiser the other day and it was full of things like 'dinner with S' and 'meeting with S'. I suppose this 'S' could just be some random colleague like a 'Stephen' or a 'Sean'—but since when do you meet your colleagues for dinner at Le Gavroche? It's fucking weird. I mean like, MY dad? On a DATE? I sorta thought he'd lost all feeling below the waist years ago and that's why he never bothered—fuck, now I'm thinking about it. Eugh.

If it is a woman, then she must be blind. Or deaf. Or just plain stupid. Who could possibly find him interesting? All he talks about is work and the dogs, and neither of them in a fond sort of way. What about your dad? What

does his mistress find appealing about him? I mean, besides the size of his wallet. (That was a joke.)

I had this dream the other day that you jumped out another window I was reading this book about a guy who fell out of a window and died. He didn't die right away, instead he had to lie in a hospital bed for three days, ruminating on his life while he bled out internally. Felt like such a shit way to go. I mean, if you're gonna jump out a window and die then you might as well die quickly. Though, I don't think he really meant to die in the first place. He just leaned a bit too far. I don't know why I'm telling you all this. It wasn't a very good book. Maybe just don't try jumping out any more windows, okay?

I know things are a bit weird right now, but it'd be really great if you could post Prongs or Wormtail back. They still worry. Though they'd probably do that anyway.

Moony.

* * *

Dear Shit-toes,

This is getting a bit old. Are you actually ignoring us on purpose? If you are, then that's a real shit thing to do. Everyone's worried! Prongs said that you've gone radio-silent before just to be an ass, but this is a new low. You're not my own personal diary, you know. I've got better things to do than sit and recite my day on paper to keep you entertained. You think I wait around all day just wondering when I'll get a scrap of news from the Great Sirius Black? Not bloody likely. No, you've really pissed me off. How hard is it to write a letter? Anything—just 'hey, I'm alive. Still a complete tosser though!'

You probably think it's hilarious—letting everyone panic. But that's not how life works, Padfoot. We're not all just going to pine after you forever like a field of love-sick daisies.

Are you trying to punish me? Cause you're the one who kissed m

Write us back.

* * *

Padfoot,

I'm sorry, alright? For that last letter and everything. It was a bad day and I let my dad get to me. But if all of this is about what happened that night in the bathroom then you can just forget about it—really! I already have, and I swear I won't tell anyone. Not James or Peter or Lily. We can keep it a secret. No one has to know. We were just being drunk idiots anyway, and we're best friends, and best friends do stupid shit with each other all the time. I'll bet you've kissed Prongs loads of So you don't have to worry about anything, I swear. I'm still the same Moony, and you're Padfoot.

Just write us back, mate. Please.

Moony.

* * *

Sirius,

It's been too long. The others are freaking out. I am too.

Where are you?

* * *

21st July 1977

"Break—the break! USE YOUR BREAK!"

Remus let out a bark of laughter as he slammed on the Roll's brake pedal, the car lurching to a halt just ahead of the estate's driveway. Still clinging to the door handle for dear life, Giles tugged the cap from his head and used it to dab the sweat from his receding hairline. They'd been driving up and down the back roads around the estate for nearly a month now, and Remus was quite pleased with his progress, even if Giles was more cynical.

"You are going to be the death of me," he cursed.

"C'mon Gil, it wasn't that even bad!" Remus said, throwing the car into park.

“Oh really? Try telling that to that lead foot of yours. I think you all but murdered that bush of rhododendrons back there.”

“Eh, they’ll grow back.”

“But the paint on the Rolls won’t!”

Grinning, Remus drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Whadda'ya say—one more whip around?”

Giles shook his head, unbuckling himself from the seat. “Sorry lad, I've got to get the car cleaned up to take your father to his next meeting."

"You mean his next *date."*

"Don't be a snot."

"Why won't you tell me where he's been going? Who's 'S'? I saw it written down in his calendar for tonight. 'Dinner with 'S'—seven o'clock'."

"Dammit, Remus—I thought I told you to stop going into his office? Your father's books aren't for you to stick your smarmy nose in."

Remus shrugged, unbothered. "I wasn't trying to stick my nose into anything—I was looking for his whisky. He always keeps some in the bottom drawer, and the bar cabinet was looking a bit dry."

Giles reached over and swatted him upside the head.

“Ow! What was that for, ya old fart?! You can't just hit me anymore, I'm not a kid!"

"Having to say that you aren't a kid just proves that you are, you little fart. Now c’mon, turn us around and let’s get this thing parked. Tomorrow I’ll take you out in one of the other cars, teach you on a manual."

“I’d rather drive to China,” Remus grumbled, sliding the gear shift out of park.

Giles chuckled; “This sort ‘a steel don’t float, son. And besides, a man’s got to be able to drive a manual else he can't call himself a real man.”

"I thought I was just a 'kid'."

"Yes, one that's too smart for his own good. Now let's get going."

After he'd crept the car back up the estate's drive, Remus shut the engine off, handed Giles the keys, and got out. The air around him smelt of clean breeze and freshly mown grass and the warm July sun immediately began to beat down on the back of his neck as it got ready to set over the horizon. It was like any other summer afternoon, except that Remus was angry. He didn't want to be there, and yet he couldn't find the right excuse to leave. The driving lessons were only a short reprieve from his every day, which were spent doing pointless things like marching up and down the lawn with Dusty, or reading books that he immediately forgot the moment he shut them, or listening to the same albums over and over and over again. He'd left the house enough times, mostly to go to the record shop and brush up on all the music he'd missed over the last school year. As a result he'd accumulated quite the collection for himself, but without Sirius to write to, or the flat as an escape, he had no one to share them with. Of course there was Marlene, though she'd left for Morocco a week ago. James and Peter were there too, and he'd already gone out with them a handful of times, but they were always trying to get him to come over to their houses for this or that—mostly band practice. Eventually Remus had grown good at giving excuses to avoid visiting. After the fiasco with Marlene's family on Easter he was too hesitant, not that he believed that anyone who could raise a James Potter could be all that bad.

No... really, it just came down to wanting to spend all of his time wallowing and feeling sorry for himself. Outside of that, all he wanted to do was go out and get utterly pissed. He wanted to run the town as he once did, smashing bottles and knocking over rubbish bins—just become that great idiot without a care in the world. He wanted to wake up hungover on a dingy sofa only to stumble to the toilet, throw up the entire contents of his stomach, before choking down some eggs and waiting for that second wind so he could do it all over again. He wanted to go back to the flat. But that wasn't an option anymore.

At least Giles was happy. It was the first holiday in years that he wasn't driving around the city at all hours, picking Remus up off of random street corners. He didn't have to wait by the phone anymore—a fact that made Remus feel guilty when he realised how often he'd done it. Nope, now Giles was free to play nursemaid, which he did passionately—never allowing Remus to sleep past noon. More than once Remus had found himself wanting to snap viciously at him for it, but he had so few people left in his corner... and chasing off the one man that had been around longer than he could remember didn't seem like the best course of action.

So, he put up with it. But sticking around and accepting Giles' badgering also came with a few more annoying stipulations.

"How did it go today, Giles?" Lyall asked, standing at the top of the estate's stairs, busy adjusting the cuffs on his suit jacket. It was so hot, Remus couldn't wrap his head around how he stood it.

"Good!" Giles called. "I figure he'll be ready for the roadway soon, though he's gotta work some on his stop-and-go. Still a bit sharp, that. Wouldn't want someone to ram into him from behind."

Lyall shifted his measuring gaze to Remus as he made it to the top step. "And how do you feel it went?"

Remus scoffed lightly; "You mean you're actually asking me?"

"Don't be dramatic. Just say if you're not ready."

"It's *fine."*

"Hm." Lyall stopped fiddling with his cuffs. "I'm going out tonight. Tell the cooks when you're hungry. And clean up your room, it looks as though an animal lives there, not a boy."

"Sure thing. And you have fun on your 'date'. That's what it is, right?"

It might've been a trick of the light, but Remus could've sworn he saw the corner of his father's eye twitch. But then he'd turned away, marching down the front steps and down the path toward the dog house. "Giles, I'll be with the dogs until we leave. Call Sebastian or Jeffrey and send them over to the kennels."

As his father kept on, Giles nodded and flashed Remus a friendly wink before heading in the opposite direction, toward the staff's quarters. Remus just glared after his father.

"Hope you stink all through dinner," he muttered, pushing open the front doors and marching grumpily inside. He'd just reached the main staircase when a butler intercepted him and presented a letter. For a moment Remus was elated—*was this finally it?!*—but then he turned it over the envelope, revealing Jillian's bubbly handwriting and the kiss mark she'd left in red lipstick.

His heart sank. Jillian had been writing to him at least twice a week since the summer holiday had started, and yet there hadn't been so much as a postage stamp from Bath. It made Remus want to tear his

hair out. Every novel-length letter from his ex-biology partner could've been confirmation that Sirius was fine and *not* in fact upset over what had happened between them on their final night at school. After so long without any word, Remus had half a mind to jump on a train just to shake some sense into Sirius himself. Always a step ahead where his friends were concerned, James claimed to have already bought the damn ticket—but somehow Lily and Peter had convinced him not to go. If Sirius couldn't write, then it must've meant he was already in deep shit, and having his 'no-good, prankster friends' show up on his family's doorstep wouldn't help nullify that.

"This is Sirius Black we're talking about," Peter insisted, the last time Remus had seen them, "he's basically indestructible. He's always been able to take what his family threw at him and shove it right back tenfold. Just you wait, he's gonna show up at school even more smug than before. He'll probably even ask for a medal of valour. Sirius will be just fine."

You're wrong, Remus had thought arrogantly, *none of you know what I know.*

Pfft, you *don't even know what you know.*

This better not be what going crazy feels like. If I'm to listen to a stupid, unhelpful inner voice for the rest of my life, then can someone please just off me now.

Everyone's got an inner voice, mate. Some are just louder than others.

Sirius Black was not indestructible. He was vain and easily-influenced, and sensitive and brash. He went about his days not caring what anyone thought of him, while simultaneously caring far too much. But he also wasn't afraid to cry, had a penchant for justice—no matter how misguided—and never let anyone get down on themselves when he could help it. And he was so soft. So *fucking* soft...

Damn it.

Remus missed him. He couldn't help it. Missing Sirius came as easily as breathing. He just wished that it made more sense; how he could miss Sirius as he had been—want him like he did—and yet not be queer. The thought had crossed his mind countless times that perhaps he was just in denial, but every time he was out with Marlene he felt giddy to be by her side. Would that cute girl across the shop think he was desirable because he was out with her? Would those pretty university birds sitting on the public library's front steps look twice at

him because he was tall and had another girl on his arm? He liked the attention, though none of them were Sirius, so the desire to act on it was simply not there. Or maybe it was, since he'd made plenty of moves already and none of them on a *man*—it was complicated. But the girls got his heart racing the same way Sirius did, and the more it happened, the more Remus began to realise that it was the same feeling—Sirius just invoked it more often.

Maybe it would've been better if he was queer. Certainly would've answered a few questions. He liked girls because they were generally kind, and he found them pretty. Sirius was pretty too, but Remus had never looked at another bloke and thought that they were handsome or that he wanted to be with them. For him, Sirius was the exception. He was set apart from the rest—*othered.* Not a girl, but not like other blokes either. Remus wondered if this 'othering' of his best friend made him a bad person. He knew intrinsically that he liked girls, but liking Sirius wasn't a choice, it was just a part of being human. He was so beautiful that people naturally gravitated toward him, whether because they wanted him for themselves or because they hoped some of his beauty would rub off on them. Remus didn't want to be gravitationally beautiful, so he supposed that it only left the former.

Thoughts like these made Remus want to do something drastic—an urge he'd already acted on several times since summer's start. It almost always involved dragging James or Peter along to some pub or elsewhere, but they were seventeen too, and short of cheating on their girlfriends, they were willing to do almost anything to have a good time.

It'd all started with that girl they'd met in that corner pub in Bethnal Green. She'd had grey eyes like a storm cloud, and knew about Queen and Deep Purple and Neil Young. Remus hadn't been anticipating going home with her, but he was already four pints in by the time she'd introduced herself. After her it was the girl he'd met while watching James play a round of scrimmage football out in East Finchley. Her name had been Mei, which she'd said meant beautiful. He only remembered because he'd used it as a cheesy pick-up line straight after, which he honestly hadn't expected to work. As it turned out he only met up with Beautiful Mei that one time, and then a week later it was that freckled brunette who'd approached him by the bally-hole tables. She'd seemed a bit squirrelly at first but she'd had the loveliest hands. Remus had been showing her how to use the machine's knobs to score a proper shot when the next thing he knew they were kissing.

Kissing girls was easy now. He'd done it enough times that he'd already sworn to himself that the next time he saw Marlene he'd apologise for being so frigid while they'd dated. But as easy as it was to sweet-talk his way into an evening of trivial fornication, and as beautiful and as pretty and as soft as the girls were, they were never Sirius.

Later that evening, after his father and Giles had left for the meeting with 'S', Remus called James up and invited him out. James had just gotten back that morning after spending two weeks at Lily's in Liverpool, and was obviously still tired from the train, but after a quick nod over on Peter's line, he phoned Remus back and said they were both in. Since his friends lived all the way in Finchley, Remus agreed that they should meet up in the middle, and hopped a cab over to the nearest tube station where he rode the line all the way into Westminster. It was just getting dark by the time he arrived, but it was still hot out so he rolled the sleeves up on his t-shirt and strolled confidently into the pub. The place was more of a hole in the ground than a restaurant, but Remus had come to like the set-up thanks to its penchant for playing live music and the fact that the bartender only ever bothered Peter over his age. As promised, a band was playing as he walked in, and he found James and Peter already set up at a table with a pint each and one more for him.

"Hey lads."

"Hey yourself, stranger," James said, raising his glass as Remus sat. Remus took the pint Peter slid toward him, sipping it as he watched the band. They didn't look all that much older than they were, and they had no singer, which meant their music was ornamental to the pub at best. They were playing a Beach Boys cover, but it wasn't one of their more-known hits so they were having trouble capturing the audience's attention. Remus thought condescendingly that they could've played in every grimy pub from there to Newham and would probably still never get anywhere.

"So... how was seeing the girlfriends?" He asked, his entire attitude rather lacklustre.

"Great," James answered. "We had to sleep in separate rooms, obviously, but Lily's parents are real friendly. Her older sister... a bit less so."

"Yeah, but you already knew that going in," Peter teased. "I got lucky. Moira's an only child. And her house is massive."

"Hm. Sounds nice."

James sipped his beer, before setting the glass down and wiping his mouth. "What'd you get up to then? You seem... different."

"Yeah, looking a bit beefy there, Moony," Peter razzed. "You going to the gym now? Jazzercise maybe?"

"Piss off, ya dickhead," Remus chuckled. "Giles has got me working around the house a bit. Yesterday I helped him rebuild part of the fence that'd fallen in. Mostly I just faffed around."

"Get any of your summer homework done?" James asked.

"Nah. Might not do it, to be honest."

"But you're a prefect now," Peter said. "Are you allowed to just not do your homework?"

"Guess we'll find out..." Feeling suddenly restless among all the noise, Remus cast his gaze around the room. He spotted on a girl sitting by her lonesome at the bar top. She wasn't looking at him, but after a few seconds she reached for a napkin further down the bar and caught his eye.

James leaned in; "So, uh… have you given any more thought about coming to Devon with us at the end of the week?"

"Mm... yeah, no—totally."

"Christ, whatchu looking at now—" James turned around in his seat. "Oh. I see the appeal."

Remus smirked slightly, but the girl had looked away. *Blimey, that's a short skirt.*

"We just got here," Peter complained. "And what's this one supposed to be, number sixteen? Does Marlene know how lively you've become these last few weeks?"

"Marlene's in Africa," Remus snapped; "And besides, we're not dating."

Peter raised his hands in defeat. "Could'a fooled me, what with how often you were seeing her before. Exes get back together all the time, just saying."

"We're friends, Wormtail, that's all..." Remus glanced back to the girl.

She was watching him now—in that way girls did when they wanted to be noticed but didn't want it to seem obvious that they were the ones doing the noticing. "You guys feel like another pint...?"

James looked down at his not even half-empty glass. "Fuck, just go talk to her then, numpty."

"Yeah, see you in an hour," Peter scoffed. "Or more."

"I'm coming back… But just in case I don't." Smiling, he slapped a few quid down on the table for the beers, before standing up and unweaving himself from the table.

The pub was busy, but not so busy that Remus had trouble making his way to the bar. He stopped on the far end, two stools away from the girl, who'd quickly turned back into her drink. It was a martini—a far cry from the drinks normally served in places like this one—and he watched out of the corner of his eye as she began stirring it with the olive skewer. When the bartender approached him, Remus ordered another pint of whatever they had on tap and stopped to wait, quietly drumming his hands on the bar top. He feigned interest in the band for a while, and when he got his drink he paid and turned lazily back the direction he'd come. He hesitated at the last second, and turned to the girl, leaning in ever so slightly.

"Is the music always this bad here?" He asked.

She looked up, a small smile playing at her lips. "No. Normally it's worse."

"Oh shit."

"You're pretty tall, you know."

Remus almost smiled. They *always* said he was tall. "Thanks. That's a nice top."

She peeked down at the flouncy shirt she was wearing. It was jewel-blue and cut deeply down the middle, tying off just above her waist. "Guys don't normally notice my clothes," she said, sounding amused. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," he lied. "I'm Remus."

He extended a hand and she took it, smiling. "Remus... Never heard that sort of name before. Is it a family name?"

"Not really."

"Oh. Well, I'm Lucy."

"Like the Beatles song?"

"The what?"

"You know, 'Lucy in the Sky with...' Never mind." Remus cleared his throat. “Say, don't the girls who normally come here just get a beer or something? I didn't even know they made drinks like that." He slowly began to close the gap between them, stopping until only a single stool separated them. Lucy watched every move with blue eyes the same colour as her top.

"Guess I just like to stand out." She raised the olive spear from her martini glass and held the olive between her teeth, slowly sliding it off the toothpick before chewing. "You here with your mates then?"

"What? Oh... yeah."

"They seem interesting."

"Nah, they're just—" Remus peeked back at James and Peter, only to find the pair of them staring openly over the rim of their pints. He straightened up, shooting his friends a nasty look—*cut it out!*—to which James and Peter just laughed and turned back around.

"Funny too," Lucy chuckled.

"More like funny looking."

"Well, your one friend *does* have a lot of gel in his hair."

"It's just something he's trying out. Pretty sure he wants to look like Elvis."

"You should tell him to wash it out. I'll bet it looks way better natural. Sorta like yours." Smoothly, she reached up and gently pawed at one of Remus' curls, her gaze never leaving his face.

Remus swallowed thickly. "Are you here with anyone?"

Lucy's eyes wandered slightly, but then she shook her head. "I know a few people in the back, but they're all busy playing cards."

"You don't play?"

"Not really. Never been very good at it so they left me behind. S'just me tonight, I'm afraid."

"Do you want to grab a booth together?"

"Hm... Buy me another drink first?"

Remus had never ordered a martini before, so he simply told the guy to remake Lucy's last drink and drop it off at one of the booths near the back. The lights were purposely dimmer there, and as he and Lucy cuddled together on one of the padded benches, Remus found that the dizzy feeling had returned.

"You're a really good kisser," Lucy said between bouts of snogging.

For some reason the compliment stung. "Worth kissing more than once...?"

She gave him a funny look, and answered with more tongue. Remus didn't mind; she was a good kisser too. And she smelt good—like vanilla. Her lips were slightly salty from the martini, but the rest of her was sweet. She had long black hair that she kept having to sweep out of her face like a curtain and her grip felt solid and real on the side of his neck. She kept herself flush against his thigh, occasionally slipping a hand down his chest and lower. It was just so easy to get lost in it, even the band's piddling music faded away; no silly counting games, no Marauders, no secret kisses in the toilet—certainly no Sirius.

Remus was just considering asking Lucy to leave with him—as if he could've actually brought her back to the estate—when a furious grip came down and latched viciously along the collar of his t-shirt. His throat made the most pathetic choking sound as he was yanked backward and out of the booth, missing his feet completely and crashing to the floor on his back. Before he'd even had time to breathe, a thug wearing a plain white singlet and a pair of track pants was screaming at him.

"WOTCHER THINK YOR DOIN' WIV YOR TONGUE DOWN ME GIRLFRIEND'S THROAT, YOU LITTLE PRICK?!"

Remus was stunned. As he finally got his feet under him and managed to stand, the skinhead kept screaming at him, wailing his obscenities while Lucy shot up from the bench, shrieking and grappling her boyfriend by the arm. "Matty! Matty, please! He's just some stupid kid!"

"I'LL KILL YA!" He barked, taking a swing that Remus had to jump back to avoid. "I'LL BREAK YOR LEGS, YA CHEEKY FUCKER!"

"I didn't know she was your girlfriend!" Remus shouted. “She—!"

The guy took another swing, this one barely missing by a hair. Remus had to throw himself back onto an empty table just to evade it, which only made Matty angrier. Brushing Lucy off, he advanced on Remus, who scrambled to get back on his feet again.

"GET OVER 'ERE, YOU RAT-ARSED BASTARD! I'LL GIVE YOU—"

"WOAH—WOAH! Just hold on a second!" James cried, getting between the two of them. "Look mate, I think this is all just a big misunder—"

Matty's fist came up deadly-quick, catching James in the side of the jaw and making his head snap back painfully. As Lucy screamed blue murder, James crumpled to the floor with Matty standing over him and barking his insults again.

"LIKE SUM 'A THAT, BITCH?!"

Other people around the pub were already moving. Obviously used to the havoc, the bartender had emerged from behind his booth, while several old codgers who had just stopped in to enjoy themselves a beer were on getting to their feet. They might've done something about it, had he given them a chance to do so, but Remus had just seen one of his friends take the fall for him. Instantly his ears thrummed with blood. He wanted a taste of it too.

With only that driving him, Remus threw himself at their attacker head-on. Now, Remus Lupin may have been tall, but he was still only about ninety pounds sopping wet. Despite that fact, he mustered all the force he could manage and grappled the skinhead around the middle, forcing him back against the edge of booth's table with a nasty thump. The surprise shot had succeeded in stunned him temporarily, but the moment Matty recovered he began wailing down on Remus' back with both fists, knocking the air straight from his lungs. After that a knee came up, slamming painfully into his cheek as he held him. Body screaming in pain, Remus released the thug's middle on instinct only to take another shot to the ribs. He couldn't hear anything over Lucy's screams, but as long as he was the one getting hit then it meant James was safe.

In the end he got a few decent shots in—one just below the chin that

left the guy's teeth rattling, and a few in the chest and shoulders, but by the time the pub's staff was hauling them apart and tossing Remus out onto the street, it was clear he'd just had his arse handed to him. Ushered by Peter, who was nowhere to be found during the actual brawl, he and James stumbled down street after street. They kept going until they were sure no one had followed them, making sure to stick to the more brightly-lit corners until they finally made it back to the station.

"D-Don't want to get jumped just as we're a-about to get on the t-train," Peter stammered, pacing nervously back and forth in front of the entrance to the underground. "James, a-are we going then? I think we should g-go."

"Yeah, one second," James sighed, before turning back to Remus. His cheek had swollen up to the side of a golf ball on the way from the pub, and Peter had been yammering about how badly his mother was going to lose it when she saw, but James had been quiet the entire way. "Moony—"

"I am *so* sorry, mate," Remus started immediately. "I didn't mean for all that to happen."

"I know you didn't, and I'm not upset."

"But your cheek... and your glasses!"

James raised the mangled eyeglasses meekly. Sometime during the scuffle they'd gotten knocked off of his face and trampled under boot. "S'fine. I got a spare back at home."

"Your mum's still gonna kill you," Peter murmured.

"Thanks, Wormtail." James let out another long sigh. "Moony, are you sure you're okay?"

Remus straightened up, swallowing a wince. His back ached, but he wasn't going to whine in front of the friend who'd just taken a beating for him. "Oh yeah. Don't think it should be too bad—dick barely got me."

"Tell that to your black eye," Peter said.

"Pete." James shoved the busted frames into his pocket. "Moony, I just mean are you *okay*-okay? 'Cause you haven't been acting like yourself for a while now, and... We're worried."

"Don't you worry about me, Prongs. I'm fine."

"You don't seem it. Is this about Sirius? 'Cause you said it yourself, that he's gonna be—"

"It's not about Sirius!"

Both James and Peter flinched back when he shouted, and Remus instantly felt more foul than he had all summer. *Good going, fuck-head, even the friends that are here are freaked out by you now.*

"I'm just trying to be less like myself," Remus swore. "You know, to make things easier on you guys."

"Why would we want that?"

Remus hugged his arm. *Why, indeed.*

"I think you should come to Devon with us," James said. "It'll be good to get away. Get some fresh air—walk along the beach a bit. There's plenty for you to read, and Mum's a great cook. We can make trips into town whenever we want, and even take the canoes out when the tide's in. It's nice."

"I dunno... I just don't think that stuff's for me. It's your family."

"You're our best friend, Remus," he sighed, then; "At least promise that you'll think about it."

"... Alright."

James gave him a tight smile, before reaching out and fondly patting him on the shoulder. Remus winced when he did it, and they all began to laugh—even Peter.

"You're sure you're okay getting home?" James asked later, as he and Peter started for the open doors of their train.

"Yeah. I'll be good. S'not that far."

"Kay. We'll call you tomorrow then, see about Devon."

Remus waved goodbye as his friends' train pulled away. He only had a few minutes until his own would be by, but when it came roaring down the tracks, it was as though his feet had frozen to the tile. He didn't want to go home. But he couldn't go where it was that he really wanted to be, so instead he just walked.

First it was aimless, just up and down the borough's dark streets—into Mayfair and back. It wasn't cold, even without a jacket, and the humidity kept up even with the late hour. A few cabs stopped along the road thinking he wanted a ride, but those stopped once he'd crossed over into Lambeth and began to take the backstreets. It occurred to Remus then that he was in the prime position to be mugged, but either thanks to whatever luck he maintained or because anyone he passed determined that he didn't have anything worth taking, no one bothered him.

It was close to one in the morning when he realised that he'd drifted south into Peckham. All the shops were shut up for the night, and when he stopped for a much-needed fag, he managed to spot a few kids tagging a shop's metal window covers with spray paint. The sight made him a bit nostalgic, and he watched until they'd finished and moved on to tag something else.

Well, here you are. Out on the town, running the streets again. Feel good?

Fuck off.

And where would I go? I'm you.

Remus knew any sane person in his position would've hailed a cab or found the nearest phone booth and called their personal driver, but if he couldn't be Moony of Marauders or Lu of the East End, then he certainly didn't want to be Remus Lupin.

He spent the night on a park bench in Deptford, like a true bum, and was awoken early the next morning by the rising sun and the sound of cars as parents arrived to drop their kiddies off at the nursery across the lawn. Feeling a lot like he'd been hit by a bus, Remus hauled himself to his feet and stumbled the rest of the way home. He was just checking his pockets to make sure no one had robbed him of his zippo and fags as he'd slept—they hadn't—when the front door flew open and Giles was dragging him inside.

"And just *where* have you been all night?!" He howled.

"Nowhere—stayed over at James'."

"You mean to say that you stayed out at your friend's place all night and then came flouncing home at seven in the morning? I think not!"

Remus bristled, snatching his arm away with an indignant grunt. Honestly, you start coming home every night for a few weeks in a row

and everyone begins to think it's the new normal.

"What's it matter?" He snapped. "I'm back, aren't I?"

"You've been fighting—don't deny it, you're beat to shit and you're walking like you spent all day hunched over in a coal mine. Now where were you?"

"I told you, at James' house!"

"Did you fight with him?"

"Fuck—*no!* Now will you piss off, Giles?!"

Giles frowned deeply, and Remus wanted to swear at him again. He'd thought a night out on the streets would leave him less angry when he'd returned. Apparently not.

"Honestly, son... I thought that this 'staying out all hours' business was behind us. What's there possibly to go back to around Aldgate?"

"I didn't go back there," Remus growled.

"Then how'd you get so beat up?"

He couldn't do it anymore. He didn't want to hear Giles' speech about how it'd felt to pick him up half-dead after he'd been jumped in the alley with Tonya last summer—he'd been there! He was the one who'd gotten utterly curb-stomped and beaten to a pulp in the first place! Why was it that other people made it so easy to feed him their pain, but never stopped to consider his?

Practically snarling, Remus shoved past the old man and headed directly for the stairs. He didn't want to think about Tomny, or the flat, or any of it! Fuck... he just wanted to sleep.

"Hold on there, young master," Giles called after him. "Your father wants you on the hunt today. It'll just be the two of you, and he's been waiting until you returned."

Remus whipped around again—fast enough to make his back twinge. "What—why? He hasn't wanted me to go with him in years."

"Maybe it's for some father-son bonding then. Lord knows the two of you could use it."

"I can't go trouncing around some bleedin' forest right now, I'm hurt."

"How hurt? Do you wanna talk about it?"

So it was a punishment then.

Fuck it.

Remus turned, carrying back up on the stairs and stomping with his every step.

"I've already laid out your things!" Giles hollered. "Shower fast and get changed, or I swear you won't leave your room for a week!"

It hurt to shower, hurt even more to maneuver himself into the stupid get-up and heavy bush boots that Giles had set out for him. Remus was at least sure nothing was broken—a small silver-lining—but as he made his way back downstairs and found his father and Giles waiting for him by the front door along with another swath of servants, every twinge became a throbbing ache.

"Since when is July hunting season?" He grumbled, refusing the gun case that was held out to him.

"I've a colleague who has given me leave to shoot on his property out near Tonbridge," Lyall said, busy inspecting each rifle as it was set in its case.

"Is that even legal?"

"No, not that one... the Remington model—yes, that's it... Well, Remus —" Lyall paused, staring openly at the bruise that'd bloomed just above his son's cheek bone. "What's happened to your face?"

"Got in a fight," Remus said finally, with an air of superiority.

"Did you win?"

He didn't answer right away and immediately regretted it as Lyall turned away. "Pointless then, wasn't it? Anyway, I think you'll find that the closer you study the law, Remus, the easier it is to work around it."

Remus rolled his eyes. *Typical.*

They didn't take the Rolls, not wanting to mar its tires on the dirt roads, and so instead Giles drove them in a Chrysler which he coveted for its rear-wheel drive. They were followed by a small lorry that was carrying the dogs, who Lyall would've never gone hunting without,

and Remus spent the entire ride glaring out the window, leaving as much space in the back seat between himself and his father as possible.

"Can we at least put the radio on?" He'd complained.

"No," Lyall answered straight away, too busy flipping through some document for work to even look up; "It won't kill you to have some silence."

"Do you ever stop working?" Remus said, scowling at the papers.

"It's called having a work ethic, Remus."

"That what you tell your girlfriend?"

Lyall didn't so much as blink. "I said silence, didn't I?"

Remus resumed his window-brooding.

When they finally reached their destination, a crop of forest surrounding a vast man-made lake, Remus piled out of the sedan and rushed over to the lorry, where all of the dogs were already busy barking their heads off. They could obviously sense that they were in a new place, and when he and the driver opened the back hutch, five large coonhounds came rushing out.

"Return for us in two hours," Lyall instructed, taking his rifle and ammo pack from Giles. He didn't bother giving one to Remus, who hadn't shot anything in years, and instead forced him to carry the game bag. Remus did so, squirming only slightly when he remembered that the bag would soon be full of dead waterfowl. After that they set off into the trees, the dogs so close they were nearly underfoot. Padfoot and Seabiscuit were the senior dogs now, having already sired litters of their own and calmed down some in their old age, but the puppies, Ruffian, Red Rum, and Eclipse, raced in and around Remus' legs as they made their way from path to path, noses pressed to the earth as they searched.

"Why didn't you bring Sebastian or one of the other trainers with you?" Remus asked eventually.

“I wanted it to be just the two of us today,” Lyall answered.

"Why?"

"You're my son. Do I really need a reason to want to spend time with you?"

"You've always needed one before."

Apparently Lyall didn't have much to say to that. He stayed quiet for a while, simply plunging on ahead through the trees, eyes trained above and below for any sign of a pheasant or grouse. "How are things at school?" He asked finally.

"Fine."

"And your marks?"

"Wonderful."

"Good. You're smart, even if you'd like to pretend otherwise."

Remus mumbled out of the corner of his mouth; *"Only around you..."*

"How do you feel about the school as a whole?" Lyall asked. "Is it worth your time? I wonder sometimes, what with you so far away."

"It's a great school," Remus said firmly. "Better than anything in London. Our exam marks are top of the country, and the teachers are good too."

"That is good to hear. And your free time? How is that spent?"

"Studying... and with friends..."

"Like that boy—James Potter? Giles was telling me, and so I had him looked into. His father runs his own firm, is that right? It's impressive. They've obviously done well for themselves, especially for immigrants. Who are the rest?"

Remus couldn't believe that Lyall had actually looked into his friends' families to ensure he was mingling with the proper sort. Or he *could*—he just wasn't sure which made him more angry.

"The rest of your friends, Remus," Lyall prompted. "What are their names?"

"Peter Pettigrew... a few girls..."

"Girls? I do hope you're behaving."

"I am!" Remus said, suddenly embarrassed. He'd never once talked about girls or dating with his father before, at least not aside from the general "don't be foolish" lecture. That had all been done with Giles. "And there's also another... his name's Sirius Black."

Lyall whipped his face around. "A Black? As *the* Blacks?"

"You know them?"

"There isn't a person of substance in all of England who doesn't know that family." Lyall's cool expression returned and he continued on, leaves crunching beneath his boots. "If he's really who I think he is, he could be worth having around. Be careful not to upset him. You're the last person who should be dealing with the wrath of that family."

Remus scowled. It bothered him that his father could even consider that he might have the faintest idea of who Sirius was, purely based on his family's name. It was the same reason Barty thought he knew anything about their family when his father started gossiping. Pure rubbish.

As he followed, Red Rum began snapping at Remus' ankles in attempts to get him to play. He brushed the pup off at first, but the baying was too cute. Cracking a small smile, he bent down to pat him.

“Do *NOT—!”* His father roared suddenly, making Remus flinch and rip his hand back.

"It's a bloody dog! He's bound to want to—"

“They’re working—learning to be obedient," Lyall scolded, before clicking his tongue in distaste. "I see you’re still just as soft with them, uncaring whether your ruin progress someone else has worked hard at. Here, make yourself useful and plant these for the pups to find.”

He passed Remus the bag of already dead fowl, freshly killed that morning at the estate, and lifted a whistle to his lips. Its silent sound drew every one of the dogs to him with utter compliance and when he was sure they were at attention, Lyall turned and set off through the trees, not even bothering to check whether the dogs were following. They did of course, with their tails upright and wagging the entire time.

"That's not obedience," Remus hissed to no one in particular, "that's brain-washing."

Taking the bag, he began marching in the opposite direction, stopping every time he found a downed tree or root hovel he should shove some dead fowl into. He tried not to gag as he pulled them from the bag, stuffing their limp bodies into the hiding spots for the puppies to "hunt". It was a disgusting task—some of the birds were still wet and they stunk to high-heaven—but it was a thoughtless one. Every now and then he'd hear a shot followed by a flurry of barking, but it was always a long ways off.

When Remus had finally managed to rid himself of the last game bird, he started back the way he'd come, following the distant sound of barking until he finally made it to the edge of the property's lake. There he found Lyall peering through the scope of his rifle, with Seabiscuit and Padfoot sitting loyally at his side, both panting in the July heat. Across the water, perhaps a hundred or so yards away, was a large family of ducks, swimming about innocently, completely unaware of the predators eyeing them from the shore. The puppies were nowhere in sight, probably already hunting down dead bird carcass.

“We’re going to be having a guest for dinner tonight,” Lyall said, without looking at him or lowering the gun.

“So *that’s* what you wanted to talk about,” Remus said dryly. "Knew it."

“Your behaviour of late has been satisfactory. I expect it to continue throughout her visit.”

“Her?” Remus could hardly believe it. *He'd been right?!* His own miserable father was actually seeing someone and now she was coming to their *house?!* He couldn't even remember the last woman he'd seen at the estate that wasn't a part of the staff. Probably some dippy wife of a random government official there on business.

“Her name is Sandra," Lyall said. "She's a good woman. She only wants to meet you. And you will behave yourself.”

“So what’s she to you?” Remus demanded. "Is she really your girlfriend or something?"

This time Lyall did look at him, sideways and measuring. “She's important.”

“Ha, I get it. You’ve finally cracked—realised that not even you can stand your own company.”

“Say what you wish now, but you will not embarrass me."

“As if I cared enough to make embarrassing you a hobby.”

Bringing it to his lips, Lyall gave a short blow on the whistle and both dogs at his side barked viciously, instantly scattering the waterfowl. As the birds took to the air he let loose a single shot, its bang echoing out across the forest like the crack of thunder. The downed duck smacked the lake’s surface and Padfoot was gone instantly, racing into the water to fetch it for his master.

Lyall lowered the gun, already squinting into the morning sun. “Maybe that’s the problem, Remus. You don’t care.”

* * *

He wanted to hate her—*god, did he want to*—but even Remus could deny it.

Sandra was nice.

She wasn't spectacular or even particularly loathsome like he’d hoped she would be, she didn't even mention the black eye—she was just *nice.* It sucked.

Rather than letting Lyall send Giles or someone else to fetch her, she'd driven on her own, in a fancy midnight-blue Bentley that made the Rolls look like a matchbox car. When the car pulled up, he'd found himself expecting some great beauty queen with hair big enough to block out the sun, but Sandra's hair wasn't big at all. It was combed modestly and perfectly coif, and her smile as she shook his hand was genuine. It was all certainly a surprise, but what had ended up shocking Remus the most was not her car or hair or generally pleasant disposition, but how—well—how *old* she was.

She wasn't *old* old, but she certainly wasn't *young.* And wasn't she supposed to be young? Was that not the main draw for a man who decides to date again so late in life—that said date would be fresh enough out of the baby bassinet that her youthful energy would surround everything and leave him feeling spry and virile again? Every other coffin-dodger with money refused to chase girls who weren’t young enough to be their daughter, but Sandra couldn’t have been that far off from Lyall's age at all. She had blonde hair that was streaked with the faintest signs of white and lines at the corners of her

mouth and eyes that meant she must've smiled a lot. She even showed up to dinner wearing a fitted pantsuit and loafers. She was the complete opposite of everything Remus had been expecting.

It was still awkward, especially when she went to shake his hand, but Lyall had already threatened to take away his driving lessons if he didn't make it through dinner without incident. So, while his father and Sandra sat at one end of the table, Remus sat at the other and ate without objection.

"Remus, your father tells me you go to school in Scotland," Sandra said, trying to be personable despite the stilted atmosphere. "Hawkings College, right? I had a cousin who went there before transferring to King's Canterbury."

Remus nodded, wordlessly chewing on his braised spinach.

"Is it a good school?"

"... Yup."

"Lots of fun things to do?"

"Oh yeah, *loads."*

"Like what?"

Remus set his jaw and looked up. "My friends and I recently recreated a scene from a horror film."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Made a real mess too—blood everywhere. A few students even passed out seeing it."

A look of pure fury flitted across Lyall's face, but Sandra remained unfazed. "Was it for a school play?"

He considered keeping up the nastiness, but Lyall's warning gaze was deterrent enough. "Yeah... something like that..."

"That sounds great then. I'd have loved to read the script. Do you like to read, Remus?"

"Sometimes."

"It's all he does," Lyall amended. "Even when I'm trying to get him to

do other things, he always has his nose in a book. It's where he gets all of those spunky retorts of his."

Sandra beamed. “So you’re a bookworm then?”

“No, not really," Remus ground out.

“Oh, but if you *were*—I should let you know that my family has a wonderful library on our property. You could borrow whatever you liked.”

“My school's library is fine, thanks.”

“I’ll bet. Hawkings is older than dust, isn’t it?”

“Some of the teachers are too.”

She smiled again, though Remus hadn’t really meant the quip in a friendly way. He began stuffing his mouth with baby potatoes, eating around the steak on his plate. It was too easy to picture the way the game birds had flopped around in his hand earlier that afternoon.

“Your father also tells me you’re fond of dogs,” Sandra started.

Remus looked up, meeting his father’s reproachful eye across the table. “Wow, guess he really has been chatty.”

Lyall’s upper lip twitched, but Sandra blazed past it. “I love animals too. My family actually breeds race horses—it’s how I met your father. There's plenty of crossover between the hounds and horses. I could even take you to one of the races sometime. The biggest ones happen during the fall and winter, but there’s always something going on. And perhaps when you’re back for Christmas we could make a day of it?”

Remus almost choked on a potato. *Christmas?! She expected to be around for that long?*

Elsewhere in the house, the phone rang and Remus felt suddenly apprehensive in his seat. Swallowing, he shook his head. “No thanks, Sandra, I’m not the biggest fan of horses actually.”

“Oh, that’s too bad," she said. "Would that mean you wouldn’t be interested in joining me for a ride sometime? I promise we don’t have to race if you don’t want to.”

“No—”

“He’d love to,” Lyall answered for him. “It’ll get him out of the house.”

“That’s funny considering you had an issue with how often I was gone before,” Remus shot back.

“Watch your temper.”

“It’s okay he doesn’t have to,” Sandra said kindly, before turning back to him, “but I can promise, Remus, that it won’t be like any ride you’ve had before.”

Rather than answering her, he leaned back in his seat and sipped his wine—it was the horribly bitter kind his father insisted on having with all meals. Before Lyall could object to his stubborn silence, a butler appeared in the room, bowing his head lightly.

“Who was on the phone then, Carsten?” Lyall asked, running his tongue across his teeth. “Was it McCarron with those stats I asked for?”

“Actually sir, the phone call was for the young master.”

Remus perked up in his seat and Lyall regarded him from the end of the table. “One of your school friends again, I expect,” he said sourly. “You’d think they’d have respect for proper meal times. You may call them back later.”

“Please let me take it,” Remus said stiffly, *“Dad.”*

“No, it can wait until after supper."

"But I told them I was going to call, and we were out with the dogs all day. I should get it now, it could be important."

"You're children. What could possibly be so important for children?"

"Please—"

"I've already said no. Now you’re being rude to our guest.”

Sandra reached out and covered Lyall’s hand with her own. “I don’t mind, love. Remus and I can talk again tomorrow, perhaps... on that ride of ours?”

It was sneaky and he didn’t like it, but Sandra was smiling broadly and he knew he was caught. Finally he nodded and Lyall raised his

head before bringing his wine glass to his lips.

“Fine, you’re excused.”

Jumping up from his chair, Remus all but ran from the room, passing the butler in the hall and making his way to the salon to pick up the line.

“Hello?”

“Hey Moony, it’s me,” James’ cheery drawl echoed through the phone.

“God, you don’t know how good it is to hear your voice,” he moaned into the receiver.

“Miss me that much, do you?”

“Family dinners suck, mate.”

“Ha. I get that. But you know where you wouldn't have to sit through any of those? In *Devon."*

Remus sighed. "Prongs, you know I love ya, but I just don't think that..."

"I understand," James said. "It'd be a month away from home, and we only just got back from school. I don't like that you'll be on your own though. Maybe if Marlene weren't away in Africa, and Mary weren't in Paris—"

"Hey, I'll be fine. Besides, if Sirius could last every summer on his own out in bum-fuck Bath, then how hard could it be for me here?"

"Hm. Promise you'll come over when we're back then? Mum and Dad won't bite."

"Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my—!"

"Alright! I believe you..." James let out a big sigh, and Remus got the distinct feeling that there was more to be said.

"Prongs...?"

"I wasn't just calling to talk about Devon," James said all at once. "There's something else too. It's got to do with Sirius."

Remus' breath caught, and he switched the receiver to the other ear.

"Have you heard from him then? Has he said—"

"No, Moony," James mumbled, “it's my letters. They've bounced—they were sent back. 'Return to sender' stamped all across the front."

It was as though the bottom had dropped out from Remus' stomach. He fell into the lounge chair by the phone, pulling the chord so taunt he nearly toppled the entire thing. "But—But I haven't gotten any of my letters back."

"Maybe they just haven't come yet..."

"You don't think they could've actually *moved* do you?"

"No way. His family's lived in that house for generations. Most likely they're keeping him shut up and he can't get to the mail anymore."

"Fuck." Remus bit down on his thumb nail. "Reckon he's alright?"

"Yeah, but I've got a bad feeling..."

“He’s brave, Prongs," Remus said quickly, suddenly determined to be optimistic enough for both of them; "He’ll be okay. Sirius said so himself—just a few more weeks and we’ll be back at school. Then he'll turn eighteen, get his inheritance from Alphard and he’ll never have to go back.”

“You’re right,” James said grimly. “You’ll still let me know if he contacts you though? I can’t be sure that he’d remember to write to the summer house.”

“I’ll call the second I hear from him. Cross my heart."

“Thanks Moony, I’ll see you in a few weeks then. You can come over for a barbecue or something—see Pete’s new drum kit, too.”

“Blimey, it’s not even his birthday!" Remus said in awe. "His parents actually went for it then?”

“Yeah, surprised him with it today. Pretty sure it was mostly thanks to Simeon, I guess he can be pretty convincing when he wants to be. The kit looks great though—a Premier five piece.”

“Nice. Can’t wait to jam.”

“Me neither.”

“Cool… I’ll see you then?”

“Okay... Bye, Moons.”

James hung up and Remus sat there, listening to the dial tone and twisting the receiver in his hands. When it came to Sirius it was easy to put on a brave face for his friends, but he couldn’t help but spend every other waking moment fretting through his teeth. If they'd always been able to get word through before, but now suddenly letters were being sent back, then what had changed?

That night Remus wrote two more letters. One being to Jillian—a short, polite thing since he’d neglected to answer the last four that she’d sent, and the other to Sirius, begging him to send word. In it he told him that they’d accept a smiley face scribbled on the back of a gum wrapper, anything that would tell them he was okay. Anything that could tide them over until September. He wasn't even sure Sirius' letter would get through, but when he handed the letters off to Giles the next morning to be posted, he sent with them all of the positive karma he'd managed to accumulate in his brief seventeen years of existence. He prayed it would be enough.

Only... Remus did not expect what would come next.

* * *

Sandra hadn't been kidding when she said her family raced horses. After arranging for Giles to drop him off at her family’s track, which boasted stands big enough to seat over fifty-thousand people, she'd waited personally for Remus to arrive, standing out front of the stadium with a grand smile on her face. Apart from the two of them, the only other people inside the racecourse was the team of construction workers he and Sandra had passed on their way inside.

“We’re doing some reconstruction over the summer so everything will be ready for the fall season,” she explained, while pointing out different parts of the building as she went. “I’m going to have an atrium put in the South wing with a glass ceiling, that way people can take the air even when rain hits.”

Remus just nodded along, entirely overwhelmed just being there, but as they made their way out onto the top of the stands, it occurred to him that Sandra wasn’t exactly dressed for horseback riding. She had boots on, but other than that she was wearing jeans and a simple blue

button-up. He hadn't dressed for the occasion either, but only because he'd planned to stay as far from the horses as possible under the guise of 'just wanting to watch'.

"Well, here we are," Sandra said, smiling over the track, which might've been beautiful had the green not been ripped up and left as dusty brown dirt instead. "We're resurfacing the turf," she said as if it was a funny joke, "but I figured this would be perfect for our ride."

She started down the stairs toward the top of the stretch, and Remus scrambled after her. "Sandra, I think this is the part where I tell you that I don't actually know how to ride."

"Oh, that's fine, dear."

"Yeah, I know all proper boys would've known how to ride back in your day but—"

" 'Back in my day'? Wow, thank you so much for that, Remus."

"Sorry! I just—I-I don't know what my dad's told you but I've never ridden—actually I hate horses!"

"That won't be a problem."

"Really I'm terrified of them! I piss my pants every time one so much as looks me in the eye."

"Ha! This isn't a punishment, you know, Remus."

"I know—!" He babbled. "It's just—no offence, but I only came because—"

"Because your father told you to. I don't mind, honestly."

"I swear, Sandra—I'll probably just fall off and break something! Or everything. I've done it. Just like a few days ago, even."

They'd reached the bottom of the stands, and Sandra whirled around, still grinning broadly. "I don't think you'll have any issues with falling unless you want to stick your head that far out the window."

Temporarily stupefied by the sentence had just been strung together for him, Remus simply blinked at her, and Sandra began to laugh before pointing just down the track. He followed it, and instead of finding a starting gate lined with horses, he saw only a fancy sports car waiting in the middle of the track, with its chrome freshly shined

and cherry red paint-job glinting in the sun.

“I told you,” she said, “it’s not like any ride you’ve ever had before.”

And that was how Remus ended up strapping himself into the passenger seat of a Jaguar E-type sports car. He had never really been much for cars, but seeing the thing up close and feeling the purr of the engine beneath them had him positively giddy.

“Turf’s no good for cars,” Sandra said from the driver's seat; “but dirt? That’s what drag racing was made for.”

Remus gasped; "Yeah mean we're actually gonna race this thing?"

"Only if you're not worried about making a mess of your pants. Because that might ruin the leather."

He laughed, and shook his head. Maybe Sandra *was* cool. She raced cars, and she didn't even care about messing up the paint!

“How fast can it go?” He asked, peeking at the speedometer.

“How fast do you want to go?” Sandra said, before pulling a pair of sunglasses from the visor and passing him a white handkerchief. “Drop that out the window when you’re ready.”

“Why?”

She put on the sunglasses and shrugged; “It’s symbolic.”

Hiding a smile, Remus turned and threw the handkerchief out the window. Before it'd even had time to hit the ground, Sandra let loose a wild cry—*WOO-HOO!*—and slammed her foot down on the accelerator. Instantly Remus found himself slammed back against the seat as the back wheels of the car spun into a fishtail. He almost thought they'd never go forward, but then the rubber caught on soft earth and they were off—speeding down the track like lightning. With the windows down, the stagnant summer heat slammed him in the face mercilessly, but as they hurdled toward the first bend, Remus had never felt so exhilarated. When they hit the curve he slid against the door, clinging to the window’s edge as a mixture of terror and delight was ripped from his throat. Sandra was clearly an expert; she allowed the car’s rear to drag just long enough to kick up the dust before levelling everything out and leaving them to fly down the straight faster than any horse ever could.

In less than thirty seconds they'd hit the second corner and rounded onto the home-stretch, as wind ripped through Remus' hair and euphoria sang in his veins. When Sandra finally pulled the car to a skidding stop just past the start line, Remus was thrown against his seat belt and smacked back into the chair behind him while his heart still thrummed wildly in his chest.

“So,” she said, lifting her shades, “what’d you think?”

Remus let out a heavy breath, nearly panting. “I think that Giles is going to be so jealous!”

Sandra threw her head back and laughed. “I know, right? Don’t get me wrong, I love horses—have since I was a little girl—but there’s nothing like driving along with the wind gently blowing through your hair.”

“You call that gentle?”

She laughed again, light and happy. “I’m glad you came with me today, Remus. Thank you.”

The air suddenly felt heavy with unsaid promises, and Remus shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He almost wished they were driving again, but Sandra just sat there watching him until it was obvious that she wasn't going to make another move. The ball was in Remus' court now.

“So…" he pandered, "how long have you known my dad...?”

“Ah, I was waiting for that question actually.” Sandra put the Jaguar in park and stretched her arms out ahead of her. “I’ve known your father for quite a few years, in fact. He was a business consultant for my late husband, Paul, who passed just over a year ago. Lyall was a great friend to him.”

“There’s a first,” Remus mumbled out of the corner of his mouth.

“Ah, I have heard that you and your father find it hard to get along,” Sandra said lightly, “and I know it’s not any of my business, but I can’t help but be a little jealous. Paul and I never had any children. We were each other’s only family beyond our parents, you see.”

“You didn’t want kids of your own?”

“Oh, children? No, nasty little buggers.” She smirked. “I’m only

kidding. I can't have children actually. But Paul and I were happy on our own for the most part. Saved time for other things. This was his car, in fact."

Remus trailed his hand across the window edge, feeling the soft white leather under his fingertips. "S'a nice car."

"Yes, it is. He didn't get the chance to take it out much before he passed, so I always make sure I have the most fun I can while driving it."

"That's too bad. Nice of you, though."

"Thank you. Does that mean you want to go again?"

Remus raised his eyes to Sandra's in an instant. "Hell yes."

"I was hoping you'd say that," she beamed, grabbing the gear shift. "And who knows, maybe if you're lucky I'll let you take her for a few spins yourself."

Remus looked from her to the track as the engine revved. Then they were off again and it was pure bliss. He'd never felt so weightless.

After that they spend the entire afternoon just sailing around the track —Sandra could even do the circuit in reverse. Remus never got tired of it, not for a second. He could've lived with the wind in his hair and the roar of the engine dulling each of his senses. There was no space to worry or panic while the car was moving, and it was the most relief he'd felt in months.

Sandra was true to her word in the end and even let him take a turn behind the wheel, which practically vibrated under his grip. It was intimidating at first, having that much power under his thumb, but all it took was a single lap for Remus to find that same euphoric thrill as when Sandra was driving. Every loop brought more confidence, until eventually he was pushing almost one hundred miles an hour on the straight-aways. Once they'd managed to reduce most of the petrol in the tank, Remus' found that his hearing was severely diminished but he didn't even mind. He'd even agreed to call Sandra 'Sandy'—at her insistence of course.

On the way home Remus found himself excited all over again. He couldn't wait to tell his friends. The ringing in his ears felt the same as it did after seeing that band play their first year together. He knew Sirius would've absolutely loved it of course, and he imagined the pair

of them whipping around the track together after they'd finished school. Sandra had told him that they redo the turf regularly to combat wear on the turf, perhaps then.

Dusty waylaid him on the way in the door, slobbering across the front of his trousers; not that he cared much—they were already covered in a fine layer of dirt and grim from the track. As Remus bent down to scratch at the dog's stomach, he heard the phone rang distantly. He waited for his father or someone else to answer, but then a butler appeared—Gregory, he thought his name was.

"The phone, sir," the maybe-Gregory said.

"Who is it?"

"Another young man. He's asked for you by name."

It was James again then. Remus got to his feet with a nod.

"I'll be right there," he told him, before patting Dusty on the stomach and watching as the hound turned over. "C'mon boy! Let's go get the phone—let's go get the phone!"

He raced Dusty to the salon and they skidded in together. Though not as nimble as he once was, the old dog turned at the last moment, upsetting a small end table with his tail and nearly knocking a vase of flowers to the ground. Diving to the ground, Remus caught it at the last second—a save that would've left even James impressed—and sighed as Dusty congratulated him by licking his face.

"This is what they mean when they say animals resemble their owners," he grumbled, before righting the vase. "Sit," he told him. Dusty didn't, but that was more Remus' fault than his anyway.

"Dozy dog," he muttered, before walking to the phone and picking up the receiver where the butler had left it sitting off the hook. "Prongs, I'm so glad you called! You'll never guess what I just did. Dad's girlfriend, Sandy, she—"

"Moony."

Remus' knees nearly buckled. He had to sit down before he could speak again, clutching onto the receiver with both hands.

"Sirius… is—is that you?"

“Yeah, s’me.”

For a second he didn’t have a single thought in his head at all, apart from how tired Sirius sounded. Each syllable was stretched, like it took every ounce of his energy to get them out. Remus cleared his throat, suddenly more nervous than ever.

“We… We haven’t heard from you in weeks!” He chittered. “Blimey, are you okay? Where are you—who’s phone is this?”

“Moony,” Sirius said again, like he was begging, “I just really need your help…”

Chapter End Notes

David Gilmour is/was the lead guitarist for the band Pink Floyd.
A 'jumble sale' is like a place to sell or buy second-hand goods. Like a garage sale.
The movie Remus and Marlene went to see was "The Man Who Fell to Earth" (1976) and yes, Bowie really does play an alien.
Star Wars (A New Hope) didn't come out in the UK until December 1977.
Le Gavroche is an uber-posh Michelin-starred restaurant in London.
Bally hole is/was a type of pinball machine popular in the 70s.
'Coffin-dodger' is derogatory slang for old people. I wouldn't use it on my grandmother, lol.

*Read the note at the top if you're still at all confused about Remus' sexuality, lmao. Or drop me a comment!

Also, HAPPY NEW YEAR’S EVE! To all of those who celebrate this time of year as their new year ^^ I'm really excited to get into these summer chapters. They're going to be so fun, hehe. :^)

Chapter 66: Per Aspera Ad Astra

Chapter Summary

Honestly, these boys. What are we to do with them?

Chapter Notes

CW: References to abuse and neglect as well as smoking.

A/N: Gotta be honest, I was NOT expecting such a reaction from that cliff-hanger, hah! I suppose it might be because I don't commonly feature them within this fic, but ya'll were reeeeeeeling. Naturally, I loved it ofc, but I swear I wasn't trying to edge you with this long wait!
PS: Thank you for the outpouring of love this fic's gotten recently. You loves are seriously so amazing *cries lovingly*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How can I try to explain?
When I do he turns away again,
It's always been the same, same old story;
From the moment I could talk,
I was ordered to listen;
Now there's a way,
And I know that I have to go away…

- "Father and Son" Cat Stevens, 1970

When Sirius called and asked for his help, Remus made the split-second decision that he would go to the ends of the earth to reach him. Luckily he only had to go as far as Dover.

The little port town was just over an hour from London, which meant he could leave and meet him before it even got dark. There was only one problem.

He had no way of getting there.

Sirius hadn't divulged much, but he did admit to swiping another passenger's ticket to get aboard the ferry across the Channel, unable to pay the ticket fee himself. Remus could tell he felt bad, but his current

lack of funds meant that hopping a train into the city wasn't an option on his own. The attendants would catch him and since he wasn't legally an adult, he would be held until his parents came to retrieve him. Sirius didn't need to extrapolate further. Remus considered taking the line down himself with enough fare to pay both their ways back, but it'd twice as long, and something in Sirius' voice had made him exceedingly nervous—like if he didn't reach him as soon as possible, he'd never see him again.

It stung later, mostly when he was being shouted at, but he hadn't even stopped to consider asking Giles for help. It would take too long—would mean too many questions. Sirius needed him and he needed him *now*. Going from the phone, to his bedroom, to the car, had taken less time than it took for Giles to polish off his evening brandy. Remus didn't even remember swiping the keys off the parlour table—it was all a blur. The Roll's front seat felt a lot bigger without the old driver sitting in there with him, but he didn't hesitate to turn the car on and begin rolling it down the rocky driveway. Flashing his high beams so the gateman wouldn't recognise him, Remus did his best to look bulky under Giles' jacket and cap, which he'd stolen off one of the pegs by the kitchen door. He'd always maintained the opinion that he wasn't a thief, but for Sirius he'd be anything.

The nerves didn't really set in until he was driving down the M20 motorway, white-knuckling the steering wheel and trying not to drift out of his lane. As wildly anxious as he was for Sirius, he couldn't bring himself to drive any faster than the speed limit. Getting himself pulled over wasn't going to help Sirius anyway. Most cars just sped on past, not paying the Rolls any mind, and Remus was almost able to relax until a lorry triple his size ran up from behind and gave a honk so blaringly loud that he nearly launched himself into the sedan's roof.

What are you doing, a voice said, *you don't even have a driving license!*

Without room for reason, he pushed back; *I ain't eighteen either but that didn't stop the bloke in the bar from serving Pete, James, and me those pints two weeks ago.*

A Ford raced past him in the next lane, so close they could've kissed mirrors and Remus struggled to not veer into the barrier.

You're gonna die, you stupid fucking idiot!

"Oh shut up," Remus grumbled, flicking on the radio.

The music helped some—soothed him at least—but even if he were a seasoned driver he still would've been distracted. Sirius' short phone conversation replayed over and over again in his head, becoming more terrifying with each iteration. Remus struggled to stay calm. Sirius wasn't dying, he just needed help, and now help was coming. He'd been calm too—tired-sounding, mostly—but still eerily calm.

"I'm in Dover," he'd said, after asking for his help.

"Dover?" Remus had exclaimed; "What the bloody fuck are you doing there?"

"You know where it is then?"

"Yes, I know where fucking Dover is!"

"Good. Can you come get me?"

"Can I... *Of course I can come,* but what—"

"I'm at the port, the one with all the ferries. Can you find that?"

"Yes, but Sirius—you have to tell me what's going on!"

"Can't," Sirius sighed; "there's too much to tell. I dialled your number wrong the first time, and I already had to bum the money to pay for this one. If you come, I promise to tell you everything once you get here. You can get here, right? Just you?"

"Just...? Aw, fuck Sirius—"

"—Please insert two pound fifty for another three minutes."

There was a bang, like Sirius had punched the machine. "Damn tourist rates."

"Sirius," Remus tried again, "are you sure you're okay?"

Sirius was quiet for a few precious seconds, but finally he answered, low and more tired than before; "I will be once you get here."

Then the line had cut and Remus' life had gone from leisurely morning drives to unhinged grand theft auto. Lyall was going to have him strung up when he found out. Probably cut him up and feed him to the dogs. And Giles might just let him—there was no way he hadn't noticed the absence of his vexing ward and precious car.

It doesn't matter, he told himself, *Sirius called, which means he's not dead in a ditch somewhere. And it means he wasn't ignoring your letters. Maybe.*

A sharp ding echoed from the dashboard, knocking him free of his thoughts, and Remus looked down to find the petrol meter had fallen into the red.

You dickhead—you didn't even stop to check if you had any gas?!

Nervous all over again, he took the first exit off the motorway and limped the car long until he managed to find a fill station just off the side of the road. He pulled the Rolls up to an empty pump and turned the car off, taking a moment to compose himself before making his way inside the station. Wiping his sweaty palms on the sides of his trousers, Remus waited in line for his turn at the counter, keeping a careful eye on the Rolls through the window.

"Next," the station attendant called lazily, as the man in front shambled off. Remus jumped to, stepping up to the counter and pulling his his wallet out of his pocket. He nearly fumbled it, but when he looked up at the attendant he found him scratching his neck and yawning disinterestedly. Really, he couldn't have been much older than Remus was, judging by the amount of acne across his forehead.

"Ten on pump five," Remus said, as casually as he could.

The guy began to ring him up. "Nice car," he said over a second yawn, gesturing lazily to the window.

Instant panic. "It's, uhm—it's a rental," Remus stammered.

"Hm. You said you wanted ten on five?"

"Er—yes."

The attendant hit a few more buttons on the register, which popped open with a dull clatter, and Remus passed him a ten pound note before looking down at the large sweets display across the counter's front.

"These too," he said quickly, dropping several chocolate bars on the countertop.

The guy raised a brow, but took the sweets. Remus swallowed.

“And a pack of Embassy Number One’s.”

* * *

Remus streaked down the pavement, dodging the crowd as they mulled from the ferry terminal toward the bus loop and car park. The last boat had just gotten in, bringing with it the smell of salt and sea, with just a hint of summertime and rotting fish. Remus had never been to the sea before; seeing its vast waters as they stretched out all the way to the horizon made him feel calm at first, but also like he was running out of time.

Just beyond the docks the sun was setting, lighting up the entire sky with a bright orange glow. Seagulls crooned overhead and the leaving ferries blared their loud horns, but Remus paid no attention to any of it. He was too busy scanning every face for a hint of familiarity; a cheeky smirk, a straight nose, a pair of storm-grey eyes. Instead all the noses were too wide or too curved, the grey eyes without that tell-tale glint of mischievousness. He went as far down the wharf as he could, throwing himself at the railing and staring out over the ocean as people unloaded from the ferry. No one so much as paid him a second glance.

With Sirius nowhere in sight, Remus finally stopped a ferry attendant, patting him hurriedly on the shoulder while nearly out of breath.

“Have you seen a guy—a—*a boy*. My age, about this tall—with long black hair?”

The attendant reached up to scratch beneath his cap, beads of sweat dripping down his temple. “ ‘fraid not son. You see lots of people on the wharf, gets too hard to distinguish 'em all. Have a look around if ye' want, but best be getting on soon. Terminal’s closing in a few minutes.”

Huffing, Remus spun away and scanned the crowd again. It was thinner now, most people having moved on, but there was not a hint of raven-black among them.

"C'mon Sirius..." He moaned under his breath. *"Where are you?"*

He circled the wharf once more, and then checked all the bus stops. Even tried swinging over the rail to get a peak at the barnacle-covered rocks below, thinking Sirius might have slipped away to avoid being

noticed. Nothing.

"I swear to god, if you let yourself be kidnapped because you thought it'd make a funny joke, then I'll..."

There.

Remus thought he might throw up. The relief was immediate—all that had happened was a single man with a briefcase stepped aside and he finally caught a glimpse of someone sitting alone on a stone bench, head tipped back and feet crossed at the ankles. He didn't see his face —Remus didn't have to. He would know Sirius Black anywhere.

“Sirius!” He shouted, starting forward. Sirius’ head snapped up, blinking in the evening light until finally he noticed him. Almost stumbling on the pavement, Remus raced to him. Sirius was slow to get up, but it didn’t matter. He reached him in a few short strides and clapped his arms around him, squeezing so tight that Sirius gave a little gasp.

“You crazy tosser!” Remus wailed. “What’s happened to you?”

An echo of a sigh brushed his ear, but Sirius still hugged him back. “Hey, Moony.”

He pulled away, glaring at him while his eyes began to burn with unshed tears. “ ‘Hey’? You're gonna 'hey' me now? Sirius, what are you *doing* here?”

“Oh, jus’ went for a little vacation, s’all,” Sirius said, giving him a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. Most of his hair was tucked up in a cap and he had a faint bruise on his left cheek, with dark circles under both eyes. The clothes he was wearing were unsettling—a stiff grey button-up that looked itchier than hell and matching slacks. The whole thing made him looks as though he'd just gotten out of prison. *Blimey,* maybe he had.

“Where were you?” Remus pushed.

“France. Belgium before that.”

His eyes bulged. *“Belgium?* Bloody—why?!”

“It’s a long story.”

“You promised you’d tell me.”

“I know, but can we do it somewhere else? Please Moony, I’m really tired.”

With a pang in his chest, Remus sighed and looked around. Hardly anyone was left on the wharf, and those who were, were bustling by with bags in hand, not paying them any mind. Sirius had no bags, just the clothes on his back.

“Okay,” he said. “C’mon, the car’s this way.”

Leading the way back to the carpark, Remus opened the Roll’s door for Sirius and watched as he stood back and raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t tell me this is yours?”

“No, it's not,” Remus scoffed. “So bloody get in before a bobby starts sniffing around.”

Sirius looked at him and Remus saw the briefest hint of a smile on his face as he slid into the front seat. *Lord how he'd missed that smile.* Stomach in knots, he closed the door after him and went around to the driver’s seat, strapping himself in and starting up the car. It was immensely hard—like holding back an atom bomb, really—to not just simply explode on Sirius with all his questions, but doing that would probably just make Sirius retreat further. As they pulled out of the car park and left the port behind, Sirius kept his head to the window, watching it until everything passed out of sight. Only then did he finally look relieved.

They drove in silence for the first bit. Remus tried hard to focus on the road, but if there was only a single distraction in the world, then it was going to be Sirius Black. What with his quippy jokes, bobbing leg, snapping or strumming fingers—except now Sirius wasn’t doing any of it. Utterly still and silent as a grave, it was like all the life and energy had been drained out of him. Remus was reminded of last January, when Sirius had returned to school cold and distant. Now the twilight reflected poorly off his pale skin, turning him as grey and muted as his clothes.

As the evening road lights of the M20 began to flicker across their faces, Remus remembered the chocolate bars and smokes he’d picked up from the petrol station. Licking his lips, and he gestured to the glove box.

“There’s some chocolate and smokes in the glove compartment.”

Sirius looked back from the window, blinking a bit. “Chocolate and cigarettes? How much more ‘Remus Lupin’ can you get?”

“Just eat. Chocolate might be a bit melted now though.”

Bending forward, Sirius opened the glovebox and pulled out a bar and the pack of Embassys. Always the dramatic, he went for the cigarettes first, popping the top of the carton.

"I see you didn't bother to wait," he smirked, putting one of the remaining cigarettes between his teeth.

"I paid for them. And 'sides, you still owe me for the last round."

"Mhm. Don't worry, I'm good for it. I mean, look at me—simply dripping in wealth."

Remus smiled a bit, reassured by the joke. With one hand on the wheel, he shimmied his lighter out of his pocket, holding it up and flicking the flame to life. Sirius came forward and lit his smoke, before cracking the Roll’s window and exhaling in relief.

“God, that’s better,” he moaned, ripping open a chocolate bar and taking bites between puffs. “You’re actually quite good,” Sirius said over a full-mouth, once he’d gotten some energy back. Remus looked to him in question and Sirius gestured to the road with his cigarette.

“What? Oh, you mean driving. Yeah, told you I was getting lessons.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yeah, I did. Said so in my—”

Remus stopped abruptly, remembering how he hadn’t gotten a single written response from Sirius all summer. Sirius, clever as he was, caught up easily. He swallowed a mouthful of chocolate and caramel and carefully licked the stickiness from his fingers before pulling another drag.

“If you wrote me any letters, I never got them,” he said, exhaling.

“Figured as much,” Remus mumbled. He sounded disappointed, but really it was a relief. He’d been so worried that Sirius wasn’t writing to him because of what had happened in the bathroom on their last day of school, as though things had suddenly changed between them —that they weren’t friends anymore. His only reassurance that he

wasn't the only one being frozen out had come when Sirius hadn't responded to any of James or Peter's letters either, though that had hardly been cause for celebration.

"Do you want to tell me what you were doing in Belgium now?" Remus asked.

Sirius kept his face to the window. "It was mum's idea, I think. I couldn't tell what it was, but things were different when I got back."

"Different how?"

"Different like... they didn't notice me. At first I thought it was a punishment—the ignoring. Mum's never been able to do it before, she always wants the last word, but this time it was like I... wasn't even there anymore. None of them talked to me for the first two weeks."

"Not even Regulus?"

"He did... a little. I tried apologising for the prank, but he didn't care. Not that he should have to. It was... bad. You know, what I did to him... Pretty sure mum told him not to talk to me too. I didn't realise it then, but she was cutting ties—just waiting for everything to be ready." Sirius laughed dryly. "For the fucking paperwork to come through."

"I don't understand..."

Sirius took another drag, but he must've inhaled straight into his lungs because it left him coughing. "Guess she'd—" *cough;* "—She'd heard about this school that supposedly could straighten out even the worst benders." *Cough, cough;* "... She probably thought it would work on me too."

Remus stared at him in alarm, before snapping his eyes back to the road. *Benders?*

"You mean she knows about you and—er… other… guys?"

"Ha—" Sirius paused to clear his throat. "I just mean she wanted her problem solved—*me* solved. I turn eighteen this year, so they had to send me away before then if they had any chance of getting me committed."

"Committed?!"

“I know, right? Turns out crazy runs in my family too. We’ve so much in common, you and I.” Sirius laughed half-heartedly, then frowned very deeply. “Sorry… Didn’t mean that.”

Remus hardly cared. If there was a time to be mad at Sirius Black, it wasn’t now.

“So weren't they… gonna let you come back to school?” He asked.

“Nope. The school runs all year round, and if you're really good—summers too. Hah... Guess we know now what Reg was on about when he talked to you before.”

Putting two and two together, Remus grew suddenly furious. “You mean the little bleeder *knew* that they were gonna send you away and he still didn’t say anything? At all?!”

“Can't hardly blame him,” Sirius said, uncharacteristically apathetic. “I was a right bastard, and he was just trying to save his own skin. Probably figured that he’d get sent away too if he tried saying anything against it.”

That’s no excuse, Remus silently seethed. Sirius was right, Regulus had no loyalty to anyone.

“So how’d you end up in Dover then?” He asked finally.

“The school—they call it a school, but it’s more like an institution. Kids from all over, most of us didn't even speak the same language, not that they allowed much interaction. It's all about 'healing' or some crap. 'Healing the mind through constraint of the body'—pretty sure they got their slogans from the Mansons... So it goes like, you've got your crazy kids—I'm talking the kind that use their own shit to draw on the walls. Then there's your 'problem kids', like *moi* for example, though I'm pretty sure I was small fry in comparison. A couple of them had already been to prison, though none of them could roll a joint like you."

"You had weed with you?"

"There's a mule everywhere, Moons. But yeah... got the strap for that one. And everything’s grey—the clothes, the beds, the walls, and there’s bars on most of the windows. It's like a real prison. It was in Ghent. I’m still not exactly sure what part—didn’t stop to ask—but at least it was in the city and not in some nowhere part of the countryside. Then I would've been really fucked.”

Remus stared at the road. He hated the Blacks. Who could do that to their own son?

“And... how long were you there for?”

“A week, maybe? What’s the date anyway?”

“It’s the twenty-second.”

Sirius swore. “Almost two then.”

“Fucking—How could you not know what day it was?”

“They have an ‘isolation room’. You get sent there if you lip off too much. Guess I was in there longer than I thought.”

Remus’ hands tightened on the wheel. “Jesus…”

“Yeah, but you should’a saw it when I started swearing at them in German—then French! They understood that, ha. They probably thought I was just some dumb English prat—they got all angry and nasty and this big woman—I’m talking built like a fridge, bint was massive—she screwed up her face real and tight and she… well, she…” Sirius trailed off. “Doesn’t matter. When they let me out I managed to sneak out through a second floor window when one of the crappy matrons left her office open. Thought they’d know better actually.”

“You and bloody windows.”

Sirius smirked and held up his hands. “No injuries this time, promise. Anyway, after I got out I hitchhiked across the border into France with this old farmer. He only spoke Dutch, but seemed nice enough. Kept showing me this picture of his wife he kept in his wallet. I think she was dead. But he got me all the way to Calais, and I walked the rest of the way toward the ferry.”

“Fuck... Hitchhiking...?" Remus took a breath. "Mary’s in France, why didn’t you just call her?”

Sirius grimaced slightly. “I thought about it, but explaining everything to her with her family around sounded horrible, and besides, Paris is south of Calais. I wanted to go north.”

“Did you even fucking sleep at all?”

“No, but it’s fine now, you’re here.”

Remus pressed his lips together in a thin line. He wished they had the radio, but this part of the highway was like a radio dead-zone. At least it was finally dark out, and eventually the yellow road lamps had fallen away. The only light came from their headlights and those of passing cards on the other side of the motorway.

“Want me to take over for a while?” Sirius asked casually.

“Do you even know how to drive?”

“No, but it can’t be that hard. You’re doing it.”

“Sod off. I’m fine,” Remus said. “You should sleep. There’s a jacket in the back you can use for a blanket if you want.”

Flicking his cigarette stub out the window, Sirius turned around and pulled Giles’ jacket over him, settling back against the car door. Remus watched him subtly, and Sirius’ eyes eventually slid closed.

“… Moony?”

“You’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“I know, it’s just… Don’t crash.”

Remus smiled to himself. *“Sleep.”*

He heard Sirius chuckle, but turned quiet after that, too tired to keep his eyes open any longer. Remus drove on in silence, occasionally sneaking a glance to his right. As always, Sirius looked best in the moonlight. No longer grey, but luminous again. Funny how friends and laughter could do that. The flat cap he was wearing still hid most of his hair but a thick lock had come loose just behind his ear, draping down his neck like a curtain.

Around twenty minutes later, as they were nearing Bexleyheath, the radio gave a crackle. Picking up the station he’d lost on his way to Dover, it cut into a song mid-way and suddenly the radio was playing the Beatles over the Roll’s dull roar;

‘—comes the sun, do, do, do,
Here comes the sun,
And I say, it’s alright…’

Not wanting to wake Sirius, Remus reached out to turn the volume down, when suddenly a voice croaked out; “Don’t.”

He froze, glancing between the road and Sirius, who was peering at him over the shoulder of the jacket.

“It’s okay,” Sirius murmured, “I like it.”

Slowly, Remus pulled back and gave a nod; “Alright, then.”

Sirius smiled, and when the next verse picked up again he began to sing along, more than a weak murmur than anything else. Remus loved it.

‘Little darling, the smiles returning to the faces,
Little darling, it seems like years since it’s been here;
Here comes the sun, do, do, do,
Here comes the sun,
And I say, it’s alright…’

Remus relaxed in his seat, leaning one arm against the window as he drove. By all accounts he’d had a good summer so far, but now that Sirius was there, all else paled in comparison. That was what love was, he supposed—even if Sirius had asked him to forget all of it, he couldn’t. It would’ve taken everything he had to do that.

But it took nothing to sing along, so as Sirius murmured the lyrics, sleepy and finally at peace, he did too.

* * *

He knew Giles was going to be mad, but this was something else. At nearly midnight, Remus had pulled up to the Lupin estate’s front gates in the Rolls. Sirius had already squeezed himself into the foot space between his seat and the glove compartment, and with the jacket draped over him it was as though he weren’t there at all. The gateman still gaped at Remus as he pulled up, but he just held a finger to his lips and the guy eventually let him in.

“The Latin on the gate,” Sirius said, flipping the jacket off of him after they’d driven through; “ ‘Homo homini lupus est’—does it mean what

I think it means?"

"Oh you mean you don't know? Thought you were taking Latin for an A-Levels."

Sirius gave him an unimpressed look and Remus smirked.

"It means, 'a man is a wolf to his fellow man'."

"Ew. That your family motto?"

"Guess so."

"Well, I suppose it's still better than mine."

Remus made sure to pull up tightly to the house, next to the kitchen entrance and just out of view from the main windows. "What's yours then?"

" 'Toujours pur'—always pure."

"Damn French people."

"D'accord."

Releasing their seat belts, they got out together and briskly scuttled up the front steps, careful to remain as inconspicuous as possible. There were no lights on inside, which made for some relief, and using Giles' keys Remus was able to open the front door and let them inside.

"Wow. Guess you Lupins do pretty well for yourselves," Sirius said, gazing around at the grand foyer. "Hard to believe a bloke as hard as you grew up in a place like this."

Remus pushed him toward the stairs. "I know you're just saying that, and I hate you for it. Now move on already."

Sirius opened his mouth to make another jab, but instead all that came out was a; *"HAVE YOU LOST YOUR GODDAMN MIND?!"*

"Crikey!" Sirius gasped, as they both practically fell over in shock. More quick to the draw, Remus shoved him the rest of the way up the stairs and then promptly stumbled back down them on his own, ready to head Giles off as he stormed out of the hallway. The old driver appeared not half a second later, face red up to his hairline, with his fists raised as though he were about to go several rounds with Muhammad Ali.

“STEALING A CAR?” He roared, halting in the middle of the foyer. “YOU ACTUALLY STOLE THE CAR?”

“Have you told my dad?” Remus asked automatically.

“HAVE I—no, but I bloody well should have! I thought I’d raised you better! I mean, really—what were you *THINKING?!”*

I wasn’t, Remus told himself. And it was true—it had all been about getting to Sirius. Not that he could tell Giles that. As good as Giles was, he couldn’t trust that he wouldn’t try and send Sirius back home. Adults were like that, always assuming they knew best. Well, he was the one who knew *Sirius* best.

“I’m sorry,” he said honestly. “Would you believe me if I told you it was important?”

“What could be so bloody important that a seventeen year-old has to commit grand theft auto?!”

“I…” Remus looked down, then his eyes slid to the second floor, where Sirius was still hidden out of sight. “… I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t you at least lie then?” Giles snapped.

“You really want me to lie?”

“Of course not! Might make me feel better though!”

“And here I thought you’d raised me better than that.”

“Ooh, you cheeky…” Giles sucked in a deep breath, growing big in the chest and puckering his mouth like a balloon ready to explode. “So what?” He grunted. “You’re not gonna tell me where it is you were?”

It hurt, but no, he couldn’t. Remus shook his head. “I didn’t go to the End though,” he added quickly, “I swear.”

“I bloody-well know you didn’t go to the East End! If you had, the Rolls would be down a tire and its back window would be smashed in!”

“But they’re not!” He agreed. “So that means everything’s okay…?”

“Everything is most definitely NOT OKAY!”

Remus winced. “Alright, I can tell you're mad—"

"Try FURIOUS!"

"—But can you at least wait to punish me until tomorrow? I promise to do whatever you say without any complaints."

It wasn't enough, not by miles, but the old man had clearly run out of steam. He deflated with another unsatisfied grunt and thrust out his open palm. Remus stared at it a moment, before understanding. Quickly, he stepped forward and handed over the keys. Giles snapped them up like hot coal and promptly dropped them into his pocket.

"Fine, go," he lashed; "Get to bed before I put you over my goddamn knee. And for your sake, you best haven't put a scratch on 'er!"

Remus couldn't help it; he threw his arms around Giles and squeezed tight. "Thanks, Gil. Knew you'd understand."

For all his anger, Giles did not push him away. He did, however, sputter a bit in surprise; "Er—don't think this means you're suddenly fancy-free! I'm gonna work you for all you're sodding worth, starting first-thing tomorrow!"

"Whatever you say," Remus said, not the least bit bothered.

Once the hug had long overstayed the usual Remus' level of welcome, Remus let go and started up the stairs, an extra spring in his step.

"Don't you forget—tomorrow morning, seven AM!" Giles called after him. "You're going to scrub that car until I can pick my teeth in its bumper!"

"Oh goodie, so I only have to scrub enough for three teeth then?"

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing!"

"Yeah, just get going, ya little blighter! And be quiet already, it's bleedin' midnight!"

As Giles fell away behind him, Remus obediently raced up the rest of the stairs and swung himself around the banister. He was aiming for the hall, ready to tell Sirius that they'd actually gotten away with all of it when he nearly tripped over him instead. Sirius, who was crouching behind the railing like a spying child, looked up at Remus as he skidded to a halt just before his shins.

“So that’s Giles,” Sirius sniggered; “Seems like a decent enough bloke.”

“You’re a dirty eavesdropper,” Remus said lightly, before reaching down and taking his arm. Hauling Sirius to his feet, they quietly scuttled down the hallway to his bedroom, and soon enough they were both slipping inside.

“Sorry for the mess. I mostly tell the maids not to come in here,” Remus said as he got the lights. They came on all at once, illuminating the scattered piles of books, records, and unfinished summer homework, as well as all of the laundry and dishes he’d neglected to clear away. Among them was a breakfast tray from several days ago, still sitting by the door and now looking decently mouldy. Snatching up a dirty t-shirt from the floor, Remus quickly covered it while Sirius watched him from the corner of his eye, looking amused.

“Nah, s’fine,” he said, taking the room in and appearing almost mesmerized by the grand space. “Though I’d be lying if I said I weren’t surprised. You’re so neat at school.”

Remus put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “This ain’t school, I guess…”

“Got that right.” Sirius stopped to right an old tea mug, which had fallen from atop a stack of books at the foot of his bed. “Your room's pretty huge though. You could fit like… thirty marauders in here.”

“You’re telling me yours ain’t bigger?”

“No, it is.” Sirius kept looking around. At the heavy velvet curtains, the dour wallpaper, the ancient rugs. “I dunno, maybe it’s me, but it just doesn’t feel like you…”

“It's a stranger’s room,” Remus agreed, following him in. “I know. Never cared for it much myself.”

“Mine neither,” Sirius said, looking at him softly. Remus returned the look, and suddenly the urge to kiss him was so great he could feel his mouth begin to water. Luckily Sirius was too enamoured by the room to notice. He’d already moved away again, spotting Andy’s guitar, which Remus had left leaning up against the far side of his bed.

“This I remember,” he grinned. “Thought James took it for the summer?” Throwing himself over the bed, Sirius reached for the instrument and sat up, slinging it across his lap. He took a moment to

pluck a few strings before wincing. “Ooh, out of tune.”

“Well, that would be my fault,” Remus said, coming forward to lean casually against the bedpost. “James actually got his own. He lent me yours so I could try practising on it, but I’m not very good.”

“He got his own guitar?” Sirius echoed with delight. “And *you’re* playing now?”

“I only gave it a shot, yeah, but it’s really James you should hear. He’s been practising every day—oh, and Pete got his own drum set!”

“Actually?”

“Yeah! I haven’t seen it myself but James says it’s positively ace. Guess there’s a lot you gotta catch up on, Padfoot. Heh.” He’d meant it as a joke, but Sirius looked down to the guitar, gently patting its body with his hand and Remus knew it’d been the wrong thing to say.

“Sirius, I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s okay,” Sirius said quickly, “s’normal… the summers. Used to suck more when we were kids, but ya get through it. Like Christmas. I'd rather you catch me up anyway.”

“Y-You would?”

“Yeah, James and Pete take forever to tell a story, but you’re much more streamlined. And besides, they’re off at the summer house anyway, right? I don't think I can handle listening to them go on about the same damn beach. It's always the same—sandy.”

“Oh yeah, right. Heh...” Remus bit his lip over a smile. “We should tell them that you’re here actually. And what happened. They’re really worried.”

“Nah, it’s late,” Sirius said, shaking his head adamantly. He was still wearing that ugly cap. “Besides, I don’t want to ruin their holiday.”

“You wouldn’t ruin it. They’d be thrilled—not the Belgium part, the part about you being alright…”

“Yeah, they’d be thrilled, alright. So thrilled they’d hop the first train back to make sure you’re telling the truth. Trust me, I know James.”

“So… what? You just want to wait until they get back? That’ll be almost a month from now.”

Sirius looked up at him in earnest. “Would that be a problem? I just… Sorry... I know you didn’t exactly ask your family if I could visit.”

Remus was quick to correct his mistake; he didn't want Sirius to think he was unwelcome. “Shut up. Do you really think I ask permission to do things?”

Sirius chuckled quickly. “You’re right. I think tonight is case in point enough. But I still don’t want to intrude.”

“Why? Intruding’s never bothered you before.”

Sirius shrugged, then played a few more sad notes.

Almost frowning, Remus reached out and grabbed hold of the head of the guitar. “I’m kidding—it’s *fine,* Sirius. You can stay here. For… For as long as you want.”

Sirius looked to his hand on the guitar, licking his lips. “Thanks, Moony.”

“Don’t thank me anymore, you would’ve done the same.”

“Obviously.” Sirius smiled and Remus sheepishly let go of the guitar.

“Are you… Are you hungry then?”

“Nah, jus’ tired. I could use a shower though.”

“Yeah, you do smell a bit like a sewer.”

“Ow. A sewer of roses, maybe.”

Remus pointed to the far wall. “Toilet’s there. Should have everything. Use whatever you want, just make sure you lock the other door. Sometimes the maids make night rounds for the dirty towels and they’re pretty shite at knocking.”

Setting the guitar aside and popping to his feet, Sirius wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Oh, I dunno… Maybe I’ll just leave the door open a crack. See who wanders in.”

“I wouldn’t. Most of them are old enough to be your grandmother. And you're supposed to be *hiding.”*

Sirius laughed, then reached out to put a hand on Remus’ shoulder. “You’re a real friend, Moons. Don't know what I did to deserve you.”

That makes two of us.

Taking a breath, Remus nodded and then watched while Sirius turned and slipped into the bathroom. As the door clicked shut, a puzzled feeling fell over him, and he glanced at the guitar suspiciously. It almost felt like he'd missed a punchline. Was his comedic timing off? No, never. Not unless…

"Wait…" he murmured as the shower turned on, "did he mean leave the door open in case… *I* wandered in?"

The guitar said nothing, and Remus suddenly felt very, *very* stupid.

"AUGH!" He cried, smacking the bed covers like a tantruming child. "What the hell?!"

Missed your shot, did ya, Romeo?

"What?! No! No way! Ugh—there is absolutely no way he could've actually meant *me."*

He was looking at you when he said it, wasn't he?

"Yeah—and he was joking!"

Believe it or not, but I don't actually think that toilet conjugal visits are beyond him.

"But he called me a friend! A bloody friend!"

Hey, I'm on your side here. Get it in already or fucking get out, ya moron.

Remus scowled. *I hate you.*

Determined to stifle the infernal voice in his head, Remus set off to do the thing he should've gotten out of the way days ago—cleaning. Collecting all of the dirty dishes, he snuck out and carried each armful down to the kitchens, trying his best not to make too much noise as he left them to soak in the sink. While he was down there, he grabbed a few day-old scones for Sirius and filled up a large glass of water before making his way back upstairs. No one bothered him, it being so late, and he could still hear the gentle rush of the shower as he walked inside.

You could try the door, see if he left it open.

Ugh… Sod off already, why don't you!

Gathering up his dirty laundry, Remus threw it all into the hamper next to the bathroom before fighting with his bed covers and shoving them in too. He was still a seventeen year-old boy, which meant he hadn't changed them since returning for the holiday, but he thought Sirius might appreciate some clean sheets after what he'd been through. The books and records he left alone, because Sirius would also appreciate them.

Just as he had finished tucking the blanket's corners in, the man of the hour finally emerged from the steaming bathroom. Sirius was still wearing the trousers he'd arrived in, but his chest was bare, and he had a towel over his head which he used to rub the dampness from his hair.

"I'll get you something to sleep in!" Remus called, trying not to make eye contact with his half-naked roommate as he rushed to the wardrobe. "Bed's clean, by the way. You can take the left side. Or the right—doesn't really matter to me."

Sirius looked up, keeping the towel around his head. "It's fine. I'll take the sofa over there."

Remus froze. "Oh! Er…"

"Sorry," Sirius said, quickly padding over to the small chaise lounge that sat in the corner of the room. "It's just… It's your bed, innit? And I really don't want to be any more of a bother."

"You wouldn't be! But—ehm…" Remus bit down hard on his tongue as he slowly pawed through the clothes in his wardrobe; "Sorry, I just assumed, but… Sorry… It's fine. Just um… here." Picking out a pair of winceyette pyjama bottoms, he crossed the room and awkwardly handed them over.

"Thanks," Sirius said, taking them. He reached up to remove the towel, before stopping midway and gesturing meekly to the trousers. "Sorry, do you mind?"

"Oh! No, go ahead." Remus cleared his throat. "I'll just… get you a blanket." Streaking away, he snatched the fresh quilt off of his bed and began bunching it up in his arms. He hadn't been able to avoid looking at Sirius' scars—the shiny, pink layers of skin that pulled taut over his shoulder like wax—but they'd hardly mattered. It was really everything else that had intrigued him so badly. Not that any of that was a good idea. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

“Can I take one of these, then?” Sirius said, appearing at his elbow with the towel still hanging over his head. He’d really only been gesturing to the pillows, but it still made Remus leap about a foot into the air. “Jesus! You feeling alright?”

“Er—yeah!" Remus winced. "Sorry, just tired too. You go ahead. My casa or whatever…”

“Cool.” Sirius plucked a pillow off his bed. “Oh and by the way, it’s ‘mi casa’.”

“… What?”

“The saying—‘mi casa, es su casa’.”

“Oh. Right.” Remus swallowed thickly, before handing him the blanket. Sirius took it, and his fingertips brushed the back of Remus’ hand, making goosebumps sprout all the way up to his shoulder.

Stop being such an idiot, you sleep in the same room for most of the year, don’t you?

This is different. He’s in my *room—with his shirt off!*

“You sure you’re okay, Moons?” Sirius asked, peering at him.

“I'm fine—it should be you we're worried about! Not that—er... Sorry. I can… I can take that towel from ya now.”

Sirius reached up to bundle either side under his chin like some Russian grandmother. “I’m good. Hair’s still kinda wet. But hey, thanks for the blanket. And the trousers, though… they are a bit long.”

They both looked down, and Remus noted the bunched up fabric around Sirius’ ankles. Sirius would’ve never called himself short, so he was obviously doing it to make Remus feel better. And it did work some.

“I left some water and a few scones for you on that table there,” Remus said in what he hoped was a kindly way. “I know it’s late and all, but they shouldn’t be rock-hard yet.”

“Yum. You’re the best.” Tucking the pillow and blanket under one arm, Sirius gave him a friendly nudge to the shoulder with his fist before walking over to the chaise. As he went about turning the

lounge into an acceptable bed, Remus drew the curtains and got the light. His ears still felt hot, but it was manageable.

“Moony?” Sirius called, after they’d both finally settled down under their covers. His voice felt so far away in the big room—completely unlike the comfort of their dorm.

“Yeah…?”

“Thanks.”

Staring up at the roof of his bed, Remus felt his heart flutter again. It was horrible.

“I told you—stop saying thanks.”

“I mean it though,” Sirius insisted; “You really saved me back there.”

Remus turned over in bed. Through a crack in the curtains, he could just make out the moon, full and bright. Hopeful.

“See you in the morning, Sirius."

“... Okay, Moony.”

* * *

The next morning, Remus served his punishment and then some for stealing the Rolls and taking it for his so-called “joy ride”. He scrubbed and scrubbed until his fingers were prunes and the car shone with a million sun-kisses twinkles. When Giles could see his every pore in its reflection, he continued his discipline by making Remus polish the floor of the foyer, hang all of the laundry, clean every window in the ground floor, and finish it all off by washing his dishes from the night before—plus any that had been procured from breakfast that day. The kitchen ladies seemed to find it all quite comical, but rewarded him for his efforts with heaping trays of breakfast.

“Gots to feed the growing boy,” one of the cooks—an old Romanian woman named Imena—said, after insisting he take a fifth piece of toast. Remus didn’t argue. He was eating for two stomachs today.

Punishment finally finished with, Remus made a quick pit-stop to pick

up a certain someone before sneaking the food up to the second floor. He'd almost toppled both glasses of orange juice several times by the time he stopped outside his own bedroom, but after knocking twice, then twice again—their code, *'I'm okay'* —Remus stuck his head in.

"Sirius, you up? Snuck you some breakfast."

"Yes! Absolutely famished," Sirius cried, tossing a random book aside as he shot upright. He was already dressed, all in borrowed clothes, and had folded the blanket and pillow up on the back of the little sofa like any good house guest.

Remus grinned and got ready to open the door wide. "Good. 'Cause the ladies in the kitchen hooked us up. Also... I might have a surprise."

"Ooh. I love surprises. What is it?"

"Don't freak out, but I brought someone to see you."

Sirius froze a bit, like he was afraid James was about to come thundering into the room, but the moment Remus opened the door fully and allowed a single excited coonhound to race inside, a huge grin bloomed across his face.

"Oh shit—*dog!"*

It was all Sirius had time to say before Dusty had zoomed across the room and bowled right through his middle. *"OOF—!* Down boy! Jesus. Excitable bugger, aren't you?" Sirius began scratching the speckled dog behind the scruff of his neck. "Now, who might you be? Hold on, this can't be the legendary Dusty, can it?"

Eyeing the glasses of juice precariously to avoid spilling, Remus came in and shut the door behind him with a little jerk his foot, before crossing the room and setting their breakfasts down on the coffee table in front of the chaise. "Padfoot, meet Dusty—Dusty, meet Padfoot."

"Well, Dusty I—*oh!* That's right, you have another Padfoot here! Where is he? I should like to meet such a distinguished gentleman."

Remus shrugged. "He's probably in the kennel—it's one of the big buildings on the other side of the lawn. Only Dusty comes into the house."

"And how'd you get so lucky, huh?" Sirius grabbed Dusty round the

snout, leaning in and making a shameless kissy-face at the end of his nose. Obviously thrilled by the attention, Dusty retaliated by surging forward again, slamming his snout into Sirius' chin and making his head snap back sharply.

"Agh, fuck! Man, I think he rattled my brain."

Sirius pressed a hand to his forehead, careful to avoid the brim of his hat. It was the only thing he'd brought from Belgium that he insisted on keeping, despite the fact that it made him look like a charity advert.

"Why are you still wearing that thing?" Remus asked, busy arranging their breakfast trays on the table. "Weren't you the one who said that all hats are a menace to good hair?"

Sirius grunted, trying to shove Dusty off of him as he desperately lapped at the side of his face. "I'm just… *c'mon boy*... Just—trying to bring back the style!" He declared. "Why? You mean to say that you're suddenly into fashion?"

Remus just looked at him.

"There then," Sirius said, as Dusty practically bowled him over on the chaise. "It's a statement, just like Marauders. You're just—*ngh*—behind the times, Lupin."

Remus shook his head, before pulling Dusty off of his friend and passing Sirius a fork. Sirius took it eagerly, and immediately began shovelling huge bites into his mouth as though he were actually starving. Remus realised with a pang that he might be.

"Fuck, I missed fry-ups," Sirius moaned. "Mum hates anything greasy. I swear, she's probably made of porridge at this point. Porridge and hatred."

"I can get you more later if you're still hungry," Remus promised, fiddling with a sausage. Dusty began to whine until he caved and fed it to him. "And we can visit the dogs as long as we're careful. I don't think they're doing any training today anyway."

"Thought I was supposed to be hiding?"

"You are... but I could lie. Say you're a friend. S'not like you'll have to meet my dad or anything."

Sirius gave him a wry look, which was stifled only by his giant mouthful of egg and toast. “Ah, don’t you fret over me.”

“I’m not fretting.”

“You are. It's like your default setting. Mooning Moony."

“I just don’t want you to feel cooped up in here.”

Swallowing, Sirius waved him off. “Oh no, I’ve got plenty of entertainment. You, the guitar, your astounding collection of books lacking any and all plot—and now Dusty!”

“My books have *plot.”*

“If you count eternal damnation and self-loathing as plot, then sure. But oh, that’s right… I’m forgetting the really scurrilous stuff. You tried to hide it, but I’ve a nose for things like these. I snuffed you out, you sneaky tosser.”

Remus shrugged, assuming that Sirius was talking about the small bit of weed he’d hidden in the bottom drawer of his dresser. “You can have it, but I wouldn’t smoke it in here. Pretty sure Giles can smell burning hash from a mile away.”

“I didn’t mean the weed—though I did find that too.”

“Then what?” He glanced at the bookshelves. “A book? I dunno which one it could be then. I may have a copy of ‘Frankenstein’ lying around if you’re that desperate, but I’d hardly call Mary Shelley ‘scurrilous’.”

“So you admit they have no plot!” Sirius smirked devilishly, and then suddenly whipped a letter out from under a pillow, torn open on its top; “No, it’s not Frankenstein, my poor Watson. What I found was *much* more interesting.” He turned it over, holding the letter up to the side of his face and puckering directly next to the kiss mark on its back.

Oh shit.

“Sirius, don’t—!”

“You never told me Jillian Stewart had a thing for you, Moony! And blimey, judging by the length of this love letter, she is absolutely *smitten!”*

“You asshole!”

Remus lunged across the table for the letter, nearly scattering the dishes, but Sirius only let out a bark of laughter and sat upright on the sofa, waving the letter in the air as if to taunt him with it.

“Don’t be too embarrassed, Stewart really does have a way with words! I mean, just listen to this prose—‘kinder than mother Theresa, the smartest boy in our year, eyes like the sea—oh fuck, Moons! She got your eye colour wrong! What a shite girlfriend.”

“Sirius, I’m gonna kill you!”

Coming around the table, Remus dodged his gangly dog and threw himself forward. He ended up missing the letter and falling against the plush edge of the chaise while Dusty barked frantically and Sirius slid away, grinning maniacally.

“You should frame it—put it in a museum! Call it *‘les désespérés et les dégénérés’!”*

“Give it back!”

“No way—*I’m* gonna frame it!” Peeling the letter free from his envelope, Sirius tossed the extra paper away and slipped further from Remus. He used one hand to unfurl the letter and kept the other pressed to the top of his head to hold his post boy’s cap down. “ ‘Dear Remus’,” he read; “ ‘I’ve only just arrived in Bordeaux’—she’s in France? Did you tell her to look Mary up?”

“Give it to me!”

“No! Finder’s keepers, Moons! Now—where was I?”

Grabbing him by the ankle, Remus gave a single viscous tug and Sirius flopped directly down onto his back with a yelp. The noise was almost too satisfying, and Remus fought a grin as Sirius scowled defiantly. Giving him a sharp push, Sirius made to turn over and shimmy away but Remus stopped that too, pinning his leg in place.

“Gotcha,” he said smugly. “Now give that back.”

Sirius smirked. “In your dreams, Lupin. Dusty—here boy, come and get the treat!”

Instantly Dusty was there. He swiped the letter from Sirius’ outstretched arm like it was another sausage and shot across the room with it.

“So NOW you listen?!” Remus moaned. Pushing up, he started scrambling to get away, but Sirius was faster. He brought his knee up at the last second, catching Remus in the gut and making him sag back into the sofa. Sitting up, Sirius laughed at him—the git—and made to turn, but Remus wouldn’t have it.

“Right… that’s it!”

He lunged again, grappling his friend and pinning him back onto the velvet. This time Remus didn’t stop until he was straddling Sirius round the waist. Sirius fought back of course, almost like he did with James, and soon enough they were really scrapping. Struggling to keep his hold, Remus grunted—Sirius was like an eel, twisting every which way in attempts to escape. He had to squeeze his thighs just to keep him in place and took several light jabs to the chest for it, but Sirius’ smack was like the gentle kiss of butterfly wings compared to some of the rounds he used to go with Doss and Lee. His legs were deadly enough, but with those pinned, Remus was obviously the winner. Almost laughing—*I’ve got you!*—he used his hands to cage Sirius in, pressing them to the sofa on either side of his face and leaned forward to—*what? Punch him? Kiss him?*

Not that it mattered.

Before Remus could decide what it was he was about to do, Sirius wrapped a hand around his wrist and shoved it directly off the edge of the sofa. With all of his weight leaning on his hands and nothing keeping him from diving head-first into Sirius’ nose, Remus dipped forward and let out a sharp squawk of surprise. He was a hair’s distance away from smacking their foreheads together when he managed to catch himself, and as his chest heaved, he looked up to find the both of them nose-to-nose. Staring back at him, Sirius’ lips also parted in shock.

Kiss him!

The thought was almost like a punch to the head. It hit Remus all at once, and he let out a second noise, this one a mixture of what sounded like a gag and grunt. It broke Sirius’ spell, and his face split into a grin as he began to laugh at him.

“Ha! You’re a real shit boxer, Moons. Wouldn't last ten seconds against Prongs.”

Remus couldn’t even comprehend enough to laugh. He was too busy reeling—still stuck on that little ring of pure blue he could see

encircling both of Sirius' pupils.

Kiss him, you great quaking idiot!

"I…"

Do it! He's already kissed you!

"I'm… what?"

"Moons? You good...?"

"I—er... uhm... ngh...?"

It was like he had suddenly become incapable of all thought. Remus bit down on his lip hard. He hadn't meant for this, if anything it was Sirius' fault, and yet now he couldn't even find the strength in his arms to move. Surely Sirius would tell him to get off if he was really that inconvenienced, so maybe…

WOOF!

A bark cut across the bedroom, demanding their attention. That's right, they had an audience. Dusty was several feet away, finished with his treat, which was now in pieces around his feet. Suddenly mortified, Remus straightened up and quickly clambered off of his best friend before Sirius had the chance to hear the raging thump of his heart.

That's right… that's your best friend—the best friend that you should've kissed, you blithering pansy!

Resisting a moan, Remus stubbornly shoved all thoughts of kissing away. He'd hoped that after everything with James and Peter, and then with the girls, that things might feel clearer; and yet there he was, dripping in anxiety the moment Sirius so much as glanced at him. *Fuck.* How was he ever going to survive the summer?

Drawing in a breath, Remus began marching away from the chaise.

I'm not gay. I'm not gay, he told himself. *He's just impossible not to notice. It's like his job. Him and that annoyingly stupid-horrible-beautiful face—no! Think of something else—think of the stupid hat!*

Dusty barked again—*WOOF!*—as Remus reached him. He was sitting proudly by the foot of the bed, the remains of Jillian's letter scattered in a slobbery circle around his feet.

“That’s a damn shame,” Sirius called, as Remus bent down to scoop up the shredded pieces. “Can it not be saved at all?”

“I-I don’t need to save it,” Remus huffed, collecting every scrap into his palm and quickly moving to stuff it into the waist basket beside his desk. His face felt hot, so rather than turning around and risk Sirius seeing, he turned to the desk and began straightening out the messy stack of books he’d left sitting there. He’d just gotten all the spines to face the right way when Sirius appeared at his side, toeing the bin with Jillian’s letter.

“Sorry I got your love letter shredded.”

Remus smacked the book he was holding down onto the desk. “Don’t you listen to anything? I said it’s not a love letter!”

“Hm…” Sirius pressed his lips out into a curious pout. “Have you written her back at all?”

"No."

"Liar. You're too nice to not have."

Remus scowled. “… A few times. Only a few.”

“So you must like her then?”

“No! Jesus Christ—you said it yourself, I only answer to be polite!”

“But you still wrote her. C’mon, lover-boy, I’m not an idiot. You wrote to her knowing that it’d give her hope, and now she’s swooning at your curls, and dotting her ‘i’s with tiny hearts, and—”

“Well at least she wrote me!” Remus snapped viciously, before immediately regretting it. Sirius’ face fell, and instead of laughing he pressed his lips into a thin line, looking away dismissively.

“Yeah, well… sorry for that.”

“No,” Remus moaned, catching Sirius by the arm, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. It wasn’t your fault. You were… ”

“I was *deposed,”* Sirius finished. “Packed up, forced onto a train, then a boat, then another train… But hey, my bad. Next time I’ll try and get you the address.”

Fuck. Remus sighed, before forcing a smile. “How ‘bout we just agree

that there won't be a next time, okay?"

Sirius looked up at him through those thick lashes, and finally he nodded.

Feeling slightly at a loss over what to do next, Remus pushed the stack of books away and cleared his throat. "We should go somewhere. Get out of here for a while. I hate this house. Maybe not as much as you hate yours but… It just sucks the life out of you."

"Makes you miserable," Sirius agreed. "I get it. This mean you're gonna be my tour guide around London?"

"I'd probably be shit at that too, but yeah, I'll do it. Where do you want to go?"

Sirius shrugged. "Anywhere. London's my oyster."

"I thought it was 'the world's your oyster'."

"The world's too vast right now, Moons. We start with London, and then we take the world. More realistic that way."

Remus smiled, and he felt better. "Let's at least finish breakfast first."

Sirius' eyes flitted away. "Yeah… dunno about that one." He pointed, and Remus spun around to find Dusty with his head bent over a clear plate that had held half of a full English breakfast not five minutes before.

"Augh! Goddammit, Dusty!" He groaned as Sirius began to laugh from behind him. Marching up to the dog, he grabbed him by the collar, hauling him away from the table just as he was reaching for the rest of the toast. "You bloody—"

They were cut off by a sharp knock coming from the door. Already trained, Sirius all but dove behind the bed. It was smart of him too, since Remus was pretty sure he'd forgotten to lock the door. Instantly on edge, he forced Dusty to sit and cleared his throat.

"I'm changing, don't come in!"

"It's Carston, sir," the butler said through the door; "Your father has asked that you meet him in his office."

Remus huffed. "Bloody ruins everything… Alright! I'll be there in a moment!"

“Very good, sir.”

Releasing Dusty’s collar, Remus crept toward the door and waited several seconds before opening it and peering out. All he heard was the sound of the butler’s footsteps receding down the hall, and let out a sigh of relief.

“Dad’s office, huh?” Sirius drawled, now lounging on the bed. “Someone's in *trouble*... Heh—kidding. I know what that’s like.”

Remus shut the door quickly. “Are you gonna be okay in here?”

“Oh yeah, don’t worry about me or Dusty-man. We’ll be waiting right here for you when you get back. In fact, bring more eggs.”

WOOF!

Remus rolled his eyes. It was with love. “Fine. Be back in a jiffy then. Make sure you lock the door behind me.”

Sirius saluted, and Remus opened the door again, slipping out.

The main hallway was as quiet as normal. There was only the gentle patter of his feet on the wood as he walked, occasionally joined by the distant sounds of a maid moving about, most likely dusting some old china or changing the untouched linens on every unused bed. It all felt so pointless. A huge house, and for what? No one came over. No one slept in the beds. There was Sandra now… but Remus doubted it would actually last. She would realise eventually that Lyall was never going to put her before his work. She’d be lucky to make par with the dogs. She’d find out things that girlfriends ought not want to know, and then she’d decide none of it was worth it and whatever rose-tinted honeymoon she was living in would end. It was what had done-in Tomny and Tonya. Their ugly bits got a bit too ugly and then… poof.

Remus still wondered about Tomny. Couldn’t help it really. He wished he could talk to him about Sirius. For someone who’d grown up without any real role models, Tomny sure gave good advice. He’d probably have found the whole thing hilarious—rich boy is sent abroad and promptly runs away to live in his best friend’s closet. It would be funnier only because Sirius’ unusual antics were almost tame compared to people Tomny knew; the one difference was money and pride. Tomny would’ve told Orion and Walburga Black to take their ancient and noble lineage and shove it right up their arse.

Yeah… he missed Tomny.

But Sirius was there now, and they hadn't resorted to hiding in closets yet, though as Remus stopped outside his father's office, it occurred to him that perhaps they'd already been found out. For all they knew, Lyall could be preparing to have Sirius dragged home in chains. Inviting him alone to break the news was just his pathetic way of saving face. Remus would never let it happen—he'd force Sirius to call James first. Or Peter, or Lily, or even that cousin of his in Islington—Andy. She'd already been disowned for having her daughter out of wedlock. Didn't even help that she'd married the guy after—he was far too poor. And if not Andy, then someone. James' parents… an eccentric aunt… *someone.* Someone would help. They had to.

"You called for me?" Remus called, as he strode into the office without bothering to knock. If they were already caught then there was no need to stand on ceremony. Unexpectedly, he found Lyall not at his desk but across the room at the bar cabinet, pouring himself a scotch.

"A little early for drinking, innit?"

"The correct phrasing is, 'isn't it'," Lyall said dryly, capping the scotch and carrying the glass back to his impossibly large oak desk. "Get yourself one if you wish," he told him, "but close the door."

Remus didn't, but he did close the office door, only slightly bewildered by his father's unnervingly blasé attitude. As he approached the imposing desk, Lyall sipped his scotch and turned to admire the large painting that hung on the wall behind him. It was of a beach somewhere in Wales. He and Hope had gone there on their honeymoon. The Lupins had had enough money to go anywhere in the world when they'd married, and Hope had chosen there. Lyall had had the painting commissioned as a birthday gift a few years before that. Remus wasn't sure why he kept it around.

"Are we gonna talk or are we gonna just stand here?" He said, taking a deep breath to soothe his frayed nerves. Maybe Lyall didn't know about Sirius. Maybe he just wanted to lecture.

Turning away from the painting, Lyall set the scotch down and opened one of the finely crafted boxes on his desk and withdrew a cigar. Instead of setting it between his teeth, he offered it to Remus expectantly.

"No, I'm fine."

Lyall gave him a hard look. "Just take it."

Huffing lowly, Remus stepped up to the desk and took the cigar. Lyall lit a match and held it to one end, letting Remus puff on the other until it glowed orange. Instantly the peppery smoke had him coughing, and he drew back as Lyall lit one for himself, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Glad to know there’s some things you haven’t tried.”

Scowling, Remus held the cigar away from him, but didn’t put it down. He didn’t want to give Lyall the satisfaction. Casually, his father waved out the match and sucked back his own cigar, before breathing out the smoke and finally dropping down into his leather throne.

“I got a letter from your school today,” he said.

A flicker of hesitant hope bloomed in Remus’ chest. So it wasn’t about Sirius then… but what else?

“What did it say?” He asked, doing his best to remain aloof.

“That you’ve been asked to be a school prefect.”

It was not the answer Remus had been expecting.

“Well?" Lyall raised a brow. "Is it true?”

“… Yes.”

“And you’ve accepted?”

Thinking back to the silver prefect pin sitting on top of his dresser, Remus took a deep breath. “Yes…”

Lyall sucked in another lungful of cigar. “Good. Then I will inform the school that you’re looking to enter university right away. Your classes will have to be switched. Can't have anything unnecessary clogging up your schedule.”

Eyes blown wide, Remus stepped forward, nearly dropping his cigar. “My classes?! You can't just—”

“Your current choices are unacceptable,” Lyall snapped. “I’ve read the sylabuses. Medieval History, Pre-colonial Africa, the Life and Works of Shakespeare—*music*. None of these things are going to help you in the real world.”

“Who bloody said I wanted to live in your so-called ‘real’ world?”

“That’s a child’s answer. No one gets a choice in the end, but the choices you make now will make or break how you navigate it.”

“You’re not changing my classes!”

“No, you will. That is as long as you wish to attend that school.”

“You’re the one who sent me there in the first place!”

“And you’ve done well for yourself, all things considered. Don’t let it all be for nothing.”

“Why?” Remus wailed. “Why are you so bloody miserable all of the time? And why must I always be miserable with you?!”

“You’re fortunate,” Lyall said sharply; “don’t presume to pretend otherwise. People would kill for the things you have—the opportunities I’ve given you.”

“I never asked for any of that!”

“Yes, and I never asked—!” Lyall drew up short, raising his cigar in a firm dismissal. “That’s enough.”

“No, go ahead,” Remus taunted. “Say what you meant to say.”

“Not another word, Remus," Lyall warned. "Or mark mine, you won’t be going back to that school. It’s a few useless classes in exchange for a real future. One day you’ll thank me.”

Torn between fury and fear of losing everything left dear to him, Remus bit his tongue. Was this how it felt for Sirius? Or was it much worse, considering his family never gave him a choice? *Goddammit.*

Clearing his throat, Lyall lifted his scotch to his lips and finished it in a single gulp. “We can talk more about this later,” he said after; “For now, I have something else we must discuss.”

“Must you be so fucking formal about everything?” Remus said scornfully. Lyall eyed him, but said nothing until he’d tapped the ash off his cigar into the ashtray in front of him.

“I’ve asked Sandra to marry me.”

Remus felt his ears pop. “What?”

“And she’s accepted.”

“What… *the fuck…?”*

“Please, Remus, try to maintain *some* decorum.” Lyall raised his chin. “Truthfully there isn’t much to discuss. Everything’s already decided. The ceremony will take place in September.”

“How could this already be decided?” He demanded. “How long have you even been dating her?”

“Don’t be a child,” Lyall scoffed, making Remus’ temper flare even more. “The two of you had a good time together yesterday, didn’t you?”

“So?! Tolerating one measly day together doesn’t mean I want to live with her!”

“Do you want to live here at all, Remus?”

The question caught him like a slap. “No,” he ground out.

“Then I suggest you return to school, attend your classes, and then continue on to a good university so that you might support yourself outside these walls one day. God knows that it *isn’t that hard.”*

“I won’t call her mother.”

“I don’t believe she asked you to.”

“I won’t love her! … I’ll hate her—and I’ll make her hate me too.”

Lyall levelled his gaze. It was scornful—no, *unimpressed.*

“Seventeen years of practice, and that’s all you can muster?” He drawled. “A single bit of hatred? I would’ve expected more from you.”

Remus couldn’t help it—he threw the cigar, letting it sail over Lyall’s shoulder and spatter ash against the painting of his mother’s beach. It didn’t matter. It was worth about as much as every other painfully mundane landscape hanging up in the estate. Remus hated all of them.

“You’re losing control again,” Lyall warned from his chair.

“Oh shut up!” He roared, slamming his hands down on the front of the desk. “You know what you used to tell me when she lost control—

when *she* went off the rails?!"

"You're making this about her, but it has nothing to do with your mother."

Remus wondered how Lyall could be so wrong. This had *everything* to do with her.

" 'Remus, go to your room'—*'Remus, go to bed'!"* He howled; "And when I refused, you'd ask me, 'Remus, why are you such a brat?'—'Remus, why don't you ever listen?' But you never gave me a chance, *not one!* I was just *her* son, and you were *waiting* for me to go off the rails too—I always knew it! ... And when it eventually happened—well, me you'd just have committed, because—*oh, you'd already learned your lesson!"*

Utterly still, Lyall didn't even blink at him. "How world-weary you've become in just a few years at that school. Perhaps you should be committed, if this is how you insist on behaving—stark-raving mad and still just a child."

Enraged, Remus grabbed the empty scotch glass and threw it against the wall. It shattered into a million tiny pieces and yet he didn't feel even the slightest bit better.

"You *hate* me! Just admit it—JUST SAY IT! Say what we both know to be true! Say it, so all of this can be OVER WITH!"

But Lyall said nothing. Even as Remus heaved with the effort of his shouts, his father gave him nothing.

You could just say it yourself, you know, the vicious Moony sneered. *If you really had the balls you'd finally come out with it. You never told the lads at school because you were afraid it would make you lesser—you never told Tomny because it would make you the* ***same.*** *And no matter how much you wanted to be one of them, you always needed to be special.*

No...

Oh yes… But maybe it's not about them at all. Maybe it's about ***him.*** *Lyall... Dad... You're afraid he won't care. And you want him to care, you always have. He could pull you from that school, ship you off to Belgium, and you'd still care. You can't* ***help it.***

With an immense cry of frustration, Remus slammed his fist down onto the desk. He didn't so much as dent the surface, but the pain

stifled some of the thoughts.

“I *know,* you know,” he growled—dared. “I’ve known for years and I know you have too... But that doesn’t make me the coward, I was just a kid—*you’re* the one who can’t say it!”

A muscle twitched in Lyall’s jaw. Remus seized it. If this pain so demanded to be felt, then Lyall would *feel it too.*

“Yeah—*you,”* Remus hissed. “The adult—the *father*... How could I ever be ashamed of it—me? I can’t. Not when you’re bad enough for the both of us… What’s a’matter, can’t admit to yourself? Afraid that that would mean she never actually loved you...? Well, I’ll tell you one thing, *Dad*—you touch my classes and I’ll tell Sandra everything. I’ll call the damn papers—your bloody boss—anyone who cares enough to gossip... To hell what happens to me.”

It was enough. Lyall dropped his brow, hands fisted in his lap. “Get. Out.”

“What? Is it harder to hide from your ghosts when they’re still alive?”

“OUT!”

Remus exhaled. His eyes burned and his limbs felt heavy, but he’d gotten what he wanted, and now he needed to be anywhere else.

“Yeah, alright,” he sighed, slowly moving backwards to the door; “But hey, good luck on the marriage. Congrats—really! You don’t deserve her…”

Pushing open the door, Remus emerged in the hallway and slammed it behind himself. He was still breathing hard, his heart beating loud enough that it echoed in his temples like an ache. He considered just screaming, but before he even had time to fill his lungs, he heard the familiar click of another door behind shut a short ways away. Perking up, he followed it, dragging his feet until finally he found himself outside the room no one ever entered. Not since he was eleven, anyway.

Hand practically trembling, Remus reached for the door’s handle. It fell open under his touch, revealing a vast music room, every table and chair covered in a white sheet to protect it from dust and light. As he looked around, it struck him how he used to be afraid of this room, back when Hope would just sit by the window in her wheelchair and stare at nothing, as though she were already dead. Then she’d died

and it was just empty again. Or at least it had been before.

Across the room, at the piano he must've uncovered himself, Sirius sat alone. He was still wearing the cap, but had rolled up the borrowed shirt and trousers at his wrists and ankles just to make them fit. He'd never looked less like himself, but Remus would've still recognised him blind. It was a relatable feeling, that blindness. As he advanced into the room, every step Remus took felt soundless, as though he'd gone deaf out of fear alone. He must've, because he could see Sirius playing and yet heard no song. It wasn't until he was standing directly behind him, watching the gentle movement of his hands, that Remus realised that there was sound. Sirius was playing so tenderly that the music was like a whisper. You had to *want* to listen to hear it.

Slowly, he slid in beside Sirius on the bench, watching his slender fingers softly dance up and down the tops of the keys. He wanted desperately to take one of those beautiful hands in his own, but everything was so raw at that moment that Remus was half-sure he'd have simply ceased to exist if he acknowledged the pain long enough to do it.

"You were listening," he said. Sirius stopped playing immediately and carefully tucked his hands into his lap.

"… Yeah."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Sorry."

"Someone could've seen you." *Taken you from me.*

"They didn't," Sirius promised.

Remus swallowed; "Good," but his voice cracked and he hated himself for it.

"He shouldn't have talked to you like that."

"… Don't worry about it."

"He threatened to take you out of school."

"He won't. It would mean keeping me here, and he's too desperate. My staying would ruin everything. He wants to start over… That's why he's marrying that woman."

“Is she…” Sirius took a breath. “Is she bad?”

“No,” Remus answered, “she’s good.”

“Oh… m'glad.”

Neither of them said anything for a while, just staring at the black-lacquered surface of the piano. Remus could see his reflection as though he were looking into a mirror. Eventually Sirius reached out again with a single hand, playing a few somber notes like the closing to a chapter. Remus recognised them immediately, and gave a weak chuckle—just air blowing out his nose.

“ ‘Any way the wind blows’…”

Sirius withdrew his hand and instead of returning it to his lap, he slid it beneath Remus’ own, lacing their fingers together so tightly it felt as though not a single atom could've fit between their palms. It didn’t even make him nervous like he’d thought it would. In the end Sirius was still his friend.

“I’m happy you’re here, Remus,” Sirius said.

And then Remus sighed, in relief and thankfulness. *Because thank god for Sirius Black.*

“Do you want to get out of here?” He asked. “Just go somewhere—anywhere?”

“Yes,” Sirius told him. “Anywhere with you.”

Chapter End Notes

'Per Aspera Ad Astra' is a Latin phrase meaning 'through hardships, to the stars'.
A 'lorry' is a truck.
A 'fry-up' is like a traditional English Breakfast.

Again, Fridays/Saturdays will be upload days! (Maybe Sunday if you're way ahead of me in timezones) If you can't wait that long, feel free to hmu in the comments or on tumblr/tiktok @motswolo. I'm always cruising there, and I love chatting about all things hp/wolfstar <3
Much love - mot

Chapter 67: City Lights, London Nights

Chapter Summary

> They take the city, and maybe just a little bit... the city will take them.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Spitting, smoking, and just general tomfoolery (lol). 'F' slur used ONLY in a smoking context. Sexual content (non-graphic) that could be considered important to the plot. Read whatever makes you most comfortable.
>
> There's a lot of subtext in this chapter, especially within Remus & Sirius' conversation outside the cinema. I hope it's clear enough, but they really are just scared boys, and love and sexuality are as scary as it gets sometimes. Love them as they are when possible <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waterfall,
Don’t ever change your ways;
Fall with me for a million days,
Oh, my waterfall…

- “May This Be Love” Jimi Hendrix, 1967

Most people who grew up in London had a hard time seeing the magic in it. Like Remus, they saw the Underground only for its horrible rush hour and poorly-lit stations. They thought of streets like Carnaby as crowded tourist-traps and never really got excited about much of anything. But for newcomers like Sirius, who were just itching to sink their teeth into anything street-cultured, London might as well have been the promised land. It was all new, from the shops and streets, to the people that filled them. It went without saying that Sirius had never been on the tube before. He’d also never hailed a cab for himself, or gotten lost on a backstreet. Sirius had never had to step over a morning drunkard’s vomit outside a Chinese place that looked scummy but actually had amazing wonton soup. He’d never scattered pigeons in Hyde park, or eaten a kebab from a street vendor along Portobello, or haggled amongst the stalls of Brick Lane, and he’d

certainly never strolled into a random pub to catch a pint and a friendly game of snooker.

For all intents and purposes, Sirius was a complete city-virgin, but perhaps the strangest thing to Remus was that Sirius had never spat on the pavement.

“I just don’t get it. What’s the appeal?” Sirius asked, as they made their way down the street. Row houses rose up on either side of them, decorated with brick and iron fences, all overgrown with ivy and ragged thorn bushes. They’d just crossed over into Clifton Hill after walking a good twenty minutes from the station. Neither of them made a fuss, for a young boy in 1977, anything under five miles wasn’t worth the whinging.

“I can’t just *tell* you,” Remus said, “it’s like a cultural thing. You do it with the lads.”

“Sounds like a more disappointing jerk-circle.”

Remus shoved him, making Sirius lurch sideways into the road as he sniggered. Stopping to wait for him, Remus dodged a young mum pushing her baby in a pram and crossed his arms over his chest. “Go on, try it then,” he prompted.

Sirius eyed the pram that had just passed. “You mean now? In public?”

“S’long as it doesn’t offend your pretty little manners.”

Sirius scowled and Remus waved the comment off. “Here, watch me.” Stopping in the middle of the pavement, he hocked back a large wad of saliva and spat it in the direction of the road. He managed to clear about ten feet—almost a new personal record—and when he turned to Sirius he found him clapping blithely.

“And who says the hooligan doesn’t have any talents.”

“You go then,” Remus urged. Sirius sighed and reached up to scratch his head beneath his cap, before making a noise deep in his throat as though he were trying to clear it.

“That’s it,” Remus said, “gotta dig deep. Doss always told me to imagine like you’d just swallowed a spoonful of cough syrup. But you’re going for distance not size, so—”

Sirius turned on him. “Can you shut up, I just swallowed it!”

Remus backed away. “Sorry, my bad. Take your time.”

Taking a deep breath, Sirius wiggled his jaw around, looking distinctly concentrated. When he threw his head back Remus almost thought he was gonna do it, but what came out was a pitiful spit wad that just barely cleared the tip of his trainers.

“Sirius, that was… Well, it was just sad actually.”

Sirius wiped his mouth. “It’s gross.”

“Nah—well, maybe—but you’re not getting enough momentum. Come ‘ere.”

Turning around, Remus grabbed hold of the rusty iron fence that let into one of the row houses’ front garden. Sirius joined him a moment later, looking slightly intrigued and a bit perturbed all at once.

“Try ‘n put your whole body into it,” Remus instructed, before leaning backwards. Using the fence, he propelled himself forward and launched the spit wad so far that it landed in the scraggly, heat-ravaged pushes beneath the house’s front windows.

“Damn.” Sirius shook out his shoulders, even cracking his neck as though he were getting ready to run a hundred metre dash. “It’s a cultural thing…” he murmured to himself, before hawking back enough to make Remus’ throat twinge, and rocking back on his heels to shoot a winner spit glob directly over the fence. It sailed a few feet before hitting the grass, and Remus jumped up in celebration.

“Brilliant! Maybe you are a natural after all.”

“Bet I could get it further than you,” Sirius said, looking suddenly smug.

“Oh yeah? Try it.”

Grabbing hold of the fence again they both began hacking, but before they could expel another wad of phlegm, the front door of the house flew open and an old man came thundering out in only his robe, waving that morning’s paper around like a bat.

“Oi! Stop spitting on my lawn!”

Remus swallowed the wad of spit, and together he and Sirius dashed

away down the street, laughing together.

“Did you see his face?” Remus asked once they’d finally stopped on the next corner. “He looked as mad as Filch that night we set the firecrackers off.”

“Thought the old codger was going to flash us, to be honest,” Sirius agreed, stretching his arms up over his head with a low moan. For all the walking they’d already done, it was still early, but that just meant there was plenty left to see.

“Haven’t we made it yet?” Sirius asked, glancing around.

“Almost. Should be just one more street up.”

They kept walking, hands in their pockets and knocking the odd stone out of their path. Remus had just pulled his cigarettes from his pocket and passed them along to Sirius when they turned the corner onto the zebra crossing and Abbey Road finally fell into view. Sirius drew to an abrupt halt, actually fumbling his cigarette and leaving Remus to pick it up.

“Holy fuck!” He cried. “It’s bloody real!”

“ ‘Course it’s real,” Remus smirked, tucking the cigarette into the corner of his own mouth and lighting the end. All around them were scattered tourists, snapping photos and using the striped crossing to recreate their own version of the photo off of the Beatles’ most infamous album.

“George Harrison walked here,” Sirius prattled; “John Lennon walked *here.”*

“They recorded right over there too, if you’re interested,” Remus said, pointing further up the street, where more people were mulling around outside the gates of the EMI recording studio.

Sirius’ mouth fell open. Then snapped shut. “I think I might pass out.”

As Sirius continued fawning over the iconic musical landmark, Remus settled back against the brick pony wall along the side of the road and continued smoking his cigarette. He’d been to Abbey Road twice before. Hope had taken him when he was maybe nine, right after he’d first shown interest in her favourite group of mods-turned-rockers. The second had been with Tomny, mostly to rewrite the memory of the first. Tomny hadn’t even been able to name a single Beatle, but he'd

still played at being excited for Remus' sake. A bit pointless now, but third time's the charm… probably.

"I could find a camera—snap your picture," Remus drawled, when Sirius kept playing at getting closer to the crossing. He eased in slowly, looking out of place amongst the sightseers in his borrowed, oversized clothes and ragged shoes and cap.

"Nah," Sirius dismissed, reaching down to pull the cigarette carton from Sirius' breast pocket himself; "I think I'm content to watch. Wouldn't want any evidence of myself dressed like this anyway."

Remus held up his lighter, and Sirius leaned in to catch the flame with the end of his fag. Looking down at him, he couldn't help but notice that Sirius' lashes were still endlessly long. It reminded him of that day in the girls' room when they'd woken up next to each other, and because it wasn't exactly a pleasant memory, Remus pushed it away.

"Shall we find you some new clothes then?"

After leaving Abbey Road behind, they hopped a tram and made their way back into the heart of the city, toward Mayfair and Soho. Remus considered taking Sirius to Selfridges or C&A but Sirius had been to a department store before—better to give him an experience that was wholly new.

"I've never owned anything second-hand. Unless you count Andy's guitar," Sirius said, as they scooted round the street corner and slipped inside the charity shop. It smelt of dust and old leather inside, just as Remus remembered, and the shop staff was little more than a teenage girl sitting behind the counter, flipping through a magazine. A few others mulled about lackadaisically—an old man picking through the chinaware, a scholar-type pulling old books down from the shelves, a young mum carefully sifting through the children's section with a sleeping baby against her shoulder. All of them living their own lives, completely separate from the two of them. If there was anywhere you could be a complete unknown, then it was a second-hand shop in Soho.

As the door chimed behind them, Remus gaze fell on a shoe rack overflowing with ragged books and trainers. On top sat a beaten up pair of red Chuck Taylors, which were inexplicably, just his size.

"You should get them," Sirius said, when he'd finished ogling long enough to catch Remus staring.

"Nah, we're here for you."

"But they'd look good on you."

Remus bit the inside of his cheek, before tossing Sirius a cheeky glance. “Come on, let’s get you dressed.”

He steered Sirius toward the rows and rows of clothing racks along the back, walking past badly dressed mannequins and abandoned furniture. They stopped at the first aisle, which was mostly shirts, and Remus had Sirius go down one side while he took the other. There was bound to be something among the endless stockpile of fabric that was halfway decent and could suit the posh boy.

“Sorta smells like a library in here… Like mouldy books,” Sirius observed as they quietly pushed the wire hangers from right to left. “They probably do it to attract your sort.”

Remus raised an eyebrow. “What d’you mean by ‘my sort’?”

“You know, the ‘old before their time’ types. The romancers who think they’re no good at romance. The gifted kids who squander everything on booze, fags, and records.”

“Wow. You should write a song. Dick.”

Sirius smirked down at the clothes, and then plucked a garish-looking caftan big enough to house an elephant off of the rack and held it up with two fingers.

“I think it’s your colour,” Remus snarked.

Sighing, Sirius dropped the hanger back on the rack. “Come on, Moony, what are we doing here? I wanna see the sights!”

“And we will, but first you need some decent clothes.”

“I have clothes.” Sirius gestured to himself pointedly.

“I meant clothes that actually fit. You look like some orphan straight out of Dickens.”

Sirius defiantly tipped the rim of his post-boy cap toward him. “You sound like James.”

“Trust me, I don’t. Just try and think of this as a new experience. Have you even been in a charity shop before?”

“Obviously not.”

“Well, then there’s a first for everything.” He held up a brown collar shirt, which Sirius grimaced at. “So picky,” he huffed, returning it to the rack. Moments like these were when Remus was most reminded of his friend’s privilege. His own, too, if he were being honest. The Blacks probably would’ve locked Sirius in a box and dropped him in the sea before letting him march into a high street second-hand shop, and Lyall would’ve been right there with them.

“Do you really shop here?” Sirius asked, pausing to study a suede vest, before apparently deciding against it.

“Sometimes…” Remus kept his gaze on the clothes. “It was easier to walk through the End when I wasn’t dressed like—”

“A rich prat?” Sirius was eyeing him pointedly.

“Uhm… yeah. A new coat’s kinda a giveaway down there, and since I went there all the time I learned how to not be noticed. Not that it matters anymore anyway…” Remus took a breath, trying for a cheerier tone. “But hey, sometimes you can find some really cool stuff in here. Got my favourite Stones’ shirt right in this very shop.”

“You mean the one with holes in both armpits?”

He ignored him, shucking the wire hangers down their rows until he found something promising. “Here,” he said, holding up a plain white t-shirt. Sirius reached over the rack and took the garment from him, turning it around for inspection.

“Oh goodie, only two stains… Do they have anything in black?”

Remus snatched the shirt back and hung it on the rack. “It’s dead summer, do you want to sweat to death?”

“If I’m gonna go out, I might as well go out in style.” Sirius looked off to his left and did a double take. “Oh, look Moons! Real cowboy boots!”

“I don’t understand how your sense of fashion works,” Remus started, but Sirius had already rushed off, abandoning him in the middle rows. Sighing, he turned back around and continued sorting through the assembled hoard. A few more shoppers who had wandered in from the heat were meandering silently around him, but the shop was pleasantly cool thanks to the rattling fans set up in each corner. Just

over their noise, Remus could hear the sound of a radio going, playing its top ten hits.

'I'm your boogie man, I'm your boogie man,
Turn me on;
I'm your boogie man, I'm your boogie man,
Do what you want…'

It wasn't a good song per say, but it was easy to mindlessly bob his head along with. Remus was just considering what the odds were that Sirius would agree to a lime green polo shirt when the sharp sound of a feminine giggle caught his attention. He looked up from the rack and found a pair of girls two rows over, faces bent closely to one another as they whispered behind a handful of clothes. If their knowing smiles were anything to go by, then they must've been there for some time. Remus looked down, pushing a few more hangers aside arbitrarily, and when he glanced back up again one of the girls was staring straight at him. She waved and flashed him a pretty smile, before her friend grabbed her wrist urgently and squeaked something that sounded a lot like *'what are you doing?!'*

As the girls descended into another giggle fit, Remus reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. He'd already told himself that he wasn't interested in any more casual flings. Sirius' sudden entrance had more than scared the promiscuity right out of him. But still, one last peek couldn't hurt…

"Oi, Moony—"

Remus jumped on the spot, whirling around to find Sirius next to him.

Speaking of sudden entrances…

"Damn," Sirius chuckled, "didn't mean to sneak up on you, space cadet."

"I was concentrating," Remus clipped.

"Oh yeah? On what?" Sirius leaned in, but another tell-tale giggle made him look up. "Ooh, I get it."

“Sirius, *don’t.*”

Sirius waved him off, and leaned forward on the clothes rack, whistling sharply. “ ‘Ello, ladies, nice day for a shop, innit? You two pretty things come ‘ere often?”

The girls glanced at each other and then began to laugh behind their hands, quickly shooting off in the other direction. Obviously soured by their lacklustre response, Sirius turned back around. “Hmph. Must be deaf.”

“No, I think they heard you,” Remus mocked. “It’s not a bar, Sirius, it’s a charity shop. And who were you trying to imitate anyway, Michael Cain?”

“No, it was you from our first year together—*any’un got ‘a light?* Can’t imagine why that would turn ‘em off.”

“Must’ve been the clothes then.” Flicking the rim of Sirius’ cap, Remus went back to the rack and pushed aside several tops, eventually coming across a half-decent button up. “What do you think? This one doesn’t have ruffles on the collar at least.”

Sirius shook his head adamantly. “Nah, s’not really ‘me’—but check this out!”

He raised his other arm, showing off a beaten-up leather jacket that looked as though it weighed forty pounds and had survived both World Wars. Remus ogled it.

“It’s summer!”

“I know it’s summer, but this thing’s killer, Moons! Someone real cool owned this jacket once, I can tell. You can practically smell the history on it.”

“Actually that’s just cat piss.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Found these too.” He held up a pair of blue jeans that once touched revealed themselves to have had just enough wear and wash to turn the fabric soft as butter.

“Those aren’t terrible,” Remus said, giving them a once-over. “We should find you some new shoes too, yours are falling apart…”

Sirius nodded, and then his face lit up and he reached past Remus,

toward the shirts. “Oh yes, this is it! This is the one.”

“Lemme see.” Remus turned the top around. “… You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m all about blending in with the locals,” Sirius sniggered, ripping the shirt off its hanger.

Not five minutes later, Remus found himself sitting outside of a fitting room on a fuzzy electric-blue footstool, twiddling his thumbs while he waited for Sirius to try on the clothes.

“Jeans are a bit tight around the family jewels,” Sirius called over the door, “but my arse looks *fantastic.”*

Remus felt his heart jump. “Hurry up, you’re burning daylight.”

“Coming!” The fitting room door flew open and Sirius strutted out, wearing the faded jeans and t-shirt he’s picked off the rack. It might’ve been nice, had the front of the shirt not bore the words, *‘Who’s “Big Ben” and why’s everyone looking for him?’*

“Well?” Sirius grinned; “How do I look?”

Remus slouched back against the fitting room wall. “You’re so embarrassing.”

“Meh. *Dans une grande âme tout est grand.”* Sirius turned around to get a look at his backside in the mirror. “I mean, just look at my arse, Moony!”

“No thanks.”

“No, seriously, have a look! Jeans fit like a glove.”

Remus sighed and glanced up. Sirius was right, they *did* look good. And familiar… As Sirius spun around admiring himself and chortling at the stupid tourist’s shirt, Remus leaned in to get a better look. On one of the back pockets of the jeans he spotted the small outline of a heart, as though several rhinestones had once adorned it and had since chipped off. He racked his brain.

“Hey… doesn’t Mary have a pair of jeans she always claims makes her butt look spectacular?”

“Hm? Oh yeah—wears ‘em on every date.”

“Did you know if they happened to have anything on the back pockets?”

Sirius paused. “Yeah… a little heart or something.”

Remus squinted harder, just to be sure, but yep—definitely a heart. He snorted. “Padfoot… I hate to say it, but I think you’re wearing women’s trousers, mate.”

“What?” Sirius reached around, attempting to peek at the faded tag. “Shit. What are the odds? Guess that explains it though, Mary’s never wrong about these kinds of things.”

Remus shook his head hopelessly, then; “You should get them. Your arse… does look fantastic.”

“Ha! Knew you looked.”

Looking a little too pleased, Sirius ducked back into the fitting room. As he did, Remus swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat and peered out around the corner to the rest of the shop. He didn’t see the girls from earlier, perhaps they’d moved on.

“What shall I do with the shirt and slacks you leant me?” Sirius called through the door.

“Just leave ‘em,” Remus said, now busy picking a hangnail. “They’re too small for me anyway.”

“Ha. That’s just your under-handed way of calling me short.” A second later Sirius had strolled out, now donning the leather jacket. The sight of him caught Remus’ attention straight away, and he watched as Sirius began strutting in front of the mirror again, flapping the leather collar with supreme confidence. “So? What do we you think of the jacket?” Sirius inquired. “I think it looks ace.”

“It’d look better without that stupid hat, I’ll bet,” Remus said. Sirius looked at him in the mirror, before gently smoothing his hands over the brim.

“Nah… the hat adds to it.”

“You’re going to sweat to death.” Remus stood; “Just take it off.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“C’mon Padfoot, I’m sure you’ll be alright without—” Before he’d even

finished his sentence, Remus had made a grab for the cap, and Sirius spun around like a cornered dog—one that was ready to take his hand off at the wrist.

"DON'T—!"

Remus yanked his arm back. "S-Sorry! Was only teasing…"

Retaliation dawned, and Sirius paled slightly before shrinking back from him like a school boy about to receive the strap. "Nah, m'sorry. Didn't mean to snap at ya." Sirius licked his lips. "I… haven't taken it off really."

"Why not?"

Sirius' eyes dipped to the floor. "It's… my hair? It kinda… got cut."

Remus stepped forward again, not quite so much as to invade Sirius' space, but enough to peek under the brim at the flaccid locks of dark hair pasted to his forehead beneath. "You still look like you got hair."

"It's the side here." Sirius gestured languidly at his head. "The matron came at me with these clippers, but I wouldn't have it. So she yanked me, and I yanked back. Hurt like a bitch for a while."

"You mean she…?"

"Yeah. Hair's gone."

Remus suddenly felt very fidgety. "Well, I… I'm sure it doesn't look that bad."

"It doesn't look *good*. You'd laugh if you saw it."

"No, I wouldn't." He gave Sirius a very hard, genuine look. "I wouldn't."

The look made Sirius falter a bit, and he shrugged. "It's not that fascinating anyway."

"Would you show me?"

Sirius clenched his jaw like he might say no, but after several seconds of anguish, he finally stepped back and whipped the hat off his head. Locks of sweaty hair promptly tumbled down to just below his jaw, looking lanky and sad, but Remus didn't really see the issue until he glimpsed the other side of Sirius' head in the mirror. Horrified, he

grabbed his friend by the shoulders and spun him. There, just behind his ear, Sirius had a small bald patch, as though whoever had grabbed it had held on until the hair had torn out from the root.

“Those *fucking—”* Remus sucked in a sharp breath. He’d nearly reached out to touch it but then Sirius turned back around and fit the cap back over his head, tucking in the leftover pieces of hair.

“Whatever, it’s done,” he said dismissively. “Don’t even hurt anymore either. I just don’t want others to see, so I’ve been covering it up… Didn’t exactly have time to see a barber in Calais.”

“Well, we could—” Remus scrambled for a solution, “we could hide it some other way maybe?”

“Oh yeah?” Sirius asked sarcastically. “Started carrying makeup and wigs around with you? Too bad Mary’s in France, could’ve used her.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Remus said. “We could tie it back. Should hide the worst bits at least.”

“Nah, tried that already. You still see where the hair's missing, plus it kinda hurts... Don’t worry though, m’sure it’ll be fine soon enough.”

“How about braiding it then? I could do it. I mean, I’m not that great, but I could try.”

The offer had clearly surprised Sirius, who raised both eyebrows. “You want to *braid* my *hair*?”

“Just for now, jackass," Remus snapped, feeling flushed. "You don’t even have to keep it in for long. Anything’s better than that hat.”

Sirius’ lips quirked upwards. “So many nasty comments about my choice of dress today.”

“Just trying to look out for you.” Glancing around himself, Remus reached into a bin of spare clothes next to the fitting room. He withdrew a single unpaired trainer and quickly unravelled its lace.

“What are you gonna do with that?” Asked Sirius.

Remus held the shoelace up. “I’m gonna tie your hair back. Might be a bit rough but no one’s gonna notice. Now go on, have a seat.”

Looking only a little reluctant, Sirius popped a squat over the shaggy purple stool and Remus took up his spot behind him. His hands began

to feel clammy as he began to gather Sirius' hair back away from his face, and he worked carefully to avoid touching any other part of him.

"I thought you don't steal, Moons," Sirius mused, watching him in the mirror.

"I don't."

"You gonna pay for that shoelace then?"

Remus rolled his eyes, before glancing around to make sure the teenage shopkeeper hadn't set upon them. "Fine, I will knick *one* shoelace. Happy? Now shut up and let me concentrate."

Sirius smiled, but was quiet after that. Wiping his palms on his trousers, Remus cleared his throat and tried to ignore the way Sirius' reflection was staring at him in the mirror, while attempting to recall the girls' lessons. *Bring sides under the middle—or was it over? Christ.*

His fingers felt slow and clumsy, but after the first two or three ruined attempts, Remus finally got into the swing of it. Sirius never complained, simply waited until he'd woven the braid all the way down the back of his head and tied it off with the shoelace. He snatched his hands away again when Sirius tipped his head back to smile at him.

"There…" Remus mumbled; "All finished."

Getting up from the little stool, Sirius peered into the mirror. Turning his head this way and that to admire Remus' work, he pulled a few pieces free around his face and finally straightened up. "Wow. You really never cease to amaze me, Moons."

"S'just a braid…"

"Do I look okay?"

"Huh? Oh… yeah! Y-You look great! Or I mean—you can't see the bald spot at all."

Sirius began fiddling with the stubby end of the braid. "It doesn't look too… girlish?"

"Ha. Since when have you ever worried about 'looking girlish'?"

He laughed again, and straightened up. "You're right. Thanks,

Moons."

Remus looked away. "Don't mention it… Shall we finish finding you a shirt then?"

"Whaddya mean? I've got a shirt right here."

He looked at the tourist atrocity clinging to Sirius' frame. "You can't really be planning to wear that around the city."

"Why not?"

"You're gonna look like one of those tourists from Abbey Road. Like an American."

"Well, can't have that, can we?" Sirius said, making no move to remove the shirt. "Perhaps I should work on my accent, *eh gov'na?* Can't have the yanks going crackers thinking I'm one 'a them, can we? It'd all be straight dog's dinner from there!"

"Yeah… so I'm gonna go find you those shoes now." Remus turned and began strolling away. "… Bloody idiot."

Sirius just chased after him. "What, you don't like that one? Alright, how 'bout I commit to the bit. Now how's it go again… Maybe like— *hey, I'm wah'kin' here!* Oh shit, that was pretty good! Right, Moons? … *tch*… Moooons!"

* * *

Remus had started keeping a mental list in his head of all the things he'd learned about the institution in Belgium;

They aided and abetted in kidnapping kids from their own homes.

And then when the kids arrived they dressed them in itchy grey suits, like convicts.

And when they misbehaved they locked them in isolation rooms for days on end.

And encouraged corporal punishment.

And withheld food.

And ripped their fucking hair out!

Lyall would've loved it, surely. A fact that only made him more pissed off. The matron who'd tried to shear Sirius' hair off had better hope that Remus Lupin never made it as far as Belgium. If he did, nothing was gonna stop him from burning her miserable school to the ground.

"Turn this way, Moons."

Luckily, Sirius didn't seem as intent on stewing over the bad.

Remus turned to him when bid, and Sirius slipped a pair of sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. He inspected them for a moment, before ultimately shaking his head and returning them to the table stand they'd stopped at.

"You've got such a big head, you dwarf all of them," Sirius mused, perusing through the frames with clever interest. He'd already picked out a pair for himself, and the wayfarers sat balanced on the top of his handsome head. Remus had just about melted when he'd put them on. *Pretty fuck.*

As Sirius fit a second pair on him, this one in the shape of a cat-eye (for his own amusement, surely), Remus lifted an arm to check his watch. They'd left the charity shop ages ago, and had since been up and down the city streets, dipping into various neighbourhoods like Camden High Street, making faces at the mods and punks and catching trolleys up and down for no good reason. It would've been faster to get around using the tube, but staying above ground meant better views and Sirius was just dying to ride one of the double-decker buses anyway. A by-product of that, they were now waiting to catch a short hop-on tour from Fitzrovia to Trafalgar Square, so Sirius could check 'punting a pigeon' off of his bucket list.

"Did you still want to go to the museum?" Remus asked, busy flipping through a sightseeing map as Sirius fit his dozenth pair of sunglasses on him. He'd already given up on not looking like a tourist. "Says here they've got a big exhibit on music. Classical music, but still."

"I'd rather go play that game you mentioned," Sirius said absent-mindedly. "Shoot 'n toot or whatever."

"It's 'Shoot 'em up'. It's a video game—like remember 'Pong'? They've got this crazy place in Burlington, s'called an arcade. James and I went with Pete at the beginning of summer. Pretty sure he's gone there every day he's been home."

Sirius picked up a new pair of glasses. They'd been standing and chatting for so long that the stand owner had begun to eye them suspiciously, but Remus quelled him well enough when he passed over a few quid for Sirius' glasses.

"I can't decide which John you should be," Sirius said, holding up two pairs on either side of Remus' face. "Are we to go with Elton, or Lennon?"

Remus arched his brow. "Seriously?"

"You're right. Has to be Lennon."

Tossing the ginormous, bedazzled square-rims aside, Sirius opened the round tea-shades and shoved them onto Remus' face. Remus didn't fight it—he just paid the stall guy and they carried on.

"Sorry I'm costing you so much today," Sirius said, casting a glance around the busy street as they crept closer to the trolley stop.

"Nah, spend away. It's only my dad's money."

"I'll pay you back, swears," Sirius said anyway. "Once I get my inheritance from Alphard. I'm almost eighteen. Soon we'll be able to rent out a flat or something."

"I see. Have you picked out where it is you want to live then?"

"Still shopping around. Soho's nice though. It's got a drug-dealer on every corner, right?"

"Only if you know where to look."

Sirius grinned. "It's gonna be so nice to have a place of our own."

Our?

Remus grabbed the side of his neck awkwardly. "James and Pete'll be there too… right?"

Sirius gave him a funny look. "As opposed to being…?"

"Uh…" Glancing away, Remus pushed the sunglasses further up his nose. "Right, I just meant that—"

"Quick, Moons," Sirius interrupted; "Trolley's here."

So, Remus was once again saved from his own stupidity. Sirius wasted no time rushing to the top floor of the bus, taking up an empty set of seats near the very back. As he sat down next to him, Remus silently cursed himself. It was time to get a grip. Sirius wasn't there because he was in love with him, Sirius was there because he'd needed help, and Remus had been the closest—the most convenient. That wasn't to say that Remus was ungrateful, he would've helped Sirius even if all they'd done since was fight, but he wasn't any more special to him than James, or even Peter. He was just there.

Well, if *there* was all he could be, then that's what he'd do.

As the open-air bus made its way down the street, full to the brim with tourists and people from all over, Sirius stood up on his seat and whooped at the sky—just a great *hoorah!* It made Remus cringe a bit while the other passengers laughed, and soon enough one of the tour-leaders had come storming up the stairs to lambast him for 'committing unsafe acts while the bus is in motion'. Sirius attempted to give lip, but Remus just pulled him back into his seat and they laughed together.

"Think we could get everyone here in on a game of bumps?" Sirius suggested not two minutes later.

"Do it and I'll throw you over the side," he warned, but the next time the bus hit a pothole, Sirius jabbed Remus in the arm and suddenly they were scrapping again right there in their seats. That was the last straw for the tour-leader, who demanded to know where their guardians were. Without any parents to be found, they bid the bus goodbye and made a hasty exit along Shaftesbury Avenue, about five stops too early. Weaving through the theatre district's tight alleys, each filled with tiny cafes and boutiques, they made their way through Chinatown toward Soho, nearly the exact route Remus had taken on a trip out with Marlene weeks before. By then they were starving, and so Remus stopped to get them both a basket of chips, which they ate while they walked.

"Imagine living down here!" Sirius declared, stuffing his face as he stared up at the towering rows of flats and shops. They'd been out for hours and he still hadn't lost an ounce of awe. "We gotta find ourselves a place somewhere like this," he said around bites; "Somewhere big enough for all of us."

"That's gonna cost a pretty penny—fitting all four of us into one flat," Remus said.

“Five. Can’t count out Evans.”

Remus laughed in surprise, dodging a woman walking her dog as they made their way down the street. “Here, gimme these,” he said, before taking Sirius’ empty to-go container and tossing it in a public bin. “You know… you’ve been oddly ‘team Evans’ for a while now, Padfoot. It’s odd. Did something happen between the two of you?”

“What makes you say that? I’m just assuming that Evans is the only one of us who can actually cook.”

“She’d lash you for saying that.”

“I know,” Sirius said with a guilty smile.

“Nice try, now fess up,” Remus prodded, even poking him in the shoulder. “You’ve been a little too friendly ever since that crap with Snape. So what is it that she’s got on you?”

“Nothing!”

He poked him again. “Come on!”

“Evans and I just came to a mutual understanding s’all! We talked over Easter and—”

“You *talked?”*

“Letters,” Sirius dismissed; “She sent me a letter. I sent one back, s’all.”

“Well, what was in it? What did you… talk about?”

“Normal stuff—her sister being a prat, Reg being a nob. I think she was just checking in. Making sure I didn’t off myself. Said something about Prongs needing his best friend back come April.”

They’d stopped along with a small crowd at a pedestrian crossing and Remus leaned in. It secretly pleased him to be able to do that; he hadn’t realised it until Sirius had taken the hat off, but he must’ve grown some more. Now he could see right over the top of Sirius’ head. He tried not to be too smug about it.

“So…?” Remus prompted. “What’d you say back?”

Sirius looked away, almost bashful. “I… I thanked her! I was expecting word from you and the lads, but Evans had never sent a

letter before. It just felt genuine, I guess. She's actually pretty funny once you get to know her, you know."

He said this last bit very wryly, and Remus shook his head, endlessly amused. "Oh my god, you've gone soft for Lily."

"Shut up," Sirius pouted as the traffic changed and they began across the street. "Did you know her middle name was 'Juniper'? And her sister is 'Petunia Marigold'? I almost pissed my pants laughing reading that."

"Her parents *are* botanists. And yes, I did know that. You're not the only one Lily's fond of, ya know."

Sirius smiled. "Is that Remus Lupin, bragging? Hah. You're right though, I wager you're the only one who has a chance of swooping her out from under Prongs' feet."

"Nah," Remus said very quickly; "Lily's just a friend."

Sirius shrugged again. "Suit yourself. But she liked you when she still hated the rest of us, so… I can't be all wrong. Maybe she had a crush."

"She liked James then too."

"You can like more than one person at a time. You're telling me you never considered it? Hey, *hey?"*

Remus took a breath. He really didn't want to talk about girls anymore, but if Sirius was going to dish it out, then he was going to get a full serving right back.

"So you and Lily are friends now, huh?" He mused. "Crazy what sort of miracles can happen when you stop being a dickhead, hey Pattycake? I mean, I never really got how you could chat up girls like that—what when you look just like one of 'em."

Remus chuckled, almost proud of himself, but instead of answering, Sirius waited until they'd crossed the street and then threw his arm back straight for a direct ball shot. The low-blow left Remus bent over and clutching his groin as the entire street parted around them with a grimace.

"You—*son of a bitch—"* he wheezed.

"Oh c'mon, it was barely a tap!" Sirius cackled.

“Augh—I’ll show you a tap!”

Sirius didn’t wait for permission before he turned tail and ran. When he could move again, Remus immediately gave chase, dodging pedestrians and other traffic as he pursued Sirius through thick and thin. Sirius kept looking behind himself to laugh at him and nearly ended up in a public rubbish bin for it, but that didn’t even come close to being as funny as it was to watch a police officer drop a sandwich the length of his arm in attempts to blow his whistle at them as they flew past. The officer didn’t catch them, but ultimately neither of them were James Potter, and they’d both spent far too much of the last year chain smoking to make it further than a few streets. When Sirius finally came to a skidding halt outside a building lit up like a Christmas tree, Remus practically tackled him to the pavement, terribly out of breath and red in the face.

“Gotchu, tosser!” He grunted, holding on tightly to Sirius’ shoulders and readying himself for some apt revenge.

“Hold on, Moony, look!” Sirius declared, thrusting one hand down to cover his sensitive bits and the other up at a poster box hanging on the building’s wall. It was then that Remus realised where they’d ended up—outside the Prince Charles theatre. The cinema’s canopy was advertising several films, and its lights were already bright and blazing in the early summer evening. Sirius continued thrusting his finger at the poster, obviously excited, but Remus had already recognised the film; *The Man Who Fell to Earth* .

“It’s Bowie!” Sirius said in amazement. “Blimey, I didn’t even know he did films!”

“Me neither, honestly,” Remus said, straightening up and releasing his hold of Sirius’ shoulders.

“We gotta go see it!”

“Sure, it was pretty good. Marlene and I saw it together a few weeks ago actually.”

“Oh.” Sirius dropped his head a bit. “Well, in that case, it’s fine, we don’t have to see it. We’ve done a lot today after all.”

“Don’t tell me you’re tired already?” Remus glanced back up at the canopy and smiled, before nudging Sirius fondly. “C’mon, looks like today’s the last night they’re showing it. Let’s go see your idol on screen.”

Biting his lip, Sirius nodded eagerly and together they made their way to the ticket booth. Remus bought their tickets and later, a box of popcorn to share, but the moment they sat down in the dark theatre, he knew he'd made a mistake.

The first time he'd gone to the cinema with Marlene they'd been holding hands and making gentle passes to each other in the dark. The second time they'd been broken up, and though that should've been cause for some discomfort, there was none to be found. They simply watched the film and when it was over, he listened to her rant about everything she loved and hated about it on the tube ride home, only occasionally interjecting with a thought of his own. Now, sitting next to Sirius and practically sharing an armrest, Remus couldn't pay attention to the film at all. Not even Bowie's sultry portrayal of an alien walking amongst humans was enough to draw him back in. All he could think about was Sirius' thin wrist brushing up against his own, or the dazzling way with which he watched Bowie every time he came on screen. At one point Sirius caught him staring and gave a little smirk before reaching over and grabbing a handful of popcorn out of the bag in his lap. Remus looked down at the bag, horribly aroused, and spent the rest of the movie clenching the armrests. It was surely the longest film of his life.

"That was great!" Sirius declared, walking out of the picture house into the warm evening air. It was dark out, but he'd put his sunglasses back on, and the theatre's canopy lights reflected in the lenses like a bursting star. "I mean the plot was sort of meh," he continued; "but did you see how he dressed? So cool. And hearing him talk? Absolutely mental. Tell me though, why was I expecting him to sound more… I dunno, whimsical?"

"I think he sounds pretty whimsical," Remus said, while tucking his own sunglasses into the collar of his shirt and tossing their empty popcorn bag in a bin on the street. "You've really never heard him talk before?"

"Nah. Just seen him on the 'Pops'. Once I tried to catch an interview on some daytime show, but it was summer and mum caught me before it even started." Sirius sniffed a bit and shoved one hand into his pocket, the other he used to fan himself with his shirt collar. "But hey, it was ace! Haven't gotten to see a colour film in a while… Gonna be so shit when we go back to school and have to watch everything in black and white again.

"Maybe you can put in a request with AV club to get a telly upgrade."

“That’s not a bad idea. Suppose Pete could hook us up?”

“Probably… if he feels like it. But we got a telly back at my place. It’s in the parlour. We can watch it when everyone’s asleep.”

“Right,” Sirius smirked, lifting his glasses; “Gotta wait until everyone’s everyone’s kipped if I’m to stay your little secret.”

“Shut up.” Looking to busy himself, Remus pulled out his cigarettes and offered Sirius one, and then his zippo. They weren’t the only ones standing outside the cinema and smoking; several other groups were sprawled about the pavement, clouds of haze drifting around them like fog.

“So…” Sirius started eventually; “You know how I spent the last several weeks, but you never said what it was that you’ve been doing all this time. How did the great Remus Lupin spend his summer?”

“Uh…” Remus flicked the ash from the end of his fag. “Just hung around mostly.”

“That’s it? Boring.”

He shrugged awkwardly. “Yup… that’s me. Boring Remus…”

“You seriously didn’t do anything? You didn’t… meet anyone?”

“Nope.” No *way* was he going to tell Sirius about the girls. Not only did he feel guilty for not remembering most of their names, but… it was Sirius! And he was… god, it was all so messed up.

Sirius had paused to take a long drag, but Remus could sense his eyes on him from behind the glasses. Then; “I met someone.”

Remus blinked. “You… *Where?”*

“Belgium. The school.” Sirius blew his smoke proudly. “I told you we could get weed in, do you really think we all stood around not talking to each other?”

“No, but you said you spent most of your time in that isolation room.”

“I did. But I made fast work of it before then.”

Remus licked his lips. *Relax.* It was good that Sirius could have a few trysts of his own. It was normal. Honestly, a frigid Sirius was more worrying.

“Alright… What was her name then?”

Sirius looked up at the canopy lights. “What makes you so sure it was a ‘her’?”

…

“Oh! Uh...”

“Something the matter, Moony?”

Is something the matter? OF COURSE SOMETHING’S THE MATTER!

Stop, the voice warned; *Don’t freak out.*

Too late—I am absolutely freaking out!

Don’t! It’s what he wants… Just be cool. Say something cool.

Something cool? Okay, I can do that.

Remus cleared his throat. “So did the two of you, like… kiss then?”

Sirius lifted his sunglasses again, looked at him, and immediately broke down laughing. As Remus stood stunned, he whirled away, laughing loud enough to draw attention from their fellow smokers.

I said something cool, idiot.

Maybe next time you could be more specific.

“Oh, Moons,” Sirius guffawed, completely unaware of his inner turmoil; “You’re really are so fucking cute.”

Remus felt his face grow warmer. “It was just a question!” He blabbed. “You could’ve just said yes!”

“Yes!” Sirius laughed. “Yes, I kissed him. Shall I give you the entire rundown?”

No, dear god, please no.

“Honestly, it wasn’t terrible. A bit wet for my taste, but he was French, and you know what they say about the French—”

“I kissed someone too!” Remus blurted. It was a reflex; anything to get Sirius to stop talking.

“You did?” Sirius echoed, without missing a beat. “A girl?”

“Of course it was a girl! I’m not like—” He realised his mistake a second too late. “Wait, I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s fine,” Sirius said. His voice had gone an octave higher, a fact that socked Remus straight in the gut. “Should’ve assumed really, seeing as you’re…” Sirius just gestured at his general appearance.

“But I really didn’t mean it like that. I swear.”

“I know,” he nodded. “But hey—you found a girl. That’s great. What’s her name?”

“She’s no one,” Remus said quickly. “Or… she was… someone. But not to me.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?”

“I just mean that she was nice, but it was a… just a one-time thing. And your… guy then?”

“Oh, him?” Sirius waved a hand. “Nah, that was nothing, I was just playing the toff. There was this one girl, though—Caprianna. Mhm. Yeah. Gorgeous, just *so* fit. Best tits I’ve ever seen. Mhm. Yup… She was great…” Sirius went to pull another drag, but the cigarette had burned down. Remus was offering him another before he’d even flicked it away.

“What’d she do to get sent there?”

“What? Oh. I… dunno! We didn’t really do much talking, if you know what I mean. Heh… But tell me about your girl, the one-timer.”

Remus shook his head. “Not much to say.”

“Don’t be like that, you can tell me about it. I wanna hear. Whatever you told James, you can tell me. I’m still… well, I wanna know!”

He wasn’t sure if his ears were playing tricks on him or not, but Remus almost thought that Sirius sounded a bit desperate. It occurred to him that he probably was. A summer away, and now liking other lads… Sirius had never been *othered* before. At least not by his friends. Maybe it scared him. Remus knew what that was like. And so he decided then that even if Sirius couldn’t like *him* that way, he could at least be brave enough to reassure him that he wasn’t any different

from the rest of his friends.

“Well… She was nice.”

“Nah, nice try. Gimme details,” Sirius insisted. “What’d she look like? Was she a bosom or a bum?”

Remus scrambled. *Which one?*

“Uhm… bum?”

“Ah, that’s right, you’re an arse-man!”

“Ugh."

"Okay, so she had a nice bum, what else?"

"She had... dark hair? ... Nice eyes. Decent body. She was, I dunno… just nice? Or she kissed nice—and erm… she had her own flat.”

Sirius nudged him in the arm. “You jammy bastard, you went to hers?”

“I couldn’t very well bring her home, could I?”

“Ah, if you can sneak me in then I’m sure a few girls would’ve been just as easy. You gotta get more creative, Moons.”

Remus flicked his fag away. “Whatever. Tell me about this guy then.”

Sirius raised his cig to his lips, looking indignant. “No, don’t wanna.”

“Why not? I told you.”

“You told me she kissed ‘nice’. That's not exactly front page news, now is it?”

“You’re not being fair.”

“Yeah, well… tough.”

Remus couldn’t think of a comeback and they eventually lapsed into silence. It was almost maddening. He’d thought hearing Sirius talk about girls was bad, but hearing him talk about other guys? Now that was real torture. Maybe now was finally the time. Maybe if they got things out in the open they could finally be more like themselves again, instead of all… *this.*

Just say it then. Ask the question.

Remus steeled himself. “Sirius… about that night in the bathroom—”

Sirius’ eyes were on him in an instant. “What night?”

“O-Our last night. At school? Remember, Mary suggested that game, and we all—”

“OH!” Sirius shoved him by the shoulder, almost too hard to be friendly. “Yeah, yeah. Fun night! Totally crazy. Don’t remember much, actually.”

Remus’ throat turned to ice. “You don’t… remember?”

“Mm-mm. Woke up with a killer headache. Super sucked. Boy, we must’ve really lost our heads.”

He’s lying.

What if he’s not?

He is.

But what if he’s not?! What if he really didn’t mean the kiss? What if he was just drunk?!

People don’t kiss like that *when they’re drunk.*

“I remember,” Remus said, plucking up the last of his courage. Lord, was he really about to do this outside of a cinema? Guess so.

“Remember what? Oh—you mean when Wormtail called McKinnon 'mum'? Yeah, that was funny. Heh."

“No, it was when I went into the bathroom. You followed me, and we sorta—”

He didn’t get to finish.

Before Remus could get his final word out, Sirius had surged forward, covering his mouth with his palm. “Please, Moons,” he begged, “please, don’t.”

Remus pulled his face away. He could feel the words on the tip of his tongue. *Why not?*

“I don’t want this to change,” Sirius told him, as though he could read the question in his face. “If we can just stay like this, I’d be happy. What that was…” He looked around desperately; “It was wrong. A mistake. So just… forget about it. *Please.”*

Remus fought a frown. It was an uphill battle.

Told you he was lying…

“Alright,” he said, in the firmest, surest voice he could muster. “I didn’t mean to dig anything up. I’ll forget about it.”

Sirius exhaled, visibly relieved, and smiled at him. “Cool.”

More silence. Remus would’ve given anything to rewind time to even just thirty seconds ago. He’s been stupid to bring up the kiss. Of course Sirius hadn’t meant it. He was Sirius, and Remus was… *this.*

Dammit. *Idiot. Stupid fucking idiot!*

Hey, no arguments here.

You shut up! This is all your fault.

I think you mean your *fault? Unless I’m secretly somebody else’s inner monologue.*

He needed to get drunk. Or high. Or take a header on the pavement so he forgot all of this had ever happened. Remus was considering the last one, when another body strolled right up to them, this one bearing a lip ring and a large faux hawk and without a shirt entirely.

“Bum a fag, lads?” The punk-boy asked. He seemed friendly enough, but Sirius still stared openly. Remus supposed it was only fair, considering it was his first day in the city. There wasn’t very much radical subculture in Bath, and the guy was more alien-looking than anything they’d seen in *The Man Who Fell to Earth.*

“Sure. Have at her,” Remus said, offering his carton.

The guy accepted a single cigarette and tucked it between his teeth. Beyond them, a group of similarly-dressed folks were shouting and trying to flag him down.

“C’mon Dell, fuck off! We’re gonna miss the show!” A girl out front complained. She might’ve been short, were it not for the platform boots that lifted her at least a foot off the ground.

The punk brushed her off, and nodded jovially at the two of them, mumbling around the fag; “Cheers, cunts.”

As he handed the pack of smokes back and stepped away to rejoin his friends, Remus saw his chance to be rid of all horrible thoughts and feelings.

“Hey, what show you guys heading to?”

Dell turned back around. “Punk group. Callin’ themselves the Sex Pistols.”

“They new?” Remus asked, not recognising the name.

“Yeah, but they’ve played everywhere—Free Trade, Nashville, got banned from the Marquee even. They’re playing at 100 Club tonight.”

“Would I know any of the members?”

He shrugged, then eyed Remus’ trainers, slacks, and Led Zeppelin t-shirt. “Don’t ask me. They’re totally radical though. Bassist’s name is Sid, 'e totally demolished a journalist at their last show—sent the fucker home in a body cast!”

That’d be a no then.

Remus raised a hand; “Cheers,” and Dell spun away again, sauntering back over to his group. As he did, a small pack of university-age girls wearing fur coats like they’d just stepped out of Biba eyed him critically. As though he sensed their displeasure toward his very existence, Dell jumped out at them with a great *‘AH!’* and the girls all shrieked in surprise. As their shock turned into cursing and swearing, the punk dismissed the judgemental girls with a single wave and rejoined his friends, who were all howling with laughter as they started back up the street.

“I don’t blame ‘em for screaming. That guy could use some serious toothpaste,” Sirius quipped, making Remus actually crack a smile. He turned to him.

“You heard him—there’s a show going on. Don’t you want to go?”

Sirius’ eyes widened. “But he said it’s a punk group. And we’re…” Sirius glanced at the way Dell and his friends had gone; “Not punk.”

“Music’s music. Especially when it’s live. Surely you feel the same

way?"

At that, Sirius considered. It only took him about two seconds. "Yeah, get a leg-on then! I wanna know what band's so bad that they get tossed out of the Marquee club."

Remus nodded in agreement. *Yes,* this was it. A couple hours of booze and rock music was exactly the thing they needed to shake some sense into them.

He hoped.

* * *

Neither of them had ever heard of a "Sex Pistol" before, so they definitely hadn't been anticipating the line wrapped halfway down the block just to get in. It was definitely a punk show alright. People decked out in full street-punk attire shuffled back and forth, creating a small mushroom cloud of haze from the weed and tobacco being shared between them, and they actually got to watch as one guy turned to his friend and ripped the shirt sleeves clean off his shoulders. Remus just knew the show was going to be amazing. If they could just get in.

"Where're you going?" Sirius asked, when Remus bypassed the end of the line.

"I'm not waiting. Come on."

"You mean we're not going in?"

"We're going in," Remus smirked, "but not this way. Follow me. Oh and, maybe turn that shirt of yours inside out."

Glancing down at his 'Big Ben' tee, Sirius snorted and quickly turned his stroll into a jog to keep up. Making their way to the end of the street, they skirted around the corner, and up toward an alleyway. By the time they made it to its mouth, Sirius had turned his tourist t-shirt inside out and had even torn the sleeves off for good measure like he'd seen the other punks do.

"Where are you taking us?" He asked, tossing the scrap fabric into a grimy dumpster and tying the sleeves of his leather jacket around his waist. He shook out his braids too, mussing up his hair with both

hands and tucking a chunk of it behind one ear to hide the bald spot.

“We’ll never get inside if we wait in that line," Remus told him, "thought I’d try something else. Just shut up and stay close.”

“Ooh. I love sneaky Moony.”

Remus almost wished he could be sneaky, but if they were to make it inside then he needed to be convincing Moony, or in the very least, bull-shitting Moony. He wasn’t quite sure what his plan was, but he’d seen Tomny talk his way into a cheap second-rate pub gig on more than one occasion. Only none of them had been the 100 Club, and if Remus were being honest he wasn’t sure he had the guts to bluff through his teeth either. Guess he’d find out.

“What’d that guy say the bassist’s name was again?” He asked Sirius.

“Sid.”

Remus wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers. “Kay.”

As they made their way down the alley, passing various trucks and cars stuffed to the brim with what was clearly music equipment, Remus pulled out his rumpled cigarette box and cleared his throat. The music was louder there, and he could feel the heavy bass and kick drum practically vibrating beneath the ground. Somewhere just below their feet a band was playing to an audience of crowded, sweaty punks, all of them losing their minds to the music, but around them, only drivers and club workers mulled about, mostly smoking or drinking or just taking in the air. No one paid them much mind until they made it to the end of the alley, where the music was loudest. There a bouncer stood up from his milk crate, abandoning the game of cards he and another roadie had set up on an overturned rubbish bin.

“Oi, where do you think you’re going? It’s fans ‘round front!” He barked.

“We—We’re not fucking fans,” Remus spat, in what he thought was a rather convincing tone of anger, “we’re staff. And we’re only out here because one of you fuckheads forgot Sid’s fags!”

“What you say to me?”

“Oh take the piss, why don’t you?” Striding right up to the guy, Remus stopped just before his huge gut, throwing up the cigarettes and scoffing in his face. “I told you idiots I was done making stupid piss-

runs for bands and you still whinge like fucking babies. This is the last time we're letting you send us anywhere when we got work to do first, ya hear me?!"

"No one sent you anywhere, I don't even know you!" The bouncer boomed. "Where's your badge anyway?"

"You think we had time to grab the bloody badges? You lot couldn't even have cigarettes on hand for your bassist! Is this why you're never out front? 'Cause ya can't be bothered to know who works here and who don't? Do you even *hear* them down there?" Remus thrust his hand up to one ear, but the bouncer barely had time to look confused. "Yeah! Fuckin' terrible. That's whatcha bloody get when ya send the guys responsible for sound checkin' out to buy fags when you dickheads can't do your damn jobs! Now get out 'a my way unless you want to be the one explaining to Sid why he's suddenly quittin' cold-turkey!"

The bouncer gave him such a nasty glare that Remus just about caved right then and there. He seemed to be determining the likelihood of getting into shit himself were they actually telling the truth. Best not to let him think too hard.

"Tick-tock, meathead," Remus hissed. "You steppin' aside or am I to climb in the window and get Sid out here to tear a strip off 'a ya 'imself?"

More grudgingly than he'd ever seen anyone do anything, the bouncer finally stepped aside and pulled the door open. The roadie who was waiting to finish their card game just looked at them as though he couldn't decide if he was more confused or more impressed. Remus didn't give him the chance to figure it out. Grabbing Sirius by the shoulder, he pushed him inside first and waited until the heavy door had slammed shut behind them to breathe again.

"I cannot believe you just fucking did that," Sirius gaped. "Oh my god —*how'd* you do that"

"I dunno," Remus wheezed, holding his head. "But I think I just shit my pants."

They both broke down into a fit of laughter that might've left them in stitches for the rest of the night, had the band not kicked up another song, this one even more riotous than the last.

"Bloody hell, they're really something aren't they?" Sirius said, wiping

the tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes. Remus looked at him, still handsome in the dim red light of the club's hallway, and pushed all of his feelings of love aside. He was determined to have a good night.

"I promised you ages ago that I'd bring you to a scummy dive bar," he said, "and I doubt it gets scummier than a group of punks calling themselves 'The Sex Pistols'."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Sirius grinned, already pushing him down the hall toward the music. Every step got them closer to the club's garish thunder of noise and after plunging further underground on a cement, red-tinged staircase, they emerged into the club. The doorway they'd come through was clearly meant for staff only, and was tucked between the bar and the loo. The room was entirely rectangular, and every inch of it was stuffed by twisted and excited bodies. The band was literally only a few feet away, lifted up on a tiny stage with a huge, glowing '100' behind them. There wasn't a single bar table—there wasn't room—only the stage and those who'd come to listen and forget that morning was only a few precious hours away. Not that there was much to listen to aside from the singer's bleating.

"I don't even think they're speaking English!" Sirius shouted. *"It's great!"*

Using the last of Remus' cash, they got themselves several shots and a whisky highball each, downing each until they were so severely liquored it wouldn't have mattered if the band were screaming in Pig Latin. The crowd was absolute insanity, covered head to toe in metal bits and facial piercings. It seemed as though even a light jostle among the thrashing bodies would have them skewered, but that was part of the fatalistic appeal.

Throwing themselves into the fray, Remus nearly lost a shoe after someone stepped on his trainer from behind and pulled it clean off his foot. No one cared, least of all him. The band kept going, mashing their instruments together until they were indistinguishable from one another. The music was awful—the attitude of the band even worse so—but that was the point. Remus looked for the bassist, Sid, and was startled to find that he looked a bit like Peter—if Peter had lost a hundred pounds and lived solely off cocaine and glue huffing. He might've said as much to Sirius, had he not already strayed far into the crowd. He kept playing at getting closer and closer to each fight that insisted on breaking out, and Remus hadn't even the sense to care. At some point someone spat beer down the back of his neck, but

he knew better than to retaliate in such close quarters. Whenever someone did get ballsy enough to throw a punch, the band only seemed to get louder. Finally the lead guitarist took a glass from an audience member, downed the drink, and turned to huck the thing against the wall behind the drum kit, shattering it all while the band kept playing.

Everyone lost their minds.

It was glorious.

“You’re getting shit all for an encore tonight because I’m a lazy bastard!” The singer wailed into the microphone. “So fuck you London, here’s ‘No Fun’!”

“YEAH, JOHNNY!” Another clubber wailed from behind Remus, fisting the air with both hands.

“FUCK YEAH, JOHNNY-BOY!” Sirius shouted gleefully, reappearing at Remus’ side with two more shot glasses and a lit cigarette in the same hand. Remus didn’t know where he’d gotten any of it, but he took the shot and then let Sirius hold the smoke to his lips for a drag as the song started.

‘No fun, my babe—
No fun!
No fun, my babe—
No fun!’

“It’s a Stooges song!” Remus said, smacking Sirius in the chest, but even that wasn’t enough to get his attention. Not while he was busy staring at some girl standing practically on the other side of the stage. Remus couldn’t believe it. Trust Sirius Black to be the only one who could catch a girl’s eye while being serenaded by a band that sounded more like a collection of wood-chippers.

“Bloody go talk to her then!” Remus shouted, shoving Sirius hard with his shoulder. Bouncing off another concert-goer, Sirius gave him a sharp look.

“WASN’T GONNA!”

“SURE YOU WERE!”

“NUH-UH!”

Remus looked up and scoffed. “WELL TOO BAD ‘CAUSE HERE SHE COMES!”

Sirius spun around just in time to find the girl squeezing through several bodies to get to them. Her hair was cut short and plastered to the sides of her neck and face with sweat and her eyebrows were drawn on with what looked to be felt-tipped pen, but she had large eyes and might've been pretty under the rest of the make-up. Too noisy for small talk, Remus watched her mouth a sultry ‘hi’ before offering Sirius another shot and a lime she had tucked between two fingers. Ignoring the fact that he could see directly down her shirt, Remus huffed and looked away just in time to see The Sex Pistol’s bassist take a long drag off a cigarette and put it out on his own nipple.

‘No fun to be alone—
Walking by myself!
No fun to be alone—
In love with nobody else!’

It would’ve been better if he could’ve just listened to the music, but Remus couldn’t help it. He looked back and found Sirius whispering in the girl’s ear, a sight that instantly turned his stomach. It was one thing for Sirius to flirt openly in front of him, but *right next to him?* No —he wasn’t going to put up with it this time.

Turning to move away, Remus only managed a single step before Sirius’ hand shot out, grabbing him tightly around the wrist and yanking him back. He almost fell right into him, but somehow still didn’t miss the way the girl leaned away from Sirius, shock clear on her face. Whatever Sirius had said to her must’ve been something, as the wide-eyed look she gave Remus was enough to stop him in his jealous tracks. Then—quite miraculously—the girl simply shrugged and moved off with her shot still in hand.

“WHAT’D YOU SAY TO HER?!” Remus demanded instantly, but Sirius only gave him a single shit-eating grin and then shoved the lime slice between his teeth. Remus choked on it and Sirius’ mouth split into a laugh that was swallowed by the band’s noise as their encore came to a turbulent and fervent end.

After a rousing second and third encore—the latter of which was just a screaming match between two of the band members—the show was finally over. As the band members fucked off deeper into the club and music switched over to a more party-like ambiance, the crowd continued drunkenly mulling about. It would've been nice to stay longer, but Remus knew the trains would stop running soon and it was always a pain to get cabbies to go from the centre of the city all the way to Blackheath. And since they couldn't call Giles to come pick them up…

Taking Sirius by the arm, he led them up and out of the basement venue, where they spilled out onto the pavement and gulped down the fresh night air.

"That was so good! Did you see how close we got to the stage?" Sirius whooped, nearly walking into a sign post on the side of the road.

"So what, you a punk now?" Remus sniggered, grinning widely up at the lights of Oxford Street. The city was still noisy so close to the club, but the further away they got the quieter things became, until only the occasional bum on the corner was around to spot them.

"My ears are still ringing. Just wait until James and Pete hear about it," Sirius beamed.

"They're gonna be so jealous…" Remus mumbled, too busy watching Sirius from the side to make much more conversation. It could've been the booze, but when Sirius talked about the music and lit up as he did, Remus was sure he'd never seen anything more pretty. Certainly the night was a monster made for Sirius. He never glowed so brightly as when they were outside and in love.

In love?

Remus tripped on a crack in the pavement. He might've gone sprawling face-first had he not caught himself at the last second, Sirius' arms stretched out beside him just in case he needed him.

"Too much to drink, Moons?" He laughed.

Fuck. Not enough actually. Not if he was still able to remember what had happened that night in the bathroom. Not enough for Sirius' begging to cull those damn feelings. At least before, when Sirius hadn't been writing him back, Remus had been able to resent him. He'd been able to feel sorry for himself, but now that he knew the truth—that Sirius hadn't been ignoring him, that he really wanted it

over with—everything felt a lot worse.

What if he just kissed *him?*

The thought occurred to him just as they turned another corner, onto an even darker street. If he kissed him, would it prove anything? Or would it just make things worse? If Sirius had already moved on past the kiss and forgotten about it, would it ruin absolutely everything for him to know that Remus hadn't?

Subconsciously, Remus found himself peering into alleys and behind shop corners, wondering if every incoming shadow would give him enough space to pull Sirius aside and find out the truth. Nothing could be done about it out in the open, he wasn't that stupid, but if he just bulked up the nerve to reach out and take Sirius by the hand then *maybe!* Except if he had the nerve, he'd left it behind somewhere between Abbey Road and the floor of the 100 Club. Every opportunity passed him by; they passed so many dark alleyways and empty doorways that Remus was starting to wonder if he would have to feign a hurt ankle just to slow their pace.

But then it didn't matter anymore. They'd reached the tube station and its bright yellow lights suffocated any chance of privacy. Not bothering to pay, they hopped the ticket stalls and skipped down the stairs into the underground. Remus shoved his hands into his pockets to suppress his prickly mood. There were only a handful of other people on the platform, but he hated every one of them for existing. Maybe if they hadn't, he'd be kissing Sirius right now.

"You know where we're going, right?" Sirius asked, peering down the tracks as a train rumbled toward them.

"You ask me that now, as if I haven't been leading you around the entire city all day?" Remus replied cutting. Sirius gave him a simple shrug, too drunk to notice the tone. A few moments later the train came to a whirring stop in front of them and they shuffled aboard as the announcer echoed over their heads, *'Please mind the gap'*.

Taking a seat in the corner, Remus tried not to think about Sirius' thigh pressed up against his own, bobbing like his heartbeat had travelled down to the ball of his foot. Instead he leaned his head back against the window while the announcer droned on, *'last train to Bethnal Green'*.

"Moony, can I have a cig?" Sirius asked after a while.

“Can’t smoke in this compartment.” It was a lie, but he didn’t feel very truthful right then.

“Ah… Really?”

“Mhm.”

“Oh.”

Sirius fell silent again next to him and the train continued roaring down its tracks, late-night commuters coming and going while the buzzing yellow lights glared down from overhead. It was another long while later when Sirius spoke again;

“Just think of it, Moony.”

Remus opened his eyes. He’d almost drifted off. What he found was Sirius smiling at the row of seats ahead of them.

“Just think… one day that’s gonna be us.”

Remus raised a brow. “You mean we’re gonna be the ones picking some girl’s shirt up off the stage and wiping our sweat on it?”

“Only if we’re lucky. But who am I kidding, you already have a line of girls who want your sweat-stained clothes.” With two fingers Sirius flapped the front of his shirt suggestively.

“First of all—you’re fucking gross,” Remus snorted; “second of all—are you joking? You actually think they’d take me over you?”

“I know they would!”

“You’re mental.”

“And you’re blind!” Sirius turned in his seat to smack him in the shoulder. “You think McKinnon’s the only one who ever had her eye on you?”

“We broke up!”

“I know that! But what about all the others?”

“What others?”

Sirius scoffed; “Are you really being this thick on purpose?”

“No, you dickhead! There are no others!”

“Of course there are others! You said it yourself, right? The ‘nice kisser’? Bet she would’ve dated you outright.”

“*Jesus*—I didn’t want to date her.”

“Then I don’t get it! You’re going to all these shows—sneaking in the back and shoutin’ at bloody security guards like you have balls of steel —”

“What are you talking about?” Remus wailed. “That’s the first time I’ve ever been in a club like that!”

Sirius’ eyes widened. “It was?”

“Yeah, I mean I’ve been outside it plenty, but only while Lee and Flacky picked pockets—we were just kids, they’d never actually have let us in.”

“Then how’d you know about the back way through the alley?”

Remus licked his lips before raising his chin haughtily. “Tomny told me. Once saw him bluff his way into another show. Nothin’ like that though.”

“So you do have balls of steel then!” Sirius guffawed. “See, I knew you were cool, Moony!”

“Oh shut up.” Remus scowled in embarrassment, shoving him back with his shoulder. In response Sirius just leaned in closer, a hand wrapped around Remus’ bicep tightly enough to make him worry if he was blushing.

“This is why girls like you, you’re cool *and* humble. Careful or some bird’s gonna come along and walk right over you,” Sirius warned.

“Sort of like you’re doing right now?”

The train slowed to another stop, letting off an old man who’d been sitting a few rows down from him. He folded up his newspaper as he passed, pointedly flapping it in their direction with a nasty look. Sirius just flipped him off from behind.

“Still,” he pushed as the train started up again, “you hang out with them.”

“You mean girls? Like Lily?”

“Yeah, duh!”

The train’s noise muffled Remus’ sputtered laughter. “She’s my friend —and she’s dating James, who happens to be your best friend by the way!”

“Well, does that make Lily your best friend?”

Remus balked a bit. “She’s—She’s one of them!”

“And me?”

“You are too! You said it yourself, didn’t you?”

Sirius fell back a bit, relaxing his hold on his arm. “Yeah,” he said, more quietly this time; “You’re right. We’re friends… ‘course.”

Something deflated in Remus’ chest as Sirius turned away. As he did Remus looked around. They were the only ones on the train car.

“Remember that girl at the show?” Sirius hummed.

Remus just made a noise in the back of his throat like a ‘hmph’. Honestly, how could he have forgotten?

“She said her friend thought you were fit.”

Remus looked up at the map of the underground hanging over the train door. Two stops left. “Don’t matter now, does it?”

“She probably would’ve hooked up with you if you fancied it,” Sirius said, “but then you threw that fit and tried to storm off. What, gotta keep yourself pure for Jillian Stewart?”

Something inside of Remus snapped. He whirled on Sirius, their faces only a breath apart. “You’re fucking infuriating.”

“Oh yeah? Well, you’re a bastard!”

Remus almost laughed. *Too right, that.*

“Fuck you, Sirius!”

“No, fuck you, Moony!”

“You think you’re so fucking funny—”

“—I know I’m funny!”

“No, really you’re just a big fucking dick! You can’t do anything without turning it into a stupid fucking joke!”

“A joke? You mean like you and Stewart?!”

That’s it!

Remus brought up one hand, slamming it on the train window next to Sirius’ head and boxing him into the corner seat. “Shut. Up.”

Sirius returned the look with wide-eyes. “I didn’t mean to…”

“I don’t want to talk about Jillian anymore,” Remus ground out.

Then he grabbed Sirius by the jaw and kissed him.

Time seemed to slow. The roar of the train dropped away, and all Remus could hear, feel, and taste was heat. Sirius’ heat. It drove right through his mouth and lit him ablaze. He was furious—confused, hurt, and pissed off, but *oh so happy*. More happy than he’d ever been. Sirius Black may have been one of the only people who could drive him up the wall and back again, but lord if he wasn’t just the *best* to kiss.

And when Sirius’ mouth parted and he let Remus slip his tongue inside? Well, that was just the cherry on top.

Pushing in even further, Remus cupped Sirius’ neck with both hands and *just kissed him.* It was magnificent. Eventually Sirius’ fire gave way to all traces of him—the whisky on his breath, the smooth curve of his bottom lip, the hint of cigarette smoke clinging to his tongue. He didn’t have time to wonder what Sirius tasted—they were too busy, practically falling over top of one another on the train seats.

It took a nasty jostle from the tracks to finally separate them. Remus pulled back, nearly panting as the distinct feeling of horror that he might’ve just ruined everything surged over him. Neither of them said anything at first, but when Remus had collected himself to chance a look in Sirius’ direction, he was rewarded with relief and—*oh thank god*—desire. Sirius’ eyes on him were soft; after a few more laboured breaths, he raised his hand and traced a smooth path across Remus’ cheek and down to his lips. And then when Sirius smiled, Remus

thought that he might actually be dreaming. If he were, he prayed he would never wake up.

“Sirius…”

“Shh… Just…” Sirius laughed again, more of a nervous chitter than anything. “My god—it’s about fucking time.” And then he returned Remus’ kiss with every inch of himself.

Remus couldn’t believe it.

They’d kissed.

They *were* kissing.

Remus never wanted to stop. *Finally*—an answer to everything he’d been feeling! How it taken so fucking long? Sirius was right there—he’d always been there! Always going on about the romance of music or the importance of making life into a story and not just an everyday sentence of hell that must be served. He’d listened to all of it and yet somehow they’d only ever missed each other. Like ships passing in the night—it almost wounded him! But kissing Sirius healed all of it. It reminded him of the things that hurt the most and somehow took away their hurt all together. It was like Sirius’ favourite stories, each of them about knights slaying dragons to save a princess, or kings coming into their own by pulling magical swords out of stone. It was just so Sirius. The Sirius who read Shakespeare like a religion, revelling in the tragic romance that filled every play and sonnet. Who preferred heartbreak and misery in every tale, but only if it served a happy purpose, and only if the characters had once been happier than their misery could ever make them. Remus had read all the stories too, and yet he was sure that their happiness and misery paled in comparison to what it felt like to kiss Sirius Black.

Distantly Remus was aware of the train slowing, but he was also conscious of Sirius’ fingers dipping down below the collar of his shirt, brushing that chain and wrapping it around his hand so he could pull him even closer. It almost hurt. He wanted more.

“You’re gonna choke me,” he grunted between kisses.

“You’d probably like it,” Sirius mumbled gruffly, running his tongue across the roof of Remus’ mouth and leaving him trembling in his very core. He could’ve stayed kissing him forever, had the train not pulled into the next station. They reluctantly pulled apart as the doors opened and a single woman got on, obviously drunk and raging,

shaking her fist at some guy she'd left behind on the platform.

"Oh go fuck yourself! I never want to see you again, you cheating bloody bastard!"

She stormed aboard, slamming herself down on a seat on the far-side of the train car. The guy ran several paces before giving up, instead shouting back at her; *'You crazy bitch!'* as she began spitting obscenities through the window like a fitting cat.

"Really, some people have no sense of public decorum," Sirius murmured cheekily, his face still flushed from kissing. Remus instantly broke down in a flurry of laughter and Sirius fell into him, cackling.

"What you laughing at?!" The hissing woman roared from her end of the train compartment. They sat up instantly, peeking awkwardly at one another before their happiness got too big again and they were laughing once more.

The woman continued glaring at them for the rest of the ride, and Remus tried to behave himself for the most part, but it was as though a set of floodgates had opened. It was suddenly impossible to keep their hands to themselves. Sirius continued flashing that cheeky smile of his and began running his fingertips along Remus' arm until he had goosebumps. Remus silently swore he'd get him back for it, and when the train finally pulled into the last station and the announcer cried, *'All change!'* they were off like a light, skidding up the stairs behind one another and out onto the cool nighttime street.

Free of all prying eyes, it quickly became clear that rather than just floodgates, an entire dam had burst within them. The moment they were alone they had each other pressed up against alley walls or street corners, anywhere dark enough that a passerby would've been able to tell what it was they were doing. It took far too long to hail a cab the rest of the way home and more than once they simply let a car pass them by—too busy throwing themselves at one another to care. They didn't talk much—Remus was tired of talking—and when they finally made it back to the estate, his lips felt puffy and bruised from kissing.

Sirius gave him enough time to make sure the coast was clear before they snuck back inside, every inch of their bodies thrumming with anticipation. The moment they were alone in his bedroom they were back at it, tearing at each other's clothes and barely leaving enough time between kisses to breathe. They ended up on the bed, pushing aside the curtains and falling next to one another over the already-

rumpled sheets. It was completely different from how it'd felt to be with Marlene; then it'd been an expectation—they'd bloody *planned* it for Christ's sake—but with Sirius everything was new and exciting.

Without even asking him to, Sirius straddled his waist and Remus was free to glide his hands up beneath his t-shirt and trace the lines of his back. He didn't dare touch his stomach. He'd been using the image of it as wanking fodder for far too long and he was worried that if he paid it too much attention he'd finish right then and there. Luckily there was plenty of Sirius he'd yet to explore. The small of his back was perfect, the line of his spine a work of art, and he hadn't even seen either up close yet. As Sirius slid his hands down his back from above, leaning down to nibble the shell of his ear, Remus began to kiss his neck, daring to reach even higher beneath the thin fabric of his shirt until his fingers brushed one of the rippled scars that lined the top of Sirius' ribs.

It was like an electric shock to both of them.

They yanked apart—two boys—and in that instant, the faces of every girl he'd ever kissed flashed through Remus' mind. He'd liked them all, though some more than others. They'd had the pretty smiles… the silky hair… and whenever he dared to get closer they'd always caressed him with soft fingertips and stuttered breath. Sirius had all of those things and then some, but he was still a man. What did it even mean to love another man…?

Remus fell forward, leaning his forehead against the crook of Sirius' shoulder. Was love supposed to make you feel so sick? Like you couldn't breathe?

"Toujours pur."

It was like the barest chance of a whisper. Remus almost thought he'd imagined it, until he heard it again, tickling the shell of his ear like a kiss. Sirius had told him what it meant on their drive into the estate. A family motto. A designation of propriety.

Always pure.

A bolt of fear shot through him, and Remus clenched his jaw as he fisted the back of Sirius' shirt.

This is it, this is where he takes it back, the voice warned.

No, he'll have to rip me off.

“Moony.”

Almost wincing, Remus leaned back very quickly. He blinked up at Sirius’ face in the darkness, searching his expression for that fatal moment of pause. Of regret.

“… What’s wrong, Sirius?”

Sirius’ tongue traced his lips. “I have to know. Does this mean… that you’re…?”

Remus’ mind began to race. What to say—*no?* No, I like girls? I’ve always liked girls, I’m just awkward and you’re just beautiful and it’s all just a damn mess? ‘No’ scared him. He didn’t even have the words to articulate how badly it scared him, and yet it seemed the most obvious choice because—*no, he wasn’t!* And neither was Sirius, right? He’d said so himself. But if the answer was no, then how could they begin to justify such love?

“Moony…?”

He’d taken too long. Sirius was staring at him now, waiting for an answer… He had to say something, and he had an answer *but he hated it!* And he didn’t want to stop— *god,* he couldn’t take it if they stopped. Maybe it would just be best to…

“Nope,” Remus answered simply, as if Sirius had asked if it were raining.

Nope, no chance of rain, Padfoot. Just a half chance of being queer…

Sirius’ eyebrows raised in unison. “No?”

“No.”

“Then we…”

“No one has to know,” Remus said very quickly. “It can just be us.”

Sirius’ eyes dipped down, then up again. “You… wouldn’t tell anyone?”

No, no, no!

“No. Never. We couldn’t, right? Not if…” If they wanted anything in life, really.

A beat passed between them, and Remus slowly uncurled his fingers from Sirius' t-shirt, gingerly sliding them against the intoxicating curve of his spine. Sirius shivered, and he thought he could taste it.

"We could just stop," Sirius said. "Stop now and… never speak about it."

No…

Remus swallowed. "We could…"

"Just… go back to how it was before. Be friends."

"Aren't we friends?"

Sirius' mouth twitched. "I want you," he confessed. He raised his chin as he said it, as though he were trying to be proud.

"I want you too," Remus sighed, practically sagging with relief.

"Doesn't mean this has to mean anything," Sirius said. "We could just… do it."

"Right! It can just be for us. We don't have to tell anybody…"

"Just… for us."

Remus nodded, and then he almost said it—*I love you*—but he didn't want to risk chasing Sirius off. Best to continue comforting him.

"No one else is here, Sirius. No one at all. It's an empty house. It's just you and me."

Sirius held his gaze a moment longer, and then began drawing off his shirt. Slipping over his head, it puddled on the bed next to them and Remus got full view of Sirius' red, band-like scars. The whole of his chest and neck were flushed, but the old wounds stood out like living fire beneath his skin.

"You're beautiful," Remus said. He meant it.

Sirius didn't say anything at first. Instead he extended his hands to cup Remus' face. Surprisingly, his hands felt cool, and he used both thumbs to trace his nose and the scar there.

"I told you once that I trusted you," Sirius said slowly, "do you trust me?"

“Oh god… *yes.”*

Sirius kissed him. It was softer than any of the ones they’d shared before, and when he pulled back he was smiling. It was like a cutting ray of moonlight.

“Then bloody get on me already.”

Unhooking his legs from around Remus’ waist, Sirius stood up and stepped back several paces. Remus watched him go from the edge of the bed, utterly transfixed. Sirius was still wearing his charity shop trousers, and they clung to the sharp ridges of his hip bones like linen on a wire. He raised his arms in a lazy shrug, as if to say, *what are you waiting for?*

For someone to tell me I’m dreaming, Remus thought dumbly. Then he was moving all at once.

Surging forward, he caught Sirius around the neck with both hands, drawing their mouths back together in a single desperate kiss. Sirius fell into him instantly, opening his mouth and allowing Remus to slip his tongue inside. It was the heat of him that set him apart, he realised; Sirius’ heat was unlike any girl’s. Their tender caresses could never compare—not when his touch left him feeling more alive than any rush, or higher than any drug. Sirius was scalding and intoxicating all at once. He was the first ‘I’m sorry’ and the last ‘I forgive you’. He was everything Remus had ever wanted and more.

“Hurry up,” Sirius grunted against his lips, while Remus fumbled with the zipper of his own trousers. He’d only managed the first button by the time Sirius was ridding him of his shirt, tossing it over his shoulder and immediately reaching up to wrap one hand around the chain at his neck. Trousers finally open at the top, Remus reacted in kind—drawing Sirius up against them and spinning them both around until they were tumbling back onto the bed in a single heap. With the other boy on his back amongst the sheets, Remus began placing sparse and eager kisses down the side of Sirius’ neck and lower. He didn’t avoid the scars, and every time he looked up he found Sirius watching him with eyes glazed over in need. Remus knew the feeling well, and it drove him as he dipped lower still, until his nose was brushing the tip of his navel and he’d just met that faint trail of dark hairs he’d been fantasizing about for months. He’d just managed to slip his fingers into the waistband on Sirius’ trousers and reveal the top of his pants when Sirius reached down and knotted his fingers into his hair, drawing Remus to a halt.

“Hey, c’mere… Come back up here.”

Remus glanced hopelessly at the trousers. “But I thought you said…” Then his voice turned whiny; “I want you.”

Sirius flashed a grin. “I know, it’s just… I haven’t nearly kissed you enough.”

Fucking hell…

Obediently, Remus rose back up until the two of them were hovering only centimetres apart. He leaned in, but before he could kiss him again, Sirius pushed Remus away by the chin. His clumsy lips met Sirius’ hairline, and Remus pulled away.

“Um, what?”

Sirius laughed, bold and beautiful, and then leaned in to kiss Remus’ neck. “I never said *where* it was that I wanted to kiss…”

Unable to help it, Remus chuckled and let Sirius have his way. Soon enough his eyes were fluttering shut, as he swallowed moans while Sirius’ tongue took a leisurely stroll about his throat. Unwilling to take a back seat, Remus slipped a hand down between them and cupped the other boy through his jeans. He was hard, and the relief was imminent.

“For us,” Sirius murmured against his skin. A moment later he was pulling away, and they’d matched gazes.

“No running away,” Remus said. Agreed. Then he watched as the corners of Sirius’ mouth quirked.

“Had enough of that for a lifetime anyway.”

And then Sirius was raising his face towards him again.

Remus almost leaned in to meet the kiss, but before their lips could touch, Sirius used his teeth to bite down on the pick that had been dangling off of his chain necklace between them. He smirked deviously then, and dropped back against the bed covers, tugging Remus down with him by the neck. It was the hottest thing Remus had ever seen.

“Oh... fuck me."

Sirius released the pick, running his tongue across his teeth. “Don’t

mind if I do…"

They kissed again and did not stop until morning.

* * *

Stupid boys.

Maybe things would've been easier if they'd both just admitted how much they loved each other that very first night. It would've made what came next certainly a little less confusing… But they'd come around eventually. It just took some time to be honest with each other and themselves—and also to figure things out. After all, they were only two boys.

Stupid, lovely boys.

Later on, Remus would recall how Lily had once described love as a lightbulb going off inside your head. At the time she'd failed to describe how the lightbulb wasn't just any old lightbulb. Love lightbulbs tended to hang in pitch black rooms without any doors or windows at all. The room was so dark that whenever the light sprung on, it tended to blind you. Depending on how long you'd been in darkness, that blindness would last and last… Yeah, love was like that. Foolishly blinding. So much so that it was sometimes easy to mistake a love lightbulb for something far, far worse. It was a mistake Remus had made often.

For so long love had felt like an ailing mother and a healthy father who only saw the worst of each other whenever they looked at him. It was not the kind of love Remus wanted to give anyone, let alone Sirius.

And so he'd looked elsewhere. What he'd found was that love sometimes began to feel more like jealousy—like an excruciating jab to the gut that left him raw and bitter for days. It had also felt like a song he couldn't get out of his head, or a light fluttering in the centre of the chest, or just plain dizziness. Sometimes love made him sick, as though he were a book with its spine suddenly cracked. Those were the hard loves—the 'tough loves', but there was also a comforting, friendship sort of love, like the kind he felt for Lily and James. One of the most common though, was the rubber band type of love. It was the sort that snapped against your skin like an electric shock but wore off just as quickly. Just— *WAP!* —and you're finished.

One thing was mostly clear though: no matter the source, love was almost always unexpected…

Unless you'd always expected to love them.

On the good days, Remus did not worry about love. He simply lived and let live. It was hard then to imagine it, but there would be other Tonyas… Other Tomnys even. And for them, there would certainly be other Remuses. Or at least, that was the hope. Because what else was real love but hope? Hoping for better, hoping for worse so that the better *could* be better, and hoping that those who cared enough to say even a little while would turn out happy in the end.

Yeah… just *love, love, love.*

It would take a lifetime to figure out, but the love Remus had for Sirius encompassed all of these things and more. There would never just be one way to describe it. It would change and grow with them, affected by the times and their lives and the people that came in and out of it. It would not always feel or look the same, but there was one thing that Remus invariably told himself: Love was wonderful—terribly so, if only because you never quite knew where you'd find it.

Chapter End Notes

'Snooker' is a game like pool or billiards.
A 'zebra crossing' is a crosswalk.
'Selfridges' and 'C&A' are both department store-type shops.
'Kipped' or 'kip' is slang for sleepy/sleep/nap.
Biba was a woman's fashion store.
'All change' is the the announcement for the last stop on public transportation.

Song in the charity shop is "I'm Your Boogie Man" by KC & The Sunshine Band, 1976.
The song in the club is "No Fun" originally by the Stooges but covered by the Sex Pistols, 1977.

Chapter 68: Interlude

Chapter Summary

> A moment of rest, where all one might need do is breathe and let be.

Chapter Notes

> I accidentally posted this early last week but immediately deleted it, so sorry if you got an email without an update, lol. Enjoy this happy chapter.
>
> CW: Sexual content (non-graphic) and smoking. Issues surrounding being queer and coming out, though mostly present in Remus' inner monologue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Workin' on our night moves,
Try'na lose the awkward teenage blues;
Workin' on our night moves,
Mhm…
And it was summertime…

- "Night Moves" Bob Seger & the Silver Bullet Band, 1976

The morning following…

Remus awoke first. It was almost noon. Outside the sun was beaming, and if they'd bothered to throw the curtains aside and open a window, they might have heard the tell-tale signs of life at the estate. Dogs barking from their yard and kennel, a mower busy chewing up the grass, even the sound of Sandra's fancy sports car as it zoomed up the front drive. She and Lyall were off on another day trip. Remus didn't care enough to remember where, as long as it was away. It'd become a norm since summer's start; Sandra enjoyed getting out of the house, and Lyall enjoyed Sandra. It was a symbiotic enough relationship, albeit still a bit strange to Remus. They'd be married soon, he recalled. She'd move in, find a place to put her fancy horses and fancier cars. The maids would start calling her 'Mrs. Lupin'. Would she redecorate? Throw out the untouched linens? Retire the unused beds? Maybe.

Remus wasn't sure if he looked forward to it or not. Hope had touched those linens, she'd known those beds.

Do you want to live here, Remus? His father had asked.

No, he'd answered.

Then what use do you have for linens? For beds?

None.

"Mornin'…"

Sirius had woken. He was naked save the sheet that covered him, and so close that Remus could still feel the warmth of his breath on his cheek. Sirius' hair was silhouetted around his head like a dark halo. It reminded him of all the times he'd seen him sleeping in the dorm, except now all Remus had to do was reach out and he could be running his fingers through those raven strands himself. So, he did.

Sirius blinked the sleep from his eyes. He was already smiling. Remus took it as a sign that their day would be good.

I love you, he thought.

"Mornin'," he said.

"Mhm… Been up long?" Sirius stretched, arching his back. Under the covers, Remus felt his leg shift over his own, still knotted together in tandem. Remembering the night before got his heart racing again. *Sirius, Sirius, Sirius.*

"No, not long," Remus answered. Then he kissed him.

Sirius kissed back, opening his mouth like a blooming rose, and then they slid together until they were sharing the same pillow. It was bliss. Slow, lazy bliss. He never wanted it to end.

"What do you want to do today?" He asked, when they parted. Their limbs were still wrapped around one another; their heartbeats the same. *Thump, thu-thump!*

"Anything," Sirius answered.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere."

“Anywhere?”

“Mhm…. Anywhere with you.”

* * *

Late July 1977

The trip into the city had set the tone for the summer. With the rest of their friends gone on extended vacations, Remus and Sirius were free to come and go as they pleased. Lyall and Sandra seemed to be doing the same; in the span of two weeks they’d visited eight different cities spread out amongst the southern half of the country. Sandra almost always asked Remus to go with them, but he never did. He didn’t want to leave Sirius for even a moment, and as nice as she was, he didn’t fancy spending any more time with Sandra or his father than need be. Luckily she never pressed the matter. Remus didn’t know what Lyall had told her of his reaction to the engagement, but if it meant he would be left alone, then it didn’t really matter. Lyall never mentioned any of the trips either, and he never called Remus to his office or brought up the subject of his lessons again. Eventually Remus wasn’t even expected to have dinner with them. It was truly like an ebbing tide; Lyall Lupin was starting over. A new life, a new wife, and no juvenile teenagers to lose sleep over.

“Maybe you should change your surname. We could both do it,” Sirius had suggested, before launching into an eager rant on the upsides of doing just this. Remus didn’t think much of ‘Remus Mercury’ or ‘Sirius Jagger’, but Sirius had poked and prodded until he spat out the first thing that came to mind. An instant regret.

“ ‘Dean’, huh?” Sirius replied; “Remus Dean… Remus Dean… Wow. That’s actually pretty sexy.”

Remus faltered, but not because of the compliment. He only regretted saying it. He knew Sirius wouldn’t understand, but hearing the name turned his stomach. So, because he couldn’t think of anything else to do, he kissed him and all talk of surnames was quickly forgotten.

Their days passed like that. Quiet and unkempt, and for the most part, more lovely than Remus could’ve ever imagined. It turned out easier than he’d originally thought to keep Sirius hidden; with the master of the house gone most days, no one bothered with Remus, not as long as

he returned home at a reasonable hour and got his chores done. There weren't many chores in a house with so many hired hands, which meant that his own hands were almost always free to do as he pleased. This usually involved touching Sirius, which he did, often.

By their second week together, Remus was sure there wasn't an inch of his best friend left that he'd yet to kiss or touch. He spent every waking hour drinking in the sight of him, until he had every bit of Sirius permanently committed to memory. Sirius was always handsome—beautiful even, as his perfect Black family genes made so—but even he was not without his own menial, cosmetic flaws. Aside from the scars and the shying bald patch, Sirius had a slightly wonky hairline, only visible when he pushed his long fringe out of the way. Then there was that grazed chip in one of his upper canines, courtesy of James and a boxing match gone awry in their eighth year. Remus had also discovered early on, the small constellation of moles on his back.

"James is always saying that I should get them looked at," Sirius said. "His dad had a friend who died of skin cancer or something."

"You've shown James your back like this?"

Sirius looked at him. They were naked again, save just their pants—playing cards and smoking around the velvet chaise. "I assure you, I have never shown James my back like *this."*

The reply had left Remus feeling like a bit of a dolt. Of course Sirius and James had never… *James wasn't queer. James liked girls.* But then again… didn't he and Sirius also like girls? Remus was almost sure that he did. Sirius was just different. Liking Sirius didn't make him a homosexual; liking Sirius was simply a state of being. If anything it made him a person with eyes. A Siriusexual.

Ugh… idiot.

No matter the hour or their current state of dress, the subject of their friends came up a lot. It was only natural, and Remus never minded. As happy as he was to finally have Sirius all to himself, he still missed the others who made up their merry band of messers. Lily had called twice that first week, first to check in, and second to lambaste him for not picking up for said check in. (He'd been thoroughly occupied by an exceedingly hot snogging session at the time.)

"I just wish you'd agreed to go to Devon with James and Peter," Lily had sighed into the phone, when she'd actually managed to get ahold

of him. Ever the nosy prat, Sirius snickered behind delighted fingers after leaning in from the other side to have a listen, and Remus gave an embarrassed huff.

“Why is everyone treating me like I need a babysitter?”

“It’s the moody attitude,” Sirius whispered.

Fuck off, Remus mouthed.

“You don’t need a babysitter, Remus,” Lily said into the phone, “but isn’t it better to be with friends than to be on your own?”

“Aren’t *you* alone? Or have you forgiven Snape after all this time.”

“Don’t be nasty. I’ve got Pet.”

“Ah. And how is sweet Petunia doing?”

“Terrible. Vernon still hasn’t proposed. I think she’s likely to kill him if they’re not at least engaged by Christmas. He’s pretty traditional—”

“That’s code for ‘stuffy bleeder with a steel pole up his arse’,” Sirius added, helpfully.

“—So Pet’s still living at home. Mum drives her up the wall most days —Dad the rest—and she hates the women’s college.” Lily’s voice grew very quiet, as though she were covering the receiver with her palm; “She still hasn’t told them, but she withdrew from the secretarial program. She’s been going to her girlfriends’ houses during class hours to avoid fessing up.”

“Wow. Can’t say I really blame her.”

“Remus! *Tch* … Anyway, it’s just been rather slow-going ever since James left. I’ve already been to the library over a dozen times, and I finished all my summer homework weeks ago. How’s yours going by the way?”

“Ah, yeah… s’great. Nnn… Almost finished.”

“How’d you find the essay?”

“Fine…”

“Have you heard from Sirius at all then? I just talked to James yesterday, and he's still totally beside himself. Have you talked with

him lately?"

"Uh…"

Hang up, Sirius mouthed sharply. Then he made a very crude gesture with his hand and mouth, and got up to leave. Remus watched him go, lips slightly ajar.

"Hey, Lily… I think I've gotta go…"

That had been a Sunday, which had quickly become Remus' favourite day of the week. Lyall had started giving the entire staff the day off, and he and Sandra were almost always off somewhere. Even Giles would take the chance to head down to the local pitch or pub to catch a game. This left him and Sirius with free rein of the house, which they took full advantage of, lounging around the furnishings and cooking for themselves.

"Would it kill them to play something half-decent?" Sirius complained after the phone call. While Remus busied himself with making lunch, he continued fiddling with the kitchen radio's dial. It seemed as though every station in London was playing the same disco pop. "Ugh, I give up," Sirius moaned eventually, abandoning the radio to join Remus by the stovetop.

"You couldn't have given up on something more bearable?" Remus asked. Sirius had left the radio playing a Donna Summer song, which only had about three words to the entire thing.

'Ooh I feel love, I feel love,
I feel love, I feel love,
I feel love…'

Sirius smirked, wrapping his arms around Remus from behind. It felt very intimate, like the way James was always holding Lily. Except he and Sirius weren't dating. They were just doing… *this.*

"You smell good," Sirius murmured, fitting his face into the crook of Remus' neck.

"Mm, yes well, we did shower today."

“Right, how could I forget? You, with your *dashing* curls all dripping, practically *glistening* in the light.” Sirius blew on the side of his neck, and Remus could barely resist a shudder.

“You’re a menace,” he muttered.

“I try.”

Sirius pressed himself flush against his back and Remus bit his lip. The kitchen really wasn’t an ideal place, but if Sirius wanted to, then…

Sirius *tsked* suddenly, shattering all of Remus’ sinful thoughts.

“Moony, you’re burning the eggs.”

“Am not!” Remus used the spatula to lift the sunny-side egg up. He found it more than just a little well-done. “I was distracted,” he said indignantly.

“By what?”

You, obviously. “Your shit taste in music.”

‘Ooh you and me, you and me,
You and me, you and me,
You and me…’

Sirius scoffed and released him, snatching the spatula and attempting to save the eggs himself. It became apparent quickly that they were unsalvageable, and so they tossed the ruined pan in the sink and had beans on toast instead.

“Lily's right. I think we should call James,” Remus said later, in between bites. They’d taken up two seats in the extravagant Lupin dining room, lounging in the high-backed chairs and feasting on their peasant food.

“Nah,” Sirius answered. “No need.”

“He and Peter are worried about you. Lying to Lily’s one thing, but they deserve to know you’re alright.”

“That eager to be rid of me, are you?”

“No! I just… I promised James I would let him know as soon as I heard from you, and I’ve *more* than heard from you.”

“That’s for sure.” Sirius paused to suck the butter from his thumb, eyeing him suggestively. Under the table, he drew his foot up the inside of Remus’ calf.

“Don’t try to distract me,” Remus grumbled, knocking the foot away.

“I’m not. I’m eating, clearly.” Sirius took a large bite. “You just like to worry. It’s your default setting—*Mooning Moony.”*

“If you weren’t so easy to worry about…”

Sirius smirked, sipping his glass of water. A second later the foot was back on Remus’ thigh, sliding higher and higher. “When did you say your dad would be back?”

Remus swallowed. “Around six.”

Sirius glanced at the grandfather clock along the far wall. It was barely noon. “Well, I’d say that’s just enough time…”

Just like that, all talk of school was over with again. Remus told himself to stop the incessant worrying and to enjoy it—enjoy what Sirius was giving him. Whatever it was. They could figure out the rest later, hopefully when things felt less unsure. For now... *enjoy it.*

And with that behind him, filling their days quickly proved to be tricky and uncomplicated at the same time. They continued going out when it suited them, and ended up catching more than one show. Nothing lived up to the fanatical thrill of the Sex Pistol’s concert bash, but every bit of it was fun. They laughed and danced and got drunk, and for all their talk of music while at school, the subject of ‘Marauders’ came up very little. It was almost as though they were on vacation from a profession that they didn’t have yet. There was no pressure to write their own songs, they simply wasted away the hours listening to others’. On these days, Remus let himself imagine that they were already famous musicians, taking time off as a retreat from the endless days and nights on the road or else in the recording studio. Sirius still played his guitar everyday, and Remus was content to sit back and listen.

“What shall I play today?” Sirius would ask.

“Play Queen,” Remus would answer.

“What shall I play today?” Sirius would ask the day after.

“Play some Stones,” Remus would answer.

“And what shall I play today?” Sirius had asked that morning.

“ … Your heart.”

Sirius had laughed at him, and Remus had just watched him do it, so in love it was pathetic.

Music had always been a safe space for the two of them. And so when they weren’t desecrating public spaces with gross amounts of affection, they played their favourite songs to pass the time. Guitar or records, it didn’t matter. Sirius was thrilled to have the little piece of his collection Remus had brought home with him and he played each album on low volume at all hours. It was brilliant (even if they did sometimes argue over the snogging song) mostly because it felt different from any other summer spent at the estate, when Remus had used music to escape from reality out of desperation. Playing music with Sirius became grounding in all the best ways. It brought him back to earth and comforted him, and on those precious days when his father was out and very few people were around, they gathered up the courage to venture downstairs to the music room where Hope Lupin had once sat by the window and wasted away.

Setting a chair against the door just in case, they opened the windows and let new life inside, creating a private world just for themselves. Being down there was hard for Remus because it’d been hard for Hope, and it was difficult for Sirius because the piano reminded him of every mistake that led to being disowned by his own family. Sirius hadn’t said anything on the subject for a long while, but Remus eventually figured out that that’s what had happened. Even if there was some slight chance that the Blacks hadn’t officially disowned him, there was no way Sirius could return. Walburga Black’s fury was violent on the best of days, and the school in Belgium was the final straw—there was nothing left for him at the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black anymore.

“Hey, it’s fine,” Sirius said nonchalantly, whenever Remus thought to bring up school. “Maybe I’ll just live in a little hut in the village. That way you guys can sneak out to see me on the weekends and we can practice. Dunno how the acoustics’ll be, but it’ll be better than practising over the phone from Belgium.”

From his spot next to the piano, Remus looked up at Sirius very

sharply. He had Andy's guitar slung over his lap and was currently rubbing his raw fingertips on his trousers. He missed the heaviness of the Fender's strings. The acoustic's thinner nylon made his fingertips feel like they were being sliced to ribbons.

"What are you talking about?" He asked. "What 'hut'?"

Sirius seemingly ignored him, letting his fingers dance lightly up the keys in a pretty sequence of notes; "I'll tell you one thing though," he mused, "I'm *not* looking forward to getting a job."

"Why would you want a job?" Remus demanded, more forceful this time.

"Well, if I'm to not go back to school then I gotta at least find something to do with myself."

"What do you mean 'not going back to school'?"

Sirius *had* to go back to school! They only had a year left, and Remus couldn't imagine setting foot in that dorm room without him.

"Lots of people leave school after year twelve," Sirius shrugged. "Honestly, save me the headache of A-Levels."

"But what about James and Peter? And the girls?"

"They'll understand."

"Okay, how 'bout—*I* don't understand. You could get decent marks without even trying, and your friends are all there, so why not go back?"

"My parents disowned me, Moony—or good as. I won't go back."

"I'm not telling you to back to *them,* but I still don't see why you couldn't come back to school with me—I mean, with *us."*

Sirius hit a wrong note and flinched at the sound, before letting out a rather forced chuckle. "Do you know how much it costs to attend Hawkings for a single term?"

He didn't, at least not exactly, so Remus kept quiet.

"I don't have my inheritance from Uncle Al yet. So how am I supposed to pay the tuition fees?"

“James or me!” He blurted then. “We could get the money—easy!”

“Alright, say you actually manage to get the money together then—what’s to stop McGonagall from writing home and telling my parents exactly where I am? And then on the off-chance they haven’t actually disowned me, they’ll have me hauled back to Bath faster than I can blink, and there would be *nothing* any of you could do to stop it.”

“We could hide you.”

“Hide?” Sirius echoed. “At Hawkings? No. I’m not gonna hide in my own home.”

Remus lowered his gaze to the floor like a cowardly dog. He needed Sirius to come back with him desperately, but he didn’t know how to convince him.

“It’ll be fine,” Sirius continued. “I just gotta find something else until I turn eighteen and get that inheritance. It’s only a few months, really. Reckon that pretty broad from the pub in town would let out one of those rooms upstairs on an I-owe-you?”

“Not unless you can remember her name,” Remus grumbled.

“Ruth? Ruthie? Rachel…? Nah, it’s definitely something with an ‘e’. Hm, Ruby? Riley? Oh wait—Rosie!”

“How can your perfect memory be this subjective?” Sighing, Remus stood up and leaned the guitar against the wall. “You gotta come back with us, Sirius.”

“Why?” Sirius asked. His hands were relaxed in his lap but his back was perfectly straight, as it always was when he sat down in front of the grand instrument. A habit, Remus assumed. “I already said, plenty ‘a kids don’t do their final year, and I don’t plan on going to uni after so what’s the point?”

Remus pressed his lips together.

“Well, what about… us?”

“You mean the band? Aren’t you listening? I just told you that we—”

“No, I mean ‘us’ us, Sirius… I mean *this*. Everything we’ve been doing.”

Sirius’ lips parted. “Oh.”

“You haven’t even thought about it, have you?”

“ ‘Course I have. Give me a little credit...”

Grinding his teeth together, Remus began tracing his fingers along the sleek lines of the piano. There was only one thing left he could think of to try to convince him.

“I… like you,” he said finally. “I like doing… this.”

“I know,” Sirius smirked. “Feels pretty good for me too.”

“I would keep doing it… when we got back to school. A-As long as you would want to… too…”

Rather than answering, Sirius set his fingers back on the piano and started up a brisk and lively tempo while he spoke; “I dunno,” he called over the music; “I’m not really sure I want to play tag all year.”

“What do you mean?”

Sirius’ cadence increased and he kept his eyes trained on the keys. “I mean that I’m not interested in rehashing what I had with Miles, that’s all. What’s the point of all *this* if it don’t really mean anything?”

A spike of jealousy dug into the centre of Remus’ chest. Ever since that first night they’d been dancing around the subject of Miles—him too nervous to broach the subject and Sirius almost unwilling to even attempt it. Now it felt like a slap to the face.

“Who said it had to be like with Miles? And who said it didn’t *mean anything?”*

Sirius stopped playing abruptly and the piano’s music choked out like it’d hit a wall. “You mean you’re just going to announce what we’ve been doing to everyone? Could you even do that?”

Remus froze up, hands splayed on top of the grand piano.

No, of course you can’t. If it doesn’t ruin this, it’d certainly ruin something else. You’re already the freak—the delinquent with a dead mum, swimming along in a sea of sparkling gentry. Do you really need to be a bloody queer too?

Unable to answer truthfully, Remus quickly switched gears;

“Would you? … Announce it?”

Sirius obviously hadn't been expecting him to turn the question around. He wrung his wrists a bit, as though they were sore. "Obviously not… I'm not an idiot."

"Then I don't see why we can't—"

"Right, exactly," Sirius interrupted; "Let's just enjoy it now, while it lasts."

"I am enjoying it," Remus said firmly. "But we at least should talk about this, shouldn't we?"

"Talk about what?"

Remus could feel that biting anger of his creeping back in. "About us," he practically snarled. "About how much I like you!"

Sirius looked up at him. Bits of hair had fallen from the braid Remus had done himself just that morning. "... You like me?"

"I just bloody-well told you that I did, didn't I?!"

Sirius got that delighted look in his eye, similar to when he was plotting a prank. "Really?"

"Am I speaking English? Or do you sleep with everyone without checking that they actually like you first?"

"Jesus." Sirius slumped back on the piano stool, almost bemusing. "If you're going to slut-shame me you might as well do the courtesy of fucking me beforehand."

"I have been—*plenty."*

Impossibly, Sirius' expression grew even cheekier. "Yeah… s'pose you have."

"... Ngh… Well?" Remus fidgeted. "What do you think?"

"I think I like you too."

Remus couldn't keep the relief from his voice; "You do?"

"Yeah, have for a while." Sirius licked his lips. "You?"

"A while," Remus agreed, laughing nervously.

“So what’s this mean? That you wanna date me? Be my… boyfriend?”

Oh fuck. Boyfriend?

‘Boyfriend’ was not a term Remus had thought to contend with before then. Maybe if he had, he would’ve been able to keep the shock from his face when Sirius said it.

“Uhm…”

Wooooooow… a new pet name! How cute. Tell me, ‘boyfriend’, which is more queer, that or ‘Mooning Moony’? But ooh, best be quick, your boyfriend’s *waiting.*

Remus stifled the voice. “I—uhm… ‘boyfriend’ s'just a bit…”

“Never mind,” Sirius said very quickly, waving him off like the entire thing had been a bad joke. “I was just talkin’ out my arse. Bit naff, right? I mean look at you, you’d probably be a shite boyfriend anyway.”

“Oi,” Remus said, offended.

“Bet McKinnon would agree.”

Remus held his tongue. It surely wasn’t the best time to have the ‘mutual breakup’ argument, and besides, the teasing just felt like Sirius’ way of bandaging a wound anyway. Like self-preservation.

“I really like you,” he said instead.

“It’s fine, Moony.”

“But I—”

“I get it,” Sirius said, as though he’d already finished mourning all of it. “Let’s just enjoy the summer. We can figure the rest of it out later. Mm?” Mirroring what Remus had been telling himself for days, Sirius flashed a warm smile and started playing again. This time Remus recognised the song, but Sirius put a jazzy spin on it that made it all the better.

“So what do you think,” Sirius called over the music, “is there a chance Miss Rosie’s lookin’ for a cute little bar-boy? Or well, I suppose there’s only a point in going back up north to the middle of bum-fuck nowhere if you guys still wanted to come see me. I’d get it if this were to change stuff.”

“I’d come and see you,” Remus replied without hesitation; “ ‘Course I would.”

Sirius smiled down at the keys. *“ ‘I want to hold your haaaand—I want to hold your hand’,”* he sang, then; “Moony, give me a kiss?”

Unable to help himself, Remus leaned over the keys and pressed his lips to Sirius’, who didn’t miss a single note as he did so.

“I suppose there is one serious downside to all this,” Sirius murmured as they parted.

Remus’ heart jumped badly. His first thought was, *only one?*

“And what’s that?”

“Going back to school… be bloody difficult to have you like *this* whenever I wanted.”

Oh! Oh...

“I dunno about that, you’re creative.”

“You saying we could manage?” The corners of Sirius’ eyes crinkled fondly. “We’d be living with two other blokes, ya know.”

“… Maybe I should just tell Dad I’m not going back either then,” Remus answered, licking his lips longingly. Sirius didn’t miss the gesture and suddenly his hands weren’t playing piano anymore, but grabbing Remus’ collar and pulling him for another hungry kiss—then another, each one more desperate than the last. Remus’ mouth opened automatically, allowing Sirius the heat he wanted. Kissing was as easy as breathing nowadays. Neither of them ever seemed to get tired of it.

Yes, this is it. This was the easy part. No talking, just *this.*

Dropping down onto the piano bench next to him, Remus slid his fingers up into the loose ponytail at the base of Sirius’ neck. It fell apart under his fingers, but Sirius only gave a low moan. Pushing closer, he snaked his hand down between them, pressing it against the crotch of Remus’ jeans. Unable to help himself, Remus surged forward and covered Sirius with his entire body, pinning him against the piano bench. As he did so, his hand slipped on the slick leather and he collapsed down on top of him, breaking their kiss and making Sirius give a very different type of moan.

“OOF! … Fuck, ha-ha!”

“Yep,” Remus grunted, “this ain’t working.” He glanced up at the piano next to them and considered. A second later he was jutting his head in the instrument’s direction. “Get up there.”

Sirius followed the look. “You mean do that on your mother’s piano? You’re such a fiend.”

Half-grinning, Remus slid his arms under Sirius’ thighs and lifted him upright on the bench. As Sirius wrapped his arms around his neck, he leaned in and gently nipped at the sensitive skin under his ear. “What is it you’re always saying?” Remus murmured; “ ‘Get on me’?”

Sirius gave a little gasp, both scandalised and obviously aroused; “Ah, ah, ahh—I warn you, you are playing a very dangerous game, Remus Dean.”

Remus ignored the nickname, and pulled away to blink lazily up at him. “I think I like my odds.”

Scoffing over a smirk, Sirius kissed him again and took his tongue between his teeth, toying with him as Remus cradled him by the tender skin of his hips. Sirius moaned into his mouth faintly and a sudden surge of desire washed over Remus. He nudged Sirius’ knees apart, gathering him into his lap and fisting the back of his trousers to grind their waists together. The shape of Sirius’ hardness stood pronounced against the base of his stomach, and like always, it didn’t feel the least bit queer. Funny how those feelings all disappeared the moment they stopped talking about them.

“You locked the door, right?” Sirius asked, his voice husky with equal parts want and need.

“Mhm.”

“Good. Take off your shirt.”

“Take it off for me.”

Sirius laughed, and quickly manoeuvred his hands between them to begin his fight with the top buttons. He took each one slowly at first, as if to tease him, but as he neared the middle Sirius grew more frustrated.

“Fuck this,” he huffed, grabbing the shirt by its edges and tearing it

wide open. The leftover buttons scattered around the room with tiny pings, and Remus looked down at his bare chest in shock.

“You ripped my shirt.”

“Give me four months, I'll buy you a new one,” Sirius replied, quickly tugging his own t-shirt up over his head and tossing it behind the piano. Completely bare save for his trousers, Remus couldn’t help but stare. Sirius was so beautiful. No Greek statue could compare. Gently, as though he really were two-thousand year-old marble waiting to crumble, Remus reached out and touched him. He let his fingers glide down over Sirius’ shoulders and collarbone, to the soft ridges of his chest, then nipples. His ribs, which were less pronounced than Remus’ own, felt like smooth ladders under his palms, and when he reached the subtle dip of his waist and cupped him there, Sirius shuddered.

“I like you,” Remus said, leaning in to kiss him. Sirius evaded the kiss, smirking.

“I know,” he said.

Remus laughed. “Dick.”

“Hm… Speaking of which.” He palmed Remus through his jeans again and Remus couldn’t help the noise that escaped him. “Oh, Moony,” Sirius chuckled, kissing his chest, “little eenie-meenie Moony… When you gonna make good on that promise?”

Remus’ breath hitched. Sirius was still caressing him through his jeans.

“Wha—What promise?”

Sirius’ wicked tongue snaked upwards, across the hollow of his throat, over his jaw, and landing very sensually on the shell of his ear. “Are you gonna bend me over that piano or what?”

Remus’ eyes shot wide. *Oh fuck yes—*

“Or I could bend you over it,” Sirius offered just as quickly, leaning back to snap at the air over his nose with his teeth.

“Easy,” Remus warned, squeezing a handful of each hip, “else I’m gonna ruin you.”

Sirius’ eyes flashed with giddy desire. “Then get to it, you bloody

prat."

Something deep within Remus' stomach snapped like a whip. He stood up abruptly and Sirius practically fell off of him, almost laughing as he skirted around the side of the piano. There he stopped, draping himself there with both elbows pressed back against the instrument's shiny black surface. Remus was before him a second later, ready to worship him like a god. It was not an exaggeration to say that Sirius could've asked for anything in that moment and Remus wouldn't have had the sense or want to deny him, but instead he simply cocked his head to the side with a single suggestive look, and reached for the waistband of his trousers.

"Shall I turn around then?"

Remus felt his mouth run dry. He was never going to be able to look at a piano the same way again.

* * *

Early August, 1977

They'd finally said it then.

I like you.

Remus could hardly believe it. *I like you!*

The 'boyfriend' bit had derailed them some, but not so much that they weren't still falling into one another every chance they got. It made hiding out almost easier. All Remus wanted to do was stay in bed and wrap himself in everything Sirius. His touch, his smell, his… *like.* And judging by his eagerness, Sirius felt the same. Eventually they lapsed into a routine of it; sleep by day, play all through the night. It didn't always involve sex, sometimes it was just talk, and then there was so much music and TV to catch up on that they were never bored. It was these times that Remus was able to reassure himself that no matter what had changed between them, they were still friends. Which was good; Remus could see himself getting away with hiding a friend in his bedroom—but a boyfriend? No way.

As stupid as it sounded, Remus didn't really entertain the idea of getting caught until he began to notice the way the estate's staff

would eye him as he left or entered a room. Unsolicited knocking on his bedroom door had become more frequent, and every time Remus had gone to check it was usually Carsten or some maid, simply trying to 'check in' on him. It was infuriating and nerve-wracking all at once, and Remus was starting to get to his wit's end. He couldn't be sure if his father had told them to be more conscious of his comings and goings, but one of the maids had already made an off-hand comment of how his daily trouser-usage had suddenly doubled. It was probably only supposed to be a friendly observation, but Remus went back to hiding his laundry and dishes anyway. He did them at night, when no one was around and Sirius could sneak out with him for something to do.

The cherry on top had come when he and Sirius were lounging around in bed late one afternoon, as per the usual. They weren't even doing anything especially outrageous, but Remus was supposed to have gone out with Giles for a driving lesson and he'd skived off to stay in bed. If it weren't for Dusty, barking when he heard the key turn in the door's lock, they might have actually been caught; but the two seconds of warning had been enough for Sirius to throw a blanket over himself and Remus to dive on top of him like he were a lump of pillows.

"GET OUT!" He shrieked, just as the maid walked in. The shout upset her so badly that she dropped a bucket of mop water across the floor, which she immediately began to fret over. Remus had to scream at her again just to get her to leave, and she fled with fear written across her face. He felt bad later on—the maid was just doing her job—but as he pulled back the blanket to reveal a laughing Sirius, he knew he'd done the right thing.

"I don't want anyone going into my room," he ordered later, chin held high and practically fuming. "In fact, stop sending people up altogether. I don't need any of you to check in on me like I'm some child."

Carsten, the head butler now that the last one had gone, bowed his head respectfully. Remus didn't know if the butler before him had been fired or left of his own accord, and he didn't care, he just needed Sirius safe.

"I understand. Marjorie didn't realise you'd stayed in for the day," Carsten said. "Shall I just send one maid in during the afternoon to change the linens then?"

"No—*none,"* Remus said firmly. "I can change my own sheets, and

clean my own room. I just want to be left alone. Why is that so hard for the rest of you to understand?"

"It's simply your father's wish that we—"

"I'll handle my father, the rest of you just stay away from me."

Remus could practically see it in the man's eyes—*brat.*

Good, let him think it. He didn't want a butler in the first place.

"And no one is to *ever* go into my room when I'm out. It's an invasion of privacy."

Carsten nodded grimly. He probably just thought he was hiding drugs (he was—but that was hardly the point), which when compared to the risk of losing one's livelihood, wasn't as intriguing as initially thought. So all the butler said was "Very good, sir." And the conversation was over.

After the close-call and his ensuing outburst, all of the maids did start leaving Remus alone, and he and Sirius were allowed some peace for a little while. It might've stayed that way for the rest of the summer, had they not been forgetting one very crucial detail.

"OI! I HOPE YOU'VE GOT YER PANTS ON BECAUSE I'M COMING IN!"

True to his word, Giles immediately came barrelling into his bedroom a few seconds later, practically blowing the door off the hinges. Remus had just enough time to throw his lit cigarette into the ashtray on his side table and wrench the bed curtains shut to hide Sirius from view. He wasn't even wearing a shirt—his lips still felt warm from the kiss Sirius had given him not ten seconds ago.

"Giles, ever try *knocking?!"* He seethed, face as red as a tomato. *Had he seen anything? Did he already know?!*

"Privacy is reserved for those who have the decency to keep to their word!" Giles lashed, coming inside and marching over to the radio, which he turned off with a sharp flick of his wrist. "You were supposed to be out on the driveway over twenty minutes ago!"

Remus sighed in irritation. "I'm not going today."

"You're not going today—or yesterday, or the day before that, and the

day before that!" Giles began listing each missed driving lesson off on his fingers like a shopping list. "Honestly, you sit around here all day like some grubby lout, and you can't even have the decency to walk down those stairs and tell me you're not coming yourself!"

"I told Carsten to tell you!"

"And I told you—unless you're paying Carsten's wages, he ain't your bloody errand boy!"

"Well, what else is he supposed to be?"

Giles marched forward and smacked Remus upside the head. He was tall enough now that the old man had to reach up to do it, but it still smarted.

"Ow! What was that fucking for?"

"First the car and now you've been smoking in here too? I'm trying to keep you humble! Do you know how hard those lasses work to keep this house neat and the beds tidy? What—you want to waste all their hard work by letting the smell of your blasted cancer-sticks seep into everything including the bloody paint?"

"No, actually. The guy I bought them off assured me that they'd smell like daisies and chamomile."

Giles smacked him again, none too gently. "What's a'matter with you—all this lip suddenly? I didn't raise such an ungrateful whelp. You claim you don't want anyone in here—that you're man enough to make your own bed and yet I come in to find this!"

Before he could be stopped, Giles reached over and threw the bed curtains aside. Remus just about shrieked, but what he found was only a mess of rumpled sheets, pillows, and another ashtray with a single smoking cigarette in the middle of it all—no Sirius in sight.

"Explain this," Giles ordered. "Don't look like no made bed to me."

Remus clapped a hand to his forehead in relief. To Giles it must've looked like annoyance; he crossed his arms with an irate expression.

"Okay fine, I'll make the damn bed," Remus swore.

"Are you depressed, son?"

"What?! No!"

“Then what’s been going on with you? You used to be outside all hours of the day—couldn’t very well get you to come home most times. Now you never leave this room.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted!” Remus snapped. “For me to come home so you could all satisfy your own ego and feel like you’re doing a half-decent job at parenting me! So you could bitch without a phone in the way!”

Giles’ frown deepened. “You’re gonna swear at me now? Fine. Gimme your cigarettes.”

“Oh c’mon, Gil—”

“You heard me, hand ‘em over. You can have ‘em back when you’ve proven you can take care of your things and keep up with your commitments like a proper ‘man’.”

Huffing like a child, Remus reached across the bed, patting around the covers until he found the half-empty carton tucked haphazardly underneath. He scowled as he clapped them down into the driver’s hand. Satisfied, Giles squashed the cigarettes in his fist before pointing a finger straight at Remus’ nose.

“Don’t think this means I’m just gonna let you laze about all day like some little skiver. You best be downstairs in five minutes. And comb your hair, you look like you stuck a fork in a wall socket.”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Remus just waited until Giles had turned and marched for the door. He grabbed the door handle and swung it closed before pointing his finger once more as a threat. *“Five minutes,”* he warned, before shutting the door.

After counting to ten to make sure he’d gone, Remus sighed heavily and immediately spun around. He picked up the bed covers, throwing them in the air like he might find Sirius hiding beneath them, but still nothing.

“Sirius?!”

“Under here,” a voice sniggered.

With a sigh of relief, Remus dropped to his stomach to find Sirius tucked up under the bed, his chin resting on his hands like a dog.

“That’s some tough love, love,” Sirius tsked, then; “I thought you said

your dad never hit you?"

"Well, obviously Giles ain't my dad," Remus scoffed, offering Sirius a hand.

"Anyone ever tell him that?"

Before Remus could respond, Sirius had taken his hand and tugged him halfway under the bed. He met his lips with a kiss, which quickly spiralled into a bout of snogging that took much longer than the five minutes he'd been allotted. When he'd finally emerged onto the drive Giles was furious, but Remus couldn't wipe the dopey grin from his face.

"You really need to watch yourself on those roundabouts," Giles said after the lesson, when Remus had gotten out and chucked him the keys.

"That Volkswagen came out of nowhere," Remus countered, turning to make a dash for the estate's front steps. He was just itching to be inside. They'd gone all the way to Hammersmith and back and the entire time he could think of nothing but Sirius. He hoped he wasn't too bored waiting for him. They'd talked about heading into the city again, which might've been a fine idea had the house not seemed so busy all of a sudden. Sirius had off-handedly mentioned a round of strip poker that morning. Maybe they could just… *mhm*…

As he was off daydreaming, Remus passed a large white lorry parked at the head of the driveway. A team of four men were unloading what appeared to be lumber and metal sheeting, creating a large mess that blocked most of the stairs. At the head of the group, methodically directing the entire operation, was Sandra. Paired with a floppy wide-brimmed sun hat, she was wearing dungarees and bulky work boots, as though she were ready to dive head-first into a gardening project. Remus half-suspected that she were, at least based off of the various array of building goods; but as he let his curiosity distract him Sandra spun around herself, and simultaneously broke into a wide grin.

"Remus! I'd heard you and Giles took the car out," she exclaimed, before stopping to direct the moving team; "Yes, that's it lads. All of this has to go down to the stables." She turned back to Remus; "So, how'd the lesson go?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Is that your favourite word? 'Fine'?" She teased.

He shrugged indifferently. "It's one of them."

Undeterred by his dismissive attitude, Sandra leaned in with a sly look. “Is Giles a good teacher, or does he mostly cling to the door handle and scream blue murder?”

“... Bit of both, actually.”

“Ah. I remember the days, my dad was *just* like that when he was teaching me to drive. Worse even. Though, I probably deserved it. I put his favourite Italian coupe in a ditch on my first go.”

She smiled like it was some genius inside joke, but Remus just nodded amicably and looked away. He wanted to get back to Sirius, and even if Sandra wasn’t the most terrible person to grace their good earth, she was still marrying his dad.

“Remus, would you help me with something?”

He looked back to her. Even with her hair done in glamorous golden waves, she felt juxtaposed. Her clothes didn’t match, nor did her fancy sports car or kind eyes or generally upbeat attitude. And yet she’d made herself fit. Remus didn’t get it. The estate had always been a cold place, no matter the time of year, and Sandra felt warm.

“What is it?” He asked, rubbing the side of his neck.

She flashed those kind eyes at him. “Follow me.”

He wanted to complain, but also got the feeling that she expected him to, and so Remus kept his mouth shut. He let Sandra lead him across the vast green lawn, past the dog kennels where several trainers were walking hounds on sixty-foot leads for their daily show of exercise. There she’d had him pick up a hay bale that was at least double his size around the middle.

“Can you manage? They are about sixty pounds each.”

Already struggling after just a few steps, Remus glanced over at her. Sandra was carrying her own bale with ease, as though she were used to the grunt-work.

“Yeah… ngh… *got it…”*

Sandra hummed contently and then was off again, meandering casually in the direction of the horse stables and leaving Remus to

toddle precariously behind her.

“I’d meant to have the hay dropped off here, but they must’ve mistaken the kennels for the stables,” Sandra said, dropping the bale down outside the stables’ grand white doors and dusting her hands. Remus was several pathetic steps behind her, and when he finally dropped his own load next to hers, he collapsed onto it, breathing hard.

“Dunno how…” he wheezed; “the dogs are… so noisy…”

“I thought the same thing!” Tipping her head back so she could see past the brim of her hat, Sandra squinted up at the impressive building. The entire thing was built out of pine, creating a long ‘L’ shape along the estate’s eastern side. It was more out of the way than the garages or kennel, and Remus liked it that way. Inside he could hear the horses’ normal baying and the occasional whinny. The Lupins didn’t have many horses, but money was old, and horses would always be money. Lyall’s mother, Remus’ grandmother, had supposedly kept many more, but they’d been sold off to other more interested buyers when she’d passed on. Though that had been ages before Remus was born.

“Are you… looking to expand the stables then?” He asked. There was another fresh pile of lumber sitting next to the stable’s outer wall, and several feet of grass had been dug up and replaced with new posts as thick as two men put together.

“I am!” Sandra replied. “Your stables are beautiful, but I’m afraid not all of my girls would fit, and I wouldn’t want to get rid of any of your horses.”

“Not my horses.” He didn’t even know most of their names. “Get rid of ‘em if you want. Or sell them. It’s whatever…”

“Oh no, I couldn’t do that. This is their home.” She gestured for the stable door. “Shall we go in then? Say hello?”

Remus shook his head. “Still don’t like horses much.”

Sandra dropped her arm immediately, accepting the boundary he’d given her without the slightest thought. He could tell though that he’d upset some sort of plan. Clearly there was more on her mind than just a stable expansion and a few stray bales of hay.

“Did you know, Remus,” she started, “that horses can hear a human

heartbeat from as far as four metres away? It's why they call them the mirrors of the soul—they feel your every intention before you even know what it is yourself." Smiling wistfully now, Sandra lifted one foot and placed it on the edge of her hay bale, leaning into it. "When I was a little girl, my father taught me two things—or three, I suppose. How to drive, how to swing a hammer… and to bring a horse with me whenever I made a deal that had a chance of running sour."

"I at least hope the last one was useful."

"Ha! Yes, actually. I took my favourite mare with me the day I signed the deed to my first house. We ended up having to do it in the front garden, and that's when I realised the entire foundation was rotted… heh, s'a bit silly… But my point is—horses always know when you're being truthful. They see it inside you. Turn you honest."

Because he wanted to be difficult, Remus said; "I dunno, just sounded like dumb luck… noticing the foundation, that is."

Sandra just smiled again, perhaps even a bit wider this time. *God, why did she have to be so nice?*

"Alright, I see what you mean, and I'll stop going on about horses, but I'm still left wondering… if the two of us can be honest with each other?"

Oh. Right then… It was one of *those* conversations. It'd be a lie to say that Remus hadn't been expecting it. Adults never talked to kids or teenagers just to 'talk', there always had to be some sort of catch… some bloody lesson.

"This about you and my dad gettin' hitched?" He asked. The least he could do was make her slightly uncomfortable too.

Sandra nodded her head in earnest. "It is. What do you think of it?"

Remus almost didn't have an answer. Lyall never asked his opinion on anything, things just simple *were,* and it was up to him to get with the program or be left behind. He usually didn't mind it as much, but if being left behind meant he wouldn't get to go back to Hawkings, then he might as well be honest.

"Truthfully? I don't give a rat's arse," he said. "Marry whoever you want."

It obviously wasn't the answer she'd been looking for, but Remus

suddenly didn't feel much like pandering. Disappointed, Sandra paused for a moment before meeting his eye again. "I see. Well, I appreciate your honesty. But I want you to know that I won't change anything without your permission either. It's still your home, Remus."

"You're moving in without my permission, aren't you?"

"Oh." Sandra let out a stilted laugh. "Alright, so that is quite the change, I'll agree that you have me there. Let me rephrase then—I won't… or… I will *try* to keep things the same. I don't want you to think that I'm coming in here to upset everything you and your father have. I simply want to add to it. But if you veto something—that's it, it's gone. No need for an explanation, I won't even question it. I'm not trying to replace your mother."

Because he was cruel, Remus said; "You couldn't."

She nodded earnestly. "I understand. Hope was very kind, you know. I didn't know her all that well, just the odd lunch-in. But she was always such a glowing woman. She spoke about you a lot—to anyone who'd listen. About her little boy... When we heard she'd grown sick we were all so upset."

Remus said nothing. *'We were upset'?* He didn't even know who 'we' was.

"Did you really drag me out here to talk about my dead mum, Sandra?"

"Oh… no. I'm sorry." Sandra knotted her fingers together with unease. "There was more to it, but I won't keep you. I just… I would really like it if we could be a family, Remus. You and your father, I've grown very fond of you both."

Remus let out a sigh, pushing himself to his feet. How was he to tell her that they hadn't even been a family before? That there was no 'you and your father'?

"Could we do that?" Sandra asked again. "Could we try to be a family? ... Would you let me be a part of your family?"

Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look Sandra—Sandy, whatever… I really don't care. Change what you want, make your family, I just want to be left alone."

Sandra sighed quietly, upset, and Remus had to fight the urge to feel

guilty. *Whatever pain this is, keep it. I've enough of my own.*

“You’re a good boy, Remus,” she said, almost surprising him. “Thank you for your kindness.”

He’d been anything but kind, but Sandra hadn’t really meant it that way anyway. What she’d really meant was, *thank you for making things clear.*

Remus dug the toe of his trainer into the soft bed of sand that surrounded the stables. “Is there anything else then…?”

“No, I believe I’ve got it from here. Boys should be arriving soon with the lorry. And thank you for your help with the hay. I’m much obliged, and so are the horses, I’m sure.”

Avoiding her gaze so as to not permeate the air with further awkwardness, Remus gave Sandra a single polite nod and stepped past her, back up the path toward the main house. He only got a few feet before he turned back around again. He couldn’t help it—he had to know.

“Why did you fall in love with him? … *Him?* Of all people?”

Sandra turned around, and then she looked at him. Or into him. He wasn’t sure.

“Your father feels things very intensely, Remus,” she said. “I can tell that you have that in common. You’re like two lost ships, drifting along aimlessly, just looking for their lighthouse.”

“And are you supposed to be that lighthouse or something?”

“I can’t be sure,” she said softly. “But Remus… forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself.”

Remus’ eyes began to burn. He should’ve known.

“Tell me, Sandy, would you forgive a man who forced you to call him ‘father’, but would never call you his son?”

The question had been part metaphor, part truth. Not knowing what Sandra knew, he wasn’t sure if she’d caught the double-meaning. Not that it mattered. He did not wait to hear her answer anyway.

* * *

Mid-August 1977

Remus didn't need a lighthouse. He had a lightbulb. And not just any lightbulb—a lightbulb that shone with all the ferocity of the brightest star in the night sky. Sirius was his lightbulb. He just knew it. It was mid-August now, which meant that they'd been hiding out together for just over three weeks. Soon it'd be a month. An entire month, and no one was the wiser. Remus was almost inclined to rub it in his father's face.

Remember that ineffable House of Black? While I've got their eldest son in my bedroom—in my bed! How's that for keeping him happy, eh Dad?

He didn't of course, because that would be ludicrous. But Lyall still wasn't bothering to hound his every step anyway, so Remus just went back to focusing on what they had—enjoying it. Which might've been easier, had another deadline not been looming.

"So… school?" Remus had asked that very same morning. It was Sunday again, their third together, and they had no plans. It was wonderful.

Across from him on the bed, Sirius did not even glance up from the joint he was fiddling with. "Ugh. Do you think I'll ever get better at rolling these damn things?"

"Sirius... I'm talking about school."

"Mhm... Oh bollocks... Will you roll it then?"

Remus sighed. Foiled again. "Hand it here."

Sirius did so, and Remus expertly shimmied the loose hash into the centre of the paper, licking its side and rolling it up.

"Ace," Sirius commended, taking the spliff and adding it to a jar with several others.

"James and Pete are coming back from Devon soon," Remus attempted instead. "I'm supposed to meet them."

"How nice." Sirius began glancing around for the jar's lid.

"You're going to go with me, right?"

“Sure. Eventually. No need to rush.”

“They come back soon,” Remus said again. “Like soon, soon. Like *three days* soon.”

Sirius found the lid amongst the bed covers and quickly jammed it onto the jar’s top, before tossing the whole thing up in the air haphazardly. “How nice,” he said again.

“Sirius.” Remus caught the jar out of the air. “I’ve ignored seven calls from James since you got here. Seven.”

“Nice number, seven. You know what’s even better than seven though? Eight.”

“No, no more joking. We have to tell them.”

“Do we though?” Sirius pouted. “Would it not be enough to just let them know that you heard from me?”

“It would be a lie.”

“Just a tiny one, wouldn’t hurt much. And then in a few days we can go see them together and all’s well again!”

Remus set the down with a huff. “I don’t understand why you’re being so difficult. They’re your best friends.”

“I’m not being difficult. I just would rather savour this.” Sirius looked leaned back on his arms. “I wanna see them, course I do, but rushing back there would mean all this has to stop, wouldn't it? And I… I don’t think I want that.”

Remus didn’t miss his meaning. Pushing the jar of joints aside, he crawled across the bed to Sirius and kissed him deeply and without hesitation. “We don’t have to stop,” he said after, like a whisper. “No one’s gonna find out.”

“Moony, I don’t…” Sirius’ voice trailed off, and then he was sliding his hand up the side of Remus’ neck, pulling him back again. “Alright then… I’ll take this much.”

Later they both snuck down to the parlour and Remus rang James’ summer house. He knew Sirius didn’t mean to be cruel to his friends on purpose; he simply resided under the impression that if they were going to worry somewhere, then it might as well be from the comfort

of their summer homes.

“I still think you should still talk to him,” Remus pushed one final time, as he flopped down into one of the salon’s arm chairs and pulled the phone towards him.

“Then he’d know I’m here,” Sirius grumbled stubbornly.

“And safe. Is that really such a bad thing?”

“Look, I know James. You tell him I’m here and he’d rush out onto the road to hitchhike.”

“Oh, woe is you—to have friends that care about you.”

“It’s not about that, you git. I just don’t need him or Pete coming home early to weep over me.”

“How do you know they’d weep? At this point I think James is just as likely to sock you one,” Remus pointed out. “And hey, if he does come back maybe he’ll get you out of my hair for a while.”

“Out of your hair, huh? You weren’t saying that last night when I was —”

Remus pressed the receiver to his ear and began punching in numbers; “Shut up, I’m on the phone.”

Smirking, Sirius fell back against the sofa, stretching out before the salon’s windows like a cat in the midday sun. Remus watched him—really there wasn’t ever a moment he *wasn’t* watching Sirius, and it absolutely had nothing to do with the fact that Sirius had neglected to put on trousers that morning.

As the line began to ring, Sirius propped his head up on a pillow, raising his leg and gently grazing Remus’ knee with his toes.

“Hey, Moony, what if I were to…” Sirius let his foot travel up higher.

“Buzz off, I said I’m on the phone,” Remus hushed, nudging his foot away. Sirius just frowned mockingly and raised a hand to trail one finger down his cheek like a tear.

The phone clicked on, silencing its ring;

“… Hello?”

“James!” Remus started, making Sirius sit up slightly in anticipation. “Hey, mate.”

“AH! MOONY!” James exclaimed on the other end, then; *“You bastard* —been ignoring my calls have you?!”

“Sorry, been a bit busy.”

“Mhm, I’m sure. What’s the girl’s name this time?”

"Oh." Remus glanced sideways at Sirius. “Erm—didn’t catch it actually…”

“You dog. Anyway, you’re gonna think I’m crazy, but I actually knew it would be you! I just got this feeling—had to practically wrestle mum out of the way of the phone. How’s tricks—heard anything from Sirius?”

Remus smirked, and Sirius caught the look. *“What’s he saying?”*

“Yeah,” Remus said into the phone; “as a matter of fact, I have.”

“Oh my shit, really? Fucking finally! *Oh, sorry mum*—So, what’d he say? Did he send a letter?”

“Er—yeah, got it this morning. He’s good, better than good actually.”

“Really? He’s not dying?”

“Decidedly not.”

“Well, why’d he go so damn radio-silent?”

Remus cast another look at Sirius, who just shrugged. “Erm… Trouble with his parents, I think. Seems like he’s sorted out mostly now, though.”

“Man, this is why I should’ve stayed home,” James sighed. “He could've sent me a letter too, I should’ve been there to get it. Maybe I should just take the train back.”

“... You want to come back?”

Overhearing, Sirius began shaking his head frantically, and Remus quickly cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t worry none, Prongs. I’m sure you’ll hear from him when you get home, just enjoy the last few days of your holiday. Sirius is fine, honest. You’ll see for yourself soon.”

“I bloody hope so or I’ll wring the nutter’s neck myself… How ‘bout you then? You’ve been going outside every once in a while, right? When’s the last time you touched some grass?”

“Sod off. I got outside plenty.”

“I don’t just mean to pubs and music shops.”

“Why not? They’re enriching. I’m expanding my palates—musical or otherwise.”

“I just don’t want you to be lonely.”

“Now you sound like Lily.”

James ignored him; “I know things with your London friends went tits-up. Just want you to know that we’re here for you.”

Remus sighed and pressed two fingers into his eyes. “Thanks, Prongs, but I’m fine.”

“Alright… But you’ll still come over and visit when we’re back, right? You promised and mum and Dad still want to meet you.”

“Oh yeah, I’ll come.”

“Great! Arsenal’s playing a home game on the twenty-sixth and Dad says we can go see it together, and afterwards I’ll make it up to you by watching every episode of the ‘Pops’ I’ve missed since we got to Devon. You should bring the guitar too! That way when we get back to school we can blow Sirius’ bloody mind with how amazing we sound. You should hear Pete now, he’s gotten really good—even Sim thinks so! Although Lottie still seems unimpressed, but I think that’s just ‘cause they still have to share a room here. Oh, I almost forgot—the other day we went into town and you’ll never guess who we ran into!”

Remus leaned back in the sofa chair, absent-mindedly staring at the ceiling as he listened to James rant. “Mhm, who?”

“Benjy Fenwick, our old dorm monitor! Guy’s here on vacation with his girlfriend’s family. Says they met at uni—she’s a graduate student and like, twenty-seven, it’s insane!”

“Oh yeah…?”

“Yeah, and so we got to talking a little bit. He couldn’t believe that

Lily and I are dating now, but then—"

As James continued rambling on, Remus felt a tug at his waist band and shot upright to find Sirius reaching across from the sofa and working his pant zipper with one hand.

"Are you bloody insane? I'm talking to James!" He hissed, covering the speaker.

"Talk to him later, I'm bored," Sirius shrugged, succeeding in popping the button of his trousers open. Remus smacked a hand down across his fingers and Sirius smirked evilly. "Fine, stay on the line then," he taunted, sliding off the sofa and taking up residence on the floor between Remus' legs.

Mouth gaping and utterly scandalised, Remus pressed himself back into the recliner with the telephone cord wrapped tightly around one wrist as he struggled to get a grasp on what James was saying.

"—And I sorta thought to myself, 'hey, who am I to judge?' It's not like I'm an art critic, though I told my mum about it—you know, the *actual* art critic, and she said that—"

"Oh my god—get off, you lunatic!"

"I've not even done anything yet!"

"Hey, Moony…? You still there?"

"Oh! Yeah—fine! Just dealing with the—er… dog!"

"Arf!" Sirius barked, before clapping his hand over his mouth to avoid bursting into laughter.

"You stupid—" Remus swallowed thickly. "Hey James, reckon I could call you back later? I'm just in the middle of something here and I sorta think I need both hands for it."

"I only need one," Sirius whispered, undoing Remus' zipper and exposing his underwear.

"Oh sure, Moons. We're going back to the village tonight for Simeon's birthday dinner but I can catch you whenever. Let me know if Sirius writes again. Or better yet, maybe I should just post him from here. You think he'll—"

Remus couldn't wait anymore. "Let you know—got it! Bye now!"

With a gasp of relief, he slammed the receiver back down on the phone before turning to glare at the handsome boy kneeling between his legs.

“I could kill you.”

Sirius grinned evilly, barely restraining his eager fingers. “You could. Or you could tell me why you were so desperate not to go to Devon with them in the first place.”

“ ‘Cause I hate the beach. And because I didn’t really feel like intruding on their only family holiday of the year.”

“Hm. Is there anything you do like?”

Remus looked down at his open zipper. “… I can think of a few things.”

“Is one of them sex on the beach? I think it would make things a bit more bearable.”

Feeling his gut tighten with sudden need, Remus leaned down until his nose was brushing against Sirius’ cheek.

“Just shut up and fucking kiss me.”

“Hm,” Sirius smiled, pressing a finger to Remus’ lips, “I’ve got a better idea.”

Trailing his finger down his chin and across the hollow of his throat, Sirius stopped with his hand splayed in the centre of Remus’ chest. Then he shoved him hard, pushing him back into the chair before gripping the elastic waistband of his underwear and tugging it down past his hips. Heat hit a moment later and Remus’ breath caught in his throat as he dipped his head back to stare wide-eyed at the ceiling.

“Ah… fuck!”

Needless to say, he didn’t last very long.

Afterwards, they snuck back up to Remus' bedroom and Sirius hopped into the shower. Left alone in the vastness of the room that was his but never felt it, Remus thought about what he'd said to Sirius before. No one had to know... and they didn't. Remus didn't know much about being queer nowadays, but everyone and their mother knew that it was just better to not be. They wanted to be rock stars—artists, and

though artists were awarded a certain level of reprieve when it came to such things like their sexuality, they always had to be established first. No record executive in their right mind was going to give Marauders a chance in hell with two poofs manning the helm. It just wasn't done. Sirius was so desirable, but no one was *that* desirable. Imagining anyone knowing, it was like taking an ice pick to the stomach. He couldn't—he wouldn't. He won't.

Remus felt immediately guilty after. He knew what had happened with Miles and how it'd hurt Sirius, but if anyone found out about them then wouldn't it just happen all over again? There was no way Lyall Lupin would let his only son return to Hawkings if he knew—Remus would finally feel the stinging slap of his father's palm first. And then there would be nothing left.

Fuck. Fuck—Fuck—Fucking shit!

Remus wished he had someone to talk to about all of it with. Someone who didn't have a stake in it—someone who wasn't Sirius Black. But where was he going to find that? He didn't know any queer people—at least to his knowledge. There had to be a book out there somewhere. If he could just get Sirius to agree to go to the library…. hm…

"Shower's all yours, Moony," Sirius called, appearing out of the bathroom with a towel tied around his waist.

"Kay..." He was so beautiful, that Sirius. No one else had to know *how* beautiful. Maybe they could just keep it under wraps—anything to keep from having to stop. Remus didn't think he could handle stopping. And if that made him queer, even in a private way… then so be it.

While Sirius began walking toward him, rubbing his damp hair with a second towel, Remus sat up and reached for him. Sirius noticed and dropped the towel around his shoulders with a pleased expression. As he took his hand in return, Remus drew Sirius in to himself and pressed his cheek to Sirius' damp chest, letting his eyes slip shut.

"That shampoo in there s'pretty good," Sirius mused. "Still don't know why you insist on that awful bar stuff at school."

"It's what they have in the commissary," Remus grumbled back.

"Can't wait until we're buying our own soap," Sirius murmured back, already running a hand through Remus' hair and making him

absolutely melt. "And milk, and clothes, and cars... Yeah... What you thinking about, Moons?"

“Hm... Just you."

“Ooh, good answer. I think it deserves a wish, even.”

Remus drew back again. “Anything?”

“If it’s within my power,” Sirius said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Sing for me?”

The surprise was clear on Sirius’ face. Remus had no doubt that he’d expected him to ask for something dirty, but he could’ve asked for dirty things at any time—*he had been*—and asking him to sing felt right all of sudden.

“What should I sing then?” Sirius asked, acting almost shy. He wasn't, but that was part of the charm.

“Whatever comes to mind first," Remus said.

Sirius thought for a moment before licking his lips and wrapping his arms around Remus’ neck, sliding all the way onto his lap until their foreheads were touching.

“You are my moonshine—”

“Oh lord.”

“—my only moonshine. You make me happy when skies are grey... You’ll never know dear, how much I love you... Please don’t take my moonshine away.”

Remus couldn’t help it, he laughed as tears of what could’ve only been heartsickness pricked the corners of his eyes. *If only this could last forever.* Sirius beamed at him, rocking them gently back and forth.

“C’mon, Moony, you gotta sing it back,” he teased.

“I’m no singer.”

“Sing it just for me then.”

Sucking in a happy sigh, Remus whispered; “Alright.”

And so he sang.

* * *

Their blissful existence together came to an end too quickly. Remus had blinked and most of August had come and gone. Soon he'd be expected to return to school not just as any old student, but a prefect. And then after that? Well, he just had to figure out what it was he was to do with the rest of his life. No pressure. Though, things could always be worse, couldn't they? He could be Sirius, who was still under the impression that he had no purpose left at school, and now must focus on finding an entirely new place to live. Remus didn't bother saying it, but there was no way he was going to let that happen. Neither would James, once he found out. The only problem was that Sirius didn't seem all that inclined to tell his other friends what had really happened.

Sirius loved James and Peter dearly, but he hated appearing weak. In front of others he was always cool Sirius Black, aloof and untouchable. Remus hadn't realised it until they'd spent those last few weeks together, but the raw Sirius—the one who cried at music and became a revenge-hungry monster whenever anyone dared inflict suffering upon his friends—that was a Sirius that perhaps only he had ever been party to. When he asked, Sirius couldn't even explain it. It was simply as though their souls had seen into one another and decided subconsciously that they were the one person they could afford to be weak in front of. Remus wasn't sure if knowing that made him feel triumphant or horrified. It was an odd feeling to know that the person you liked most in the world knew every dark inch of you. Or well, most of you.

"You have to tell them," Remus said quietly. "James would want to know."

"Maybe, but..."

"Do you think he'd pity you? Because—"

"No, it's not pity. James is too good for that."

"Then why is it hard? I won't know unless you tell me."

"It's just different with James," Sirius said, murmuring into his hair. He was hugging Remus from behind, something he'd started doing

whenever he didn't want Remus to see his face. They hadn't talked much that day—the last day. Instead they'd just laid next to each other with the radio playing and watched the sun rise and fall in the sky outside their window. Eventually the blue summer sky had given way to a majestic sunset, casting a warm orange glow over the entire room. Tomorrow their friends would be back and Sirius could go see them... if he wanted.

"How so?" Remus asked, because he knew it would help Sirius answer.

"He's so good, Moony. If James were a colour he'd be pure white. Like a cloud. A great white cloud... What if I stain him?"

"Then… I think he'd call it tie-dye."

Sirius let out a noise that was probably supposed to be a laugh, but filtered off like a cry. "Shit. You're probably right."

Remus slid a hand up to his chest, where it found Sirius' and he could lace their fingers together. "You said his parents were good. What if they're able to help?"

"It isn't their problem."

"Hm. Why is it victims always feel the guiltiest?"

"To keep things interesting, I suppose."

Turning over, Remus looked down over Sirius' pretty face. How many times had he looked at it over the last month? It felt like a million, and yet he was sure he'd never get tired of it. In a room of one hundred people, he'd only ever see Sirius.

"I won't make you go," he told him; "but I hope you do. If not for your own sake, then for James'."

Sirius met his gaze, grey eyes into brown, and sighed. "Yeah, well, the tosser does have my stereo so I guess I should at least get that back."

"That's it. Silver lining."

"You'll go with me right?"

"Yeah. I promised James, and well… I'm not quite ready to give you up just yet."

Face glowing a vivid orange in the evening light, Sirius smiled sheepishly and leaned up to press a kiss against his lips. When he pulled away, Remus licked them just to taste him.

“Are you gonna tell me what colour I am now?" He asked. "And please don’t say white like a cloud.”

“Oh Moony,” Sirius sighed, “you’re the whole bloody sky.”

Chapter End Notes

A 'skiver' is a lazy person.
Do I have to say what a Tescos is...?
A 'bunch of fives' is a punch.

The song is "I Feel Love" by Donna Summer, 1977. (A queen honestly—Remus is just a snob.)

Chapter 69: Potter Cottage

Chapter Summary

It's nearing the end of summer, and Remus and Sirius head to the Potters. Along the way, they meet someone they did not expect.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took forever to edit so sorry if it's a bit late aasafgjsgdfj

Coincidentally it is also dedicated to my lovely Asaelia, who not only made the very first comment on this fic over a year ago, but has been my friend ever since. Thank you for always answering any questions I may have, no matter how silly. Ily <3

C/W: 'F' slur in smoking context. References to scars and child abuse.

A/N: Full transparency, I am not Hindu! If I have gotten anything wrong or made a bad decision please let me know in the comments so I might correct it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Our house is a very, very, very fine house,
With two cats in the yard;
Life used to be so hard,
Now everything is easy 'cause of you…
- "Our House" Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, 1970

With only a week of summer holiday left, Remus packed them a bag and together with Andy's guitar in hand, he and Sirius started the trek across London to see their friends. They first hopped a cab to Camberwell, then a bus to Charing Cross where they crammed themselves into the first train toward East Finchley along with all the rest of London's late-morning commuters. Remus would've preferred to let James know that it was not just him on his way over, but as dramatic as always, Sirius was determined to make an entrance.

"If I'm to show up on their doorstep a pauper, then I might as well make it a surprise," he insisted for the hundredth time, turning to

watch the London Underground speed by. Sirius never got tired of city-watching; no matter how dirty or crowded, he was always facinated. Every little thing thrilled him and he spoke to whoever cared enough to strike up a conversation. Remus had thought on more than one occasion that if Sirius had looked any more like his true blue-blooded self they'd have been tagged by a pickpocket ages ago, but neither of them had much to steal in the first place. Just a single old guitar, a few dingy records, and the clothes on their backs.

"Blimey. Look at this, Moons," Sirius said after a while. Remus looked up from his song journal, which he'd really only brought to pass the time, and found that Sirius had picked up one of the stray papers other commuters were always leaving behind on their seats. He was flipping through the rental classifieds.

"This one here says one bedroom flat in Brixton, a ninety-eight pounds a month. Sounds reasonable, right?"

"For a one bedroom in Brixton? Way too expensive."

"Alright, then how 'bout this one—two bedrooms in Mill Hill. Sixty-seven pounds a month. That's like plonk-change!"

"Except Mill Hill isn't exactly close to the city."

Sirius huffed and passed him the paper. "Go on, you have a look then."

Setting his journal aside, Remus opened the paper and began scanning each ad. "This one in Chelsea don't sound all that bad… Or here—in Shepherd's Bush. Three bedrooms."

"That's where we went to that killer pub, innit?" Sirius beamed. "God, their bathrooms were disgusting though."

"As so many in Shepherd's Bush are."

"Eh, I'll keep looking. Dunno what I'd do with three bedrooms anyway."

Remus just about started. He'd began the conversation thinking Sirius was talking about all of them getting a flat together after school… not about him moving in by himself.

"M'sure rent's cheaper in Scotland…" He murmured.

“Oh totally, I'm just having a look. S’good to keep my options open, but I can’t leave you lot anyway. You’re simply too irresistible.” Taking the paper back, Sirius leaned into him and pouted his lips into a kiss. Remus smiled in relief.

“Wouldn’t want you to leave,” he said.

“I know. It’s because *I’m* even more irresistible.”

“Don’t forget modest.”

As Sirius went back to his search, Remus reached for his journal again. As he was flipping it open to the correct page, he glanced up to find a man and a woman business dress watching them from a short ways down the carriage. Remus eyed him warily, and the next time the train gave a jostle he slid away from Sirius on the bench slightly.

“Do you think we should’ve told James I was coming?” Sirius asked, not five minutes later.

Remus resisted a groan. “Are you joking me?”

Sirius winced. He was staring at the Underground map posted over the door, his newspaper rumpled nervously in his lap. “I dunno… maybe this whole thing was a mistake.”

Remus glanced out the window. The stone walls of the Underground whipped by, anonymous and haunting. As the train grew nearer to the next platform, Remus had to draw his knees in while a woman passed them to get to the door.

“You’re gonna be fine,” he said. “It’s just James and Pete, how long have you known ‘em?”

“They’re gonna be so pissed."

“Only if you tell them you’ve been with me all this time.”

Sirius looked up at him. “You don’t want to tell them?”

What was there to tell? That the two of them had been shacking up since July? Not bloody likely. On that they were both agreed, at least.

“I mean, you *could* tell them that you've just been... you know, hiding out. But you're not going to...?"

Sirius caught his meaning right away. "Tell them about—no. 'Course

not."

Good, Remus thought. "You could just say I let you stay in a spare room or something."

"I just don't want to worry them. I'll tell them about Belgium—hard to hide that if I'm to not go back to school—but... maybe a little fib...?"

"There's your answer then, I guess."

"... Right." Sirius took a deep breath. Above them, the train chimed and the automated announcer cut across the noise;

'The next station is Camden Town, High Barnet Branch. Change here for…'

"There," Remus said, interrupting the announcement, "we're basically halfway there now. Just relax."

Sirius nodded again, eyes flitting about like an ever-nervous bird. Normally, Sirius was too stubborn to be considered a flight risk (that label was reserved for Remus alone) so when the train pulled into the station and other passengers began to shamble out onto the platform, Remus didn't think much of Sirius as he stood up.

"Something wrong with your seat?" He asked, mostly to tease. But then Sirius turned to him, and he finally noticed the panicked look on his face.

"I-I can't—!" Sirius squeaked, before streaking toward the train door and right out onto the station platform. Remus leapt to his feet after him, gaping.

"Sirius!" He started to go after him, but as he jostled for his bag, he accidentally dropped his journal and kicked it halfway down the train.

'This train is about to depart,' the announcer chimed; *'Please mind the doors.'*

"Shit!"

Scrambling to get out onto the platform in time, Remus snatched his songbook up off of the dirty train floor and threw himself at the nearest pair of doors. He got caught between them the first time, but as the doors pinged and reopened again, he fell out onto the platform amongst a sea of other flummoxed commuters.

“Sirius!” He called again, whipping his head around. There was no sign of an infuriating, black-haired prat, and so he quickly legged it toward the stairs, taking them up and out onto Camden district’s busy pavement. He had to squint in the early sun, wishing he'd remembered his sunglasses. Across the way was a movie plaza and a Fine Fare market, but he found Sirius just a short ways down the road, already smoking beneath a billboard. Ironically, the billboard bore an advertisement for cigarettes; *Rothmans. The best tobacco money can buy. Warning: Cigarettes can seriously damage your health.*

“Tell me,” Remus said, as he marched up to him, “are all your shit ideas this spontaneous, or were you actually trying to leave me behind?”

Sirius dropped his arm, blowing smoke out his nose. “Sorry.”

“Hm? Sorry, didn’t catch that.”

“I’m sorry alright!”

“Oh, you’re sorry?!”

“Yes!”

“Then I don’t get it!” Remus snapped. “This is *James,* your best friend since nappies almost. That’s who we’re going to see. You’re always going on about how great his parents are—how you’d kill to be their son—so why’re you running away now?”

“Because I don’t want this to end!” Sirius exclaimed.

Remus softened, but he couldn’t help but look around. There were too many people passing them by for a real love confession.

“Nothing’s gonna end, Sirius,” he promised, coming in close. “We’re gonna find a way to get you back to school, but I can’t do it on my own. We need James and Peter.”

Sirius sighed, glaring down at his cigarette like it might bite him. “I wish we could just run away, Moony. Start our life now. Find a flat and play our music—get some bum job pouring pints for old codgers and just never talk about our shit families again.”

“Giles would string me up first," Remus said, trying for the light-hearted angle.

"We can hide. I'll hide you, like you hid me. It'll be just for us again."

Oh how I wish it could be.

"That sounds great," Remus said, "but wouldn't you miss our friends? I know I would."

"James and Pete could come too," Sirius answered stubbornly.

"They're not just gonna leave school because we asked them to, Sirius. And besides, I thought Hawkings was your home?"

"It is. Or it was… now I'm starting to think that home could be anywhere, as long as I have you guys."

Dammit Sirius…

"I understand," Remus said firmly, "but James and Peter are gonna be at school. And right now? They're at home—waitin' for us."

"You don't know how hard it is—going there," Sirius said glumly. "Effie and Monty are amazing. They make me feel like I could actually be their son, but I'm not their son, Moony. I'm a fucking lost cause. Wrong in all the right places."

Wrong in all the right places. Yeah, Remus knew exactly what that was like. He just wished he knew where this sudden martyrdom was coming from. Normally Sirius' psyche was an impenetrable barrier, but it'd been just the two of them for so long now… even Remus couldn't help mourning it a bit.

"I'm not gonna go without you," he said, trying to think of a solution. It came to him suddenly—a trolleybus rolled past, it's side placarded with advertisements for Camden Market. Sirius didn't seem to notice. His eyes were on the toe of his boot as he ground it into the pavement.

"Maybe we just need a few hours, hey?" Remus suggested, as the trolley moved on. "James isn't expecting us—or me, more like—until early afternoon. Should we just go somewhere in the meantime?"

Sirius nodded, and flicked the barely-smoked cigarette away with an exhale of relief. "That'd be nice."

And so they went. Anywhere and everywhere Sirius wanted to go. With no real aim, they ended up retracing their steps from all those

weeks before, dipping into the same shops and stopping to practice their spitting over the back of a public bench. Albeit a little rough due to the ongoing job crisis, Camden Town was nice in the summertime, always awash with signs of city life. They passed several buskers along the way, and one even tried to get Sirius to play with him when he noticed the guitar, but Sirius bowed out humbly and Remus tossed a tenner into the busker's pot. The man just about dropped his saxophone when he saw it, and stopped mid-song to scoop the note into his pocket.

While walking, the two of them picked up a game of 'find the flat', in which the goal was to choose a random flat and imagine what their life might be like if they lived there.

"What about that one?" Remus asked, pointing to a corner apartment just off the main drag.

"Too much traffic noise," Sirius said, laughing when a cab flew past and honked obnoxiously, proving his point. "I think one of those would be a better fit."

Remus followed his gaze. The flats in question were tucked up in a quaint brick building without so much as a single busted window. "Hm, maybe… but ah, it's got a butcher's on the ground floor. Imagine how it'd smell in the heat."

Sirius sniffed the air as they passed. *"Eugh* … don't have to imagine."

After walking for near-on an hour without any real aim, they eventually ended up in Primrose Hill. The park was already sprinkled with other wonderers, a family eating lunch, a couple lounging on a blanket, several old women feeding pigeons. Remus chose a spot in the park under a sparse oak tree where they might not be bothered, and laid back with his head on his bag, smoking a cigarette while Sirius pulled his guitar from its case. They just hummed and strummed for a while, watching others come and go from the park's pathways.

"Tell me how that first part went again," Sirius asked eventually, his guitar still propped up in his lap.

Grinding his cigarette out in the grass, Remus sat up and pulled his songbook from their bag. Once he'd found the right page, he began to read; " 'Mary-Anne's darling mother—' "

"Nah, you gotta sing it, Moons."

“I don’t sing.”

“You do sing. You’ve sung for me *and* I’ve heard you in the shower.”

“Shower singing does not count. Everyone sings in the shower.”

“C’mooooon. Sing it for me—again?”

Remus sighed. “Not a word about my ‘tone’ or ‘pitch’ or whatever.”

Sirius zipped his zips shut snidely and beckoned him on before setting his own fingers to the strings, ready to play. Only slightly nervous to be outside, Remus cleared his throat; *“ ‘Mary-Anne’s darling mother didn’t know how to comfort her… She only told her “be a good girl and you’ll see” ’.”*

Sirius nodded, his eyes slipping shut as he found his rhythm and began to gently strum along the guitar. What followed was the beginnings of a soft melody, like the caress of a loved one.

“Next part, Moons,” Sirius prompted.

“ ‘When Johnny left his home of troubles, the men in the pub sat him down and said, “hear our words of wisdom, they’ll set you free”…’ ”

Eyes still closed, Sirius smiled and his strumming got stronger. Urged on by its clear tenderness, Remus continued;

“ ‘Head held high, never cry, our lady’s love is nigh—hear our Lady of Conceptual Hope’s sad, sad lullaby’.”

Sirius lifted his hands from the strings the moment Remus stopped and gave a little shudder. “Wow. Utter chills. ‘Lady of Conceptual Hope’—talk about irony. How’d you even come up with that?”

“Dunno,” Remus answered, flipping the journal shut again. “… Just sorta picked a few names and strung the words together. Maybe it’s the religious trauma.” He chuckled, then; “Mm… Sounds a bit silly now.”

“Silly? Are you joking? That was pure prose. I wish I could sit down and write something like that.”

“But your songs always sound so much more rock and roll. I sound like a knock-off. A fifth Beatle.”

Sirius smirked. “Eh. My songs aren't ever as heartfelt as yours. I just

try and write something I can scream."

"Point in case."

Sirius waved him off bashfully before taking a sip out of one of the Cokes they'd stopped and gotten from a nearby corner shop. "I got something new actually! Couldn't sleep last night so I borrowed your journal—hope you don't mind."

Remus frowned down at the book, and after Sirius instructed him to flip to the back page, he found several scribbled lyrics in his handwriting. Reading them over quickly, Remus' original judgement was instantly proven.

"Alright, go on then, book thief," he said, eagerly tossing the journal across the grass. Sirius spun it toward himself and quickly began fiddling with the keys of his guitar until its tuning went from low to high.

"Okay, so I haven't figured out all of the chords yet—didn't want to wake you," Sirius explained.

"Such the gentleman."

"Don't be an arse, Moons. So I care about your sleep habits—sue me."

Remus drew a knee up to his chest and leaned his chin against it. *God, I love you. How simple it is to love you.*

"Remember, it's a work in progress," Sirius continued. A second later he was playing a chord progression that felt both bluesy and hard. Remus instantly liked it. It was faster than anything he'd ever written, and so, *so* Sirius.

" 'Blow out your voice—till there's nothing left'," Sirius sang; " 'You're less than bloody likely—to die in your bed. Call us Harlot's Progress—red apple gone bad. Making way more money—than dear ol' Dad'!"

Sirius strummed harshly several more times, grinning from ear to ear, before silencing the strings with his palm. Down the hill, a group of teenagers had turned to watch, but Remus' eyes never left Sirius.

"Colour me impressed," he called, "that actually sounds pretty good."

"I know, right?" Sirius answered, tone dripping sarcasm. "Guess you're not the only one that can spin a tune. It'll sound way better once we

get Pete on those new drums of his, but I figure it could actually be pretty good. I've already written the hook too—the beat picks up here and it goes, *'Music gets louder—sent us a howler. Singin' ain't breathin'—sleepin' ain't dreamin'! Crowd keeps growin'—time keeps slowin'! On an upswing—that's just rock and roll, yeah'!"*

Sirius finished with a spectacular flourish, and Remus clapped for him.

"What's a howler?" He asked.

"Who knows? I just needed it to rhyme!"

Remus began to laugh, only stifling himself by pressing his cheek back to his knee. "I think it sounds real good, babe."

Sirius gasped lightly, and then looked around like he might be hearing things; " 'Babe'?"

Uh… Remus baulked a bit and straightened up. No one was close enough to overhear, but the lack of privacy did help to launch his stomach into his throat ever so slightly.

"Thought I'd try it out," he mumbled sheepishly. *Better than 'boyfriend', anyway…*

Despite Remus' sudden aversion, Sirius only appeared ecstatic. "Hm… okay, *babe,"* he purred. "In that case, I think it sounds pretty good too."

Sirius finished off his Coke, setting the bottle aside and returning to the same strumming pattern he'd created for Remus' "Lady of Conceptual Hope". Remus just watched, content, and eventually the playful feeling returned.

"Did I ever tell you that while you were dating Kimmy, she asked me for a threesome?"

It was a rhetorical question—*of course he'd never told him*—but Sirius' reaction was funny none-the-less. His fingers came down, almost strangling the guitar strings as he bolted upright in place.

"WHA—A THREESOME?!"

"SHH!"

"SHE ACTUALLY ASKED YOU FOR A THREESOME?!"

Horrified that someone might actually overhear this time, Remus snatched up his songbook and chucked it at him. “Fucking honestly… I *knew* I shouldn’t have told you!”

Unfazed by the book bouncing sharply off of his shoulder, Sirius practically threw Andy’s guitar aside in a mad rush to scramble forward. “OOOH—! How dare you keep such vital information from me, Remus Lupin!”

“UGH—Gerroff!” Remus wailed, as Sirius caught him by both ankles and dragged him halfway onto his back.

“No way—out with it!” Sirius ordered. “Tell me everything this instant, or I’ll—I’ll *kiss* you right here.”

“Alright, alright,” Remus moaned. “Just shut up! … It was that night last year, when we were at the bonfire.”

Sirius’ mouth dropped open. “Jesus fuck—is *that* why you were so fucking aggro until the end of term?”

“Oh fuck off. I wasn’t ‘aggro’, I was just pissed off. Do you know how it feels to have your best friend’s crappy girlfriend practically pawing at your lap?”

“If I did, then we’d be having a real different conversation!”

At that, Remus laughed. Kicking Sirius’ hands away, he sat up against the oak’s trunk and smoothed out his shirt. “Yeah well, s’not like I could say yes.”

“Why not?!”

“ ‘Cause she was bleedin’ awful. And ‘cause you pissed me off!” *And because I didn’t even know what it was that I was feeling. Handsome git.*

Sirius gave a deep moan, falling forward onto his stomach in the grass. “I have been mortally wounded. I simply cannot go on… I shall succumb to the ennui of it all and die.”

“You’re such a drama queen.”

“Don’t belittle me, Remus Dean! This is positively the worst thing to have *ever* happened to me!”

Remus shook his head. “The worst? Are you kidding me—you mean you would’ve wanted to?”

Sirius rolled over. *"UH—YES?!* Kimmy may have been a total cad, but she was still smokin' hot! You'd have to be blind to miss that. And with you?! UGH—FUCK ME."

"You're hopeless."

"… Nah, just horny."

"Desperate then."

"How can you call me 'babe' one moment and be so mean the next?"

"It's called nuance."

Sirius began to grumble over the strings of his guitar. "Pfft… 'nuance'… more like straight-up moody… yeah, 'Moody' Moony… ya bastard."

Remus smiled and reached down to pat Sirius on the shoulder. "I think that means it's time to go. We're officially fashionably late for our meeting with the Potters."

"Can we at least get something to eat first?" Sirius whined. "It's bad taste to show up to a party hungry."

Remus rolled his eyes fondly. "You're so dumb. C'mon."

He held out a hand to help Sirius up, and together they gathered the rest of their things and set off. Leaving Primrose Hill behind, they made their way back over the train tracks toward the market in Camden Lock. Along the way they passed the Roundhouse, so named for the circular stage that occupied its interior. The building itself had originally housed a railway turntable, and then later used as a warehouse for old railway cars, but now attracted bands from all over the world to perform to intimate crowds hand-picked from London's finest and most passionate fans.

"Everyone's played there," Remus said, when Sirius stopped to hand off the chain link fence surrounding the venue. "Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, the Doors… The Who. Even David Bowie."

"Yes," Sirius said with a wistful smile. "And one day it's gonna be us."

Remus didn't bother questioning the finality with which Sirius made his statement. Even if they had a snowball's chance in hell of actually making it onto the Roundhouse's stage—or any stage, really—it was

his dream too now.

Carrying on, they followed the tracks until they found themselves skirting around the market, its stalls piled high with various antiques and handmade jewellery. Sirius stopped outside one of them to admire a table piled high with chunky silver and brass rings. The woman selling them was set up behind the table on a mattress of several oriental-looking rugs, eating a salad that looked more like the grass of Primrose Hill than lettuce. Her entire outfit seemed to be made of various silk scarves and the smile she gave them when they approached felt similar to the rest of the traders in the market; just a hungry artist looking to make a buck.

“My dad has one of these,” Sirius said, plucking a large signet ring out of the heap. “Family heirloom. Had the Black family crest on it and everything. Was supposed to be mine when I turned eighteen. Suppose it’ll go to Reg now.”

“Good riddance?” Remus suggested meekly.

“Yeah,” Sirius agreed. “Always thought it was an ugly old thing anyway. Though, at least his was real silver.”

The stall-woman gave them a vexing look and Remus quickly took the ring from Sirius, replacing it and steering him away. The next few stalls were packed with fresh cooking and hungry market-goers, and Remus had to muscle his way to the front of the line where he ordered döner kebab for both of them. Lamb for himself, beef for Sirius.

“Ohhh… I think I’m gonna marry this sandwich,” Sirius moaned, already several bites in as they made their way out of the market thoroughfare.

“Are you now? Didn’t you once say that you’d never get married?”

“… I’m going to fuck this sandwich.”

Remus grinned, taking a large bite of his own. “It’s called kebab, you tourist.”

Sirius just nodded, eyes closed in reverence. “I want to make a pun, but I can’t think of any, so I’m just going to enjoy this.”

Mouths stuffed, they made their way along, eating while walking and hindered only by their sparse possessions. People passed them in the streets without so much as a glance. Maybe one day, when they were

christening stages like the likes of the Roundhouse or Dingwalls, the reaction would be different. But for now they were just two nameless idiots with half a pack of fags and an old beat-up guitar.

“Which was back to the station?” Sirius asked around another bite of kebab. Throwing his wrapper in a roadside bin, Remus wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, already looking on ahead.

“It’s just—”

Remus’ eyes shot wide.

Could it be? … Really? Agh… ah fuck.

Oblivious, Sirius looked up at him with a cheeky expression. He reached for his cheek. “Oi babe, I think you’ve got a little something right—*eugh!”*

Grabbing Sirius by the collar of his shirt, Remus quickly hauled him into an alleyway that they’d just passed. Surprised by the sudden yank, Sirius dropped the rest of his kebab on the way and appeared fully ready to throw a quality fit, but something on Remus’ face must’ve given him reason to pause. Instead he slowly peeked around him and peered out onto the street, obviously unsure what to look for.

“Moons…?”

It was as though Remus’ heartbeat had moved from his chest into his ears. It’d been so long, he almost glossed over them entirely, but Vint was a large guy who wore his leather jacket more often than Sirius, and Seesaw was never without his signature shades. But still they looked different. Their heads were shaved… their faces more flat and square. Remus could remember thinking they’d all looked grown last Christmas, but this was something else. Gone were the boyish features he’d known, replaced by stoney looks that deterred any passerby from getting too close. They weren’t alone either—they had a gaggle of other guys with them, some younger and freckled, others with leftover scars from acne or one-too-many fights. He couldn’t recall any of them as familiar, but he searched every one of their faces desperately. For a hint—a chance.

No dice. Tomny was not among them.

“Moons?” Sirius said again, grabbing his arm. “You good…?”

Remus said nothing, just ushered Sirius further into the alley. The group was almost upon them, and he couldn't bring himself to look when they passed. He didn't want to be noticed—he couldn't be noticed, what would he even say? Hello? Hello and goodbye? I'm sorry? *Dammit.*

In whatever capacity to feel that he had left, he was grateful for Sirius. The other boy didn't say anything else, and simply waited until the pack of boys-turned-men had long passed. A few of them were in the middle of conversation—laughing. Remus couldn't tell what about, it was so quick, but caught wind of Seesaw's lazy drawl as he quipped a quick reply and it was enough to send him sprawling back to those days at the flat. He'd thought he'd mourned them all. Guess not.

"I knew them," Remus said later, when he'd finally had the courage to exit the alleyway and continue on.

"You mean those guys?" Sirius clarified. "The ones that looked fresh outta the chokey?"

He glanced over his shoulder like the boys might reappear holding switchblades and brass knuckles.

"They didn't look like that when I knew 'em," Remus murmured. "They were my f-f… my friends. They know Tomny."

Sirius' expression became a glower. He still had not forgiven Tomny for the way he'd ended things, though it was entirely on Remus' behalf. "You should've said hello," he told him; "Asked them where Tomny was so we can go kick his arse."

Even in his raw state, Remus found it within himself to smile. "You'd actually pick a fight with Tomny for me?"

"Hmph. Can't be that tough, not if he's weaselling out over the phone like a little bitch."

The snipe did not make Remus feel better, but Sirius was quick to rectify it. He leaned in close as they walked and wrapped a friendly arm around Remus' shoulders.

"Hey, don't think about it. Those guys are the ones missing out, not you. After all, you're Remus Dean, you're gonna play the Roundhouse one day. Then the 100 Club, and the Astoria, and Wardour Street… you're amazing, you are."

“Careful,” Remus replied meekly, “any more ‘a that and m’gonna start thinking you’re trying to charm your way into my trousers.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve already done that twice over.”

That you have.

With a sigh caught between relief and longing, Remus wrapped his own arm around Sirius’ shoulders. It was just a friendly gesture—no one would’ve mistaken them for being anything other than a pair of lads out on the town, but it meant more because it was Sirius. Sirius would always mean more.

“Ah! I know just what’ll cheer you up!” Sirius declared not five minutes later. They were only a street over from the station and it was getting late into the afternoon, but that didn’t deter him from steering Remus directly toward the record shop the moment he spotted it.

“Retail therapy’s always helped me,” Sirius instructed, pushing the door open and letting the bell overhead chime.

“Especially when it’s someone else’s money,” Remus added.

“Precisely!”

It was a small shop, with yellow overhead lights all cracked in various places and crates upon crates of old vinyl stacked all the way to the ceiling. There was music playing, and a few other shoppers weaved amongst the rows, browsing quietly while an animated clerk attempted to charm some girl over the register’s counter. “Hey-up,” he called halfheartedly, as the two of them ambled inside. Sirius returned the lame hello with a wave.

“Think they got any Sex Pistols?” He asked Remus.

“Only one way to find out…”

With tapes on one side and records on the left, they promptly got to work.

“Do you think we’ll ever be rid of disco?” Sirius asked, standing across from Remus and haphazardly flicking through the shrink-film wrapped albums.

“Could be worse. Could be synth.”

“You think synth's worse than disco?”

“Obviously. At least disco uses some real instruments. Synth is all machines making music—nasty. You lose the human aspect of it, the part that makes it rich and… I dunno, *alive.”*

“You’re such a music snob,” Sirius laughed. “I love it.”

Remus smirked down at the row of albums in front of him. How easily Sirius could banish a bad spell. All thoughts of Tomny and the flat gone, a giddy feeling had come over Remus, like the sort that made screams of triumph build up in your chest. Before he could lose it completely, he shoved the albums back into their place and cleared his throat.

“Gonna go ask the guy if he’s got any Sex Pistols.”

Sirius just nodded, bobbing his head to the shop's music as rummaged through the stacks.

As Remus broke away, he slipped around the few other shoppers and stopped a short ways away from the cash counter. The shop clerk was still heavily engrossed in conversation with the girl—or that was to say, *she* was still heavily engrossed in conversation with *him.* Remus had to wait several minutes while the guy went on and on about the marvels of bands like Bad Company and Cheap Trick, not so subtly pausing every third word to peek down the front of her shirt as she leaned half her torso across the counter. Remus didn't care much to listen in, but his mouth-breathing was hard to ignore.

"Yeah, so ya see, Black Sabbath was completely unlike anything on the scene at the time. Their blues-rock was pure sludge music—either ya hated it or loved it.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “I personally prefer their earlier stuff meself, but ‘Technical Ecstasy’ wasn’t bad.”

Impossibly, the girl leaned even further over the counter. “Wasn't their lead singer supposed to have sold his soul to the devil?”

“That’s jus' Oz being Oz. He created this whole ‘Prince of Darkness’ thing to wake people up. You know, make rock faster by slowin' it down.”

“Wow.”

Grimacing slightly, Remus glanced at his wrist, wishing he’d remembered his watch. “Uh, s’cuse me…”

“Be right with you, pal,” the clerk responded, without so much as

glancing Remus' way. "Have you listened to their debut album?"

The girl shook her head.

"Oh man, you're really missing out. It's just got these—these tones to it, ya know?! It's doom, but it's also hope, and—and—ya know, their guitarist used to lower his string tension all the time to get these really low, grovelly notes. I'm talking like, almost out of tune here!"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Uhm..."

"Yeah, hold on a sec, mate. Anyway, he did it so he could mix rhythm riffs with lead guitarist right there in studio. He hated editing his sound in the booth. Said it ruined—"

"No, he didn't," Remus cut-in mercilessly, "he did it because he was missing the tips of two fingers on his right hand."

Both the girl and the clerk looked up at him very sharply. "Excuse me?"

"Tony Iommi," Remus said. "He lost them while working at a sheet metal factory when he was seventeen. That's why he played low."

The clerk squinted at him critically. "Who?"

"The… The guitarist…? Of Black Sabbath?" Remus glanced around as though he were being chaffed. "Were you not just talking about him?"

Looking more than a little affronted, the clerk cleared his throat and began to nod briskly. "Right. Iommi. Class act, him… er—Right!" He lifted his hands into the shape of an air-guitar and began mimicking the fretboard while the girl watched. "Lost his fingers! Total devastation time. Imagine fretting a guitar with half your hand!"

"Well, actually—" Remus pointed to the guy's other arm; "Iommi plays left-handed so it'd be your other hand."

The clerk gave a sharp huff and dropped his arms. "Orright, kid, whatchu want?"

"Do you have the Sex Pistols' new single?"

"You sure you're old enough for that kind of stuff?"

The girl giggled and Remus puckered slightly. "You sure you're not too old to be hitting on teenage girls?"

Apparently the joke was not a hit. “Don’t got it,” the clerk retorted.

“Could you double-check?”

“Look, even if I did have it once upon a time, you’re about the tenth guy I’ve turned away already. Try checking back next week.”

“Gee, thanks,” Remus replied, not at all thankful. He turned away and the clerk promptly launched back into another rant—*“Where was I? Oh right, actually Sabbath’s pretty much old-hat now anyway. It’s punk that’s in now. You’ve heard of the Ramones?”*

Making his way back across the shop, he found Sirius going through a milk crate of LPs that were on-offer.

“Ever cared much for the Allman Brothers, Moons?”

“Nah, too American.”

“Too right.” Sirius dropped the LP back into the crate. “What’s the verdict then? We gettin’ high to ‘God Save the Queen’ tonight?”

Remus shook his head. “They don’t got it.”

“Bollocks.”

“We could always check in Finchley. James said there’s a decent shop not too far from his place.”

“Right, right—he’s told me about it. But hey, I found these!” Crossing over to the centre aisle, Sirius began showing off several more albums —good albums. Marvin Gaye. Joni Mitchell. King Crimson. Even a few he didn't know.

“What’s ‘Kraftwerk’?” Remus asked, holding up one of the albums curiously.

“Dunno,” Sirius said; “I’m trying to diversify. I think they’re German—but look, one of these songs is over twenty-two minutes long!”

“Jesus... and they say Queen's bad. Alright, give ‘em here then.” Gathering the albums from Sirius and tucking them under one arm.

"Oh, you don't have to get all of them," Sirius said quickly.

"Sure, I do. Call it an advance on your birthday gift."

Sirius smiled shyly, fingering his sunglasses.

As they turned for the cash counter, the door behind them opened and chimed to allow other customers inside. Neither of them paid any mind. “You think you’re ready to head on to James’ now?” Remus asked.

“Good as,” Sirius said. “Can’t keep ‘em waiting forever, now can we?”

“Not if you want this band of yours to actually work out. Any more of this nonsense and James might actually kill you. And then what would we do without our notorious Sirius Black?”

Sirius grinned. “ ‘Notorious’, huh? I like the sound of that.”

“You would.”

“Gotta find you a new stage name too. How 'bout the Rakish Re—"

"No."

"No? Alright, then maybe, Majestic Moo—"

"Keep trying."

Sirius huffed. "Fine, then how about the *Spectacular—"*

“Sirius…?!"

The name had not come from Remus or Sirius' mouth. Instead it’d echoed from behind—from the woman who’d just walked into the shop. Already half-facing Sirius, Remus saw her first; she was quite short, but no one they knew from school, with hair the colour of coffee with just a bit too much cream. At her temples were two twin streaks of purple and she wore a collared necklace around her throat like a second belt. Heavy beaded hoops hung from either ear and dark coal rimmed her eyes—a punk if Remus had ever seen one. But as striking as she was, Remus was instantly horrified. He hadn’t counted on anyone recognising Sirius before they were even due back to school. Almost a month of pure secrecy coupled with hiding out in his bedroom and here was this random stranger off the street, waltzing in and shouting his name out of nowhere. There couldn’t be that many Siriuses in London, surely. And *none* that could’ve been mistaken for Sirius Black.

Remus felt like saying, *Don’t turn around. Just run. Run and I’ll distract*

them! But they were not characters on a daytime drama with finite answers and endings. They were just two boys with a strong affinity for irony, and there was nothing else to do aside from watch as Sirius spun around to face the potential threat. Face her and… *hug her?*

Lost in his own surprise, Remus stood by dumbfounded as Sirius' face split into an inexplicable expression of disbelief and utter joy. *"ANDY!"* He cried, throwing himself forward and forcing the woman to catch him. She did—barely—and then stood back to get a better look at him.

"Oh my god! It *is* you, Sirius! Holy fuck—what are you—*How are you —?!"* She whipped her head around. "Ted! Ted, it's Sirius! It's my cousin."

Another guy stepped forward. Remus hadn't the gall to notice him until he did, but what he found was a man nearly twice Andy's height, with an eyebrow piercing, wearing a creased t-shirt with the words *'Vive le Rock'* across its front. His hair was spiked up with gel and he wore leather cuffs on both wrists. Despite the rough-looking dress, he appeared friendly enough as he extended a hand toward Sirius, tucking a cigarette behind his ear as he did so.

"I'm Ted," he said with a lazy smile. "Pleasure to meetcha. Heard lots from Andy."

Sirius shook Ted's hand, still entirely starstruck. "I-I'm sorry," he managed, "but is this really happening right now? I mean—what are you doing here? Where's Dora?"

Andy looked Sirius up and down slowly, like she still couldn't believe it was him. "Dora's with grandma. The Grateful Dead's just released a new album, and we—we know the owner… What are *you* doing here? Have you really moved to London?"

Appearing unsure, Sirius glanced back at Remus. "Er... Something like that…"

Andy didn't miss the look. For the first time Remus felt as though she'd noticed his presence; giving him the same once-over, she paused just long enough for him to begin worrying again—but the next moment she was smiling, and all the anxiety instantly melted away. Her eyes weren't the same grey as Sirius', more of a mottled brown, but they had the same shape, the same little wicked crinkle at the outer corner.

“Oh, who cares?!” She exclaimed. “You’re *here.* And you have my guitar!”

Sirius perked up, raising the colourful guitar case high. “Yeah, a‘course! Couldn’t leave it. It’s the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

Looking like she might cry, Andy let out a little whimper of happiness and pulled Sirius into another hug. “It’s been too long—you’ve grown so much… oh… I missed you, little brother.”

Unable to see his face, Remus couldn’t be sure what expression Sirius was making, but if he knew him at all, then it was bound to be something very close to luminous.

They’re like mirrors of each other, Remus thought later, as the four of them made their way up and down the borough’s busy streets together. From behind, the Black cousins could’ve been closer to siblings. They both had that willowy look about them—pale skin, dark eyes, with legs up to their necks and hair to match. Then there was the part where they both spoke with their hands; the more excited they got, the more they jumped over one another in conversation until eventually they were finishing each other’s sentences with ease.

“You do know that Bella—”

“Got married? Oh yeah, Cissy still sends me the occasional letter. Did you—”

“Go to the wedding? Nah, as if mum would ever let me. It was in April anyway. But I saw the photos! … Almost feel bad for Bella, too. Her unibrow might be worse, but nothing’s as bad as his—”

“His teeth! Oh my god, I remember the teeth. Like a fucking horse!”

It was good to hear Sirius laugh at someone else’s jokes. He and Andy walked on ahead, leaving Remus and Ted to trail behind like the leftover partners they were. They had no real destination, but the sudden reunion was too wonderful an opportunity to pass up. No one complained, after all Andy and Sirius hadn’t done more than send letters and talk over the phone in almost five years. Since that time, Andy had found out she was pregnant, had the baby out of wedlock with a lower-class boy from Tottenham, and was promptly ejected from the family of Black—an experience the cousins now shared.

“I don’t know why you didn’t just call me!” Andy lashed, after Sirius reluctantly told her how he’d ended up in London in the first place.

“What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey Andy, mum sent me to prison in Belgium, can you come pick me up?’ ”

“Yes! Exactly that!”

Sirius waved the answer off, but Remus could tell he was secretly pleased. It was a foreign feeling to him—cousins. Remus didn’t have any. Both Hope and Lyall had been only children, and well… there was no way of knowing what went on within his more distant relations.

“They look alike, don’t you think?” Ted asked suddenly, pulling Remus back down to earth. “Think it’s the eyes. Like a gene lottery. Though I suppose I’m the lucky one, really.”

Me too, Remus thought.

Smiling, Ted turned to look at him while they walked. “Sorry, I never caught your name?”

“Oh, my bad. It’s Remus.”

“Pleasure. You Sirius’ friend then?” Ted offered a hand, which Remus shook. It was firm, his palm a bit rough, like Giles' or any other working boy. Briefly, Remus wondered what Ted thought of his palm. It was probably smooth enough to assume that he'd never done a day of work in his life.

“Er… yeah," he answered. "He’s been staying with me for a while.”

“You from London then?” Ted asked.

“Mhm. Blackheath.”

“Nice. From Tottenham, meself, but we’re over in Islington now. The two of you should drop in sometime! I’d love to get Sirius to jam out with us. You play anything?”

“Bass.”

“Oh, champ! Don’t tell Andy I said this—but the bass is where it’s really at.”

Remus smiled. He liked Ted, he’d decided. He was friendly without asking too many questions, and he was tall enough that Remus didn’t feel gangly or out of place. Plus, he looked bloody cool. A bit fit, even —but that was *queer* thought, so he pushed it away.

“Sirius said you used to be in a band?” He asked.

Ted nodded. “A few years ago. Almost got a contract even, but then everything went tits up when our lead singer skipped town for America. Thought he would make it big in L.A, ‘cept now he buses tables while his boss busts his balls.”

“Oh. Bad luck, that.”

“Eh, didn’t matter really. I quit not long after anyway—when Dora was born. Gotta feed the family somehow, right?” Ted chuckled. “Not that I’m complaining! Got a whole new outlook on life. I look back now and I’ve realised that I was just drifting before, y’know? Andy didn’t just give me a family, she gave me a purpose.” Without any prompting, Ted popped a tattered wallet out of his pocket and flipped it open. Aside from a sparse few paper notes and his driving licence, it held only a handful of photographs, mainly of Andy holding a chubby baby girl.

“This is the most recent,” he said, thumbing through and producing a small photo of his daughter covered in paint and brandishing a paintbrush like a sword. He showed the photo off with all the eager glee of a loving father, almost a complete paradox to his hard, punk-like exterior. “Cute, huh?”

Remus nodded firmly until Ted had tucked the photo away again. He couldn’t imagine giving up everything for something as trivial as family. But maybe that was just because his family had never given anything up for him.

“I wish we could’ve talked for longer, but Dora turns into a real riot act if we’re even a minute late,” Andy said, after their twentieth turn around the block had ended outside the entrance to the Underground. “We’re still not sure who taught her how to read a bloody clock at only four years-old, but I’m gonna wring their neck when I find out.”

“Reckon she’s just gifted,” Sirius said, “like me.”

“Don’t say that. Can’t afford to let my kid take after a bruiser like you.” Andy ruffled his hair fondly, loosening the braid Remus had done himself that morning. “You’ll come and visit us before heading back to school then?”

“Sure, sure,” Sirius smiled.

“I *mean* it. If you don’t I’ll kick your arse.”

“C’mon Ands, we’re not kids anymore. You couldn’t kick my ass if you tried,” he scoffed, leaning in to taunt her. Andy socked him one for it —right in the stomach—and Sirius folded around her fist like a piece of paper.

“You were saying?”

“Ugh… alright, I yield, Ands—uncle, uncle!”

After that they hugged, and Remus held back to shake Ted’s hand once more.

“Take care of him, Remus,” Andy said, just as they were about to part ways. It was only about the third thing she’d said to him directly, the first being *‘so you’re the Remus I’ve been hearing so much about!’* and the second, *‘blimey, you* are *tall’.* Remus didn’t really mind; Sirius was usually the subject of attention, but this time around he deserved it.

“I will,” he promised her.

“We take care of each other!” Sirius interjected, hitting Remus with the tip of his guitar case and poking his tongue out in Andy’s direction.

“Don’t be a stranger then!” Andy called, taking Ted’s hand and already backing down the pavement. “You come visit too, Remus, and bring James and Peter as well! We’ll catch a show—or have one! Perhaps both!”

They waved, the happy couple, and Remus and Sirius returned it in kind. Neither of them moved until Andy and Ted’s forms had faded far into the distance, and when they finally turned to head down onto the platform, Sirius did so with a revived spring in his step.

“Absolutely mental—seeing Andy again!” Sirius said, as the next train to Finchley rumbled into the underground station and they boarded. “She was pissed off that I didn’t give her the bell a'course,” he went on; “Or tell ‘er I was in London, but it was… Blimey—*amazing.* She looks the exact same.”

“Real fates at work,” Remus agreed, as they took two seats near the back of the train car. “You gonna go visit her then?”

“Yeah, should, shouldn’t I? ... ‘sides, I’d like to see Dora, and Ted’s supposedly still got all of his old equipment in storage. I told you once that Andy was the only other one Alphard left money to? It’s how they

bought the house in Islington! You could come—we could all go! ... Ha, oh hell. James is going to be so pissed off that we're this late."

Remus shrugged. "Day ain't over yet, he'll understand once we explain everything."

"Yeah—yeah, he's good like that, that Prongs. He'll understand. Can't wait to tell him about Andy."

"You never told me that Andy calls you 'brother'," Remus said, because he could tell Sirius wasn't done talking about her.

"Picked up on that, did you?" Sirius beamed, still babbling along. "Jus' something we did as kids. All I had was Reg, and she liked her sisters well enough, I guess, but we were always the odd ducks. Pretending it was just the two of us made things more bearable. Sucked when she left though. But hey—we're both better for it, we're both here now! Totally free and livin' life."

"That's right," Remus said, then; "I don't have any cousins."

"None?"

"Not that I know of."

"Sounds a bit lonely."

"Hm. Maybe… I had the dogs though."

Suddenly going very quiet, Sirius bit his lip. "Er—that's right, what am saying?! You're not really missing out on much anyway. In fact, I hate most of my cousins! They're all racist, right-wing Tories who'd rather get with each other than marry someone of a lower class. 'Cept for Andy of course."

Remus chuckled lightly. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better. Andy seems pretty rad."

"Oh yeah, she is. Sorry I never really introduced you properly—got a bit excited."

"S'okay. Next time."

Smiling, Sirius glanced down at his hands. The anticipation of *'next time'* was written all across his face, and Remus was glad for him. In the exposed space of the train car, he wished he could have leaned his head on Sirius' shoulder in comfort, but he couldn't, so instead he set

his bag across their laps and slid one hand beneath it, reaching for Sirius' lovely fingers.

If Remus hadn't turned to face the train window to hide his own guilty blush, he might've noticed the smile on Sirius' face become that much wider.

* * *

"Moony?" Sirius asked, as they made their way down the street from the station. It was already late afternoon, almost evening, and they were most certainly late, but Remus still couldn't bring himself to rush.

"Mhm?" He responded, busy staring at the passing houses.

"Don't hate me, but I think I'm still sort of nervous…"

"It's just James, Sirius."

"It's not though. It's the *Potters*. I've only ever visited that one time, and when I showed up, it took about five minutes for them to start calling me their son. It was… indescribable."

"Wow, you've really convinced me. They sound horrible—guess we should go home!"

Halting in the middle of the pavement, Remus made a sharp about-turn and Sirius laughed, immediately pulling him back by the arm. "Alright, I get it. I'm being a pansy."

"You are," Remus agreed. "And I'm tired of putting up with it, so let's just getchu on home to Prongs, okay?"

Sirius sighed. It was with love. "Okay, Moony."

Like they had on the train, Sirius reached for his hand. Remus let him at first—he'd almost grown used to it after a month—but as they began to walk, he noticed a young couple down the lane pushing a pram ahead of them and quickly pulled free of his grasp. Sirius' fingers flexed at the sudden absence, but he said nothing about it. Cringing with slight regret, Remus held his breath until the couple passed, but even then he couldn't bring himself to reach back out again. He told himself not to be bothered—Sirius understood.

On the way they discovered that the walk from the station to the Potters' was a decent one. They passed through several different neighbourhoods and suburbs until the townhouses gave way to detached homes, and then detached homes with a driveway, and then detached homes with a driveway and a garden and a path and then some. They really only got lost once, but after stopping a passerby for directions, they eventually found themselves walking down a private driveway lined with rich growth and birch trees. They had to pass a country club to find the house, but finally made it to the proper start of the Potters' drive after a few more minutes of walking.

"Bloody hell," Remus murmured, when he first spotted the house. He was used to the vast finery of the Lupin estate, but Potter Cottage was something else.

"I know, right?" Sirius said back, still taking it all in himself.

Just beyond an unlocked gate made of solid brass was an elegant driveway that stretched all the way up to a stunning three-floor Tudor home. It's sprawling front garden was covered in blooming colours and fully-grown trees of birch and oak. Each window was made of stained glass, and flowering ivy crawling up its exterior walls. The lawn was perfectly manicured, with thriving rose bushes that dotted the lane leading all the way up to the home's front door. Everywhere they looked there was more greenery, more life, but none of it felt stifling or uniform. Grass grew where it chose to grow, and the weeds were tidy but not eliminated all together. It felt a bit arbitrary to call such a fine house a 'cottage', but the home wasn't so needlessly large as to avoid any real character in favour of blatant wealth. It was warm and happy—it *looked* happy.

"Hasn't changed a lick," Sirius said, trailing his fingers across the bars of the gate. Taking the initiative, Remus pushed it open for him and together they started up the drive where they eventually passed Mr. Potter's sensible, yet still flashy, Aston Martin sedan.

"Giles would be jealous," Remus said, peeking in the window. "Look, it's got a built-in cassette player!" He glanced up, but Sirius had already moved on, having set his guitar case down on the front stoop to wring his hands nervously. Remus followed, and Sirius turned to him, taking a deep breath.

"Alright. So how should we do this?"

"How 'bout like this." Remus rang the doorbell.

“Moons, I wasn’t ready!”

Already fretting, Sirius ducked behind a shrub while a great thundering started inside the house. It sounded to Remus like frantic footsteps, and he was proven right when James burst forth out the front door, looking wide-eyed and utterly delighted to see him.

“Moony!” He declared, already hugging Remus fiercely. “About time, mate! I told you to ring me when you got to the station so Dad and I could come pick you up!”

“S’okay, I enjoyed the walk,” Remus smiled, patting James on the back in return.

Releasing him, James stepped back into the doorway. “Made it alright then? I hope your dad didn’t give you much trouble. Mum says she’ll still call if he’s got a problem with you staying over.”

“Nah, he don’t care. Got enough on his plate to not be worried about me.”

Nodding understandably, James began to usher him inside. Already Remus could smell the comforting scent of fresh baking. “Come on in then, Mum’s just in the kitchen making lunch. Pete’s gonna be by soon too! He’s just the lane over.”

Biting his lip over a smile, Remus dug his heels in and hesitated on the door mat. “Well, there’s one thing you probably know first, Prongs…”

“What’s that?”

With a great cry, Sirius burst out from behind the shrub, a single leaf caught in his fringe. “TA-DA!” He announced, as James’ jaw fell open. “Miss me, Prongsie?”

If James did, Sirius never heard about it. After snapping his head back and forth between them for a few shocked seconds, James Potter let out a furious war cry and threw himself out of the doorway, making Sirius turn-tail and run out of sheer alarm.

“OH—GOD! SOMEONE CALL ANIMAL CONTROL," Sirius wailed. "WE’VE A PRONGS ON THE LOOSE!”

“YOU WANKER!” James screamed, chasing his best friend all across the lawn, shouting and waving his fists as he ran. “GET BACK ‘ERE—I’M GONNA THROTTLE YOU!”

“MOONY! OH, MOONY—AUGH GOD—HELP ME!”

Remus shook his head. “Told you he’d be mad!” He called, just as James threw himself forward and managed to tackle Sirius from behind. With a great *‘omph!’* they went down into a single pile and began to roll across the lawn like two thrashing crocodiles. No surprise, it was James who came up on top, pinning Sirius on his stomach as he rubbed his smug face into the grass.

“YOU BASTARD! YOU CHEEKY FUCKING BASTARD! DO YOU EVEN *KNOW* HOW WORRIED I WAS?!”

Sirius made a grunting noise that might’ve been something akin to ‘no, why don’t you tell me?’ and James finally let him up to breathe.

“OUT WITH IT! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL THIS TIME?!”

“Oh, you know…” Sirius began spitting foliage. “Around…”

With another cry, James thrust his face back down into the turf and Remus just sighed, crossing his arms. He might’ve gone to break the tussle up himself, had someone else not stepped out onto the stoop with him.

“What the devil is going on out here?”

Remus spun around to find a woman standing in the doorway, holding a hand to her forehead as she peered out at the pair of wrestling boys on her front lawn. He knew instantly that it was James’ mum—she had his almond-shaped eyes and brown complexion, with the same high ridged nose and angular cheeks. She appeared a bit older than he’d imagined, but still clearly a pretty woman, with her hair methodically pinned back from her face and an intricate golden earring dangling from each ear.

“James, what are you doing? Get up this instant!” Mrs. Potter ordered. She had a light accent which James lacked, but there wasn’t a hint of anger in her voice. “Honestly, what does that boy think he’s up to?”

“Just a bit of dog training,” Remus quipped out of the corner of his mouth. She caught it and turned on him. For a moment he had the good sense to be frightened—Euphemia Potter was said to be a generally kind woman, but her temper was not one to be prodded.

“You must be Remus,” she said, and then rather than reprimanding any of them, she smiled kindly and offered her hand.

Remus relaxed. “I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Potter,” he said, taking it.

“Oh please, do call me Effie.”

He wouldn’t, but nodded anyway. “You, ehm… have a wonderful house... spectacular garden.”

“The garden’s not my doing I’m afraid,” Mrs. Potter said wistfully. “That’s all Monty. I’ve the brown thumb in the family, but James has told us a lot about you, Remus. He’s been oh so eagerly awaiting your arrival…” She cast her eyes back out across the lawn, where James was still busy grinding Sirius’ face into the dirt. “Though now he seems a bit distracted.”

Remus laughed nervously. “Party my fault I think. I hope you don’t mind, but I brought a spare.”

“Oh, not at all.” Mrs. Potter squinted at the pair. Then she huffed good-naturedly and raised her chin to shout; *“James Fleamont Potter,* if you know what’s good for you then you’ll release that poor boy at once—!”

Spurned by his mother’s words, James gave Sirius’ back one more shove for good measure before at last rolling off him. He was laughing now—Sirius too—and when they stood up they slung an arm over the other’s shoulder, grinning as they made their way back back up to the front door.

“I think you knocked a tooth loose,” Remus heard Sirius say.

“You sure it wasn’t something in your *brain?”* James replied.

More laughter, and Mrs. Potter’s eyes shot wide as she finally realised who it was.

“Is that—it can’t be,” she gasped; “Mr. Sirius Black!”

Sirius looked up, and his face was instantly aglow with joy.

“Hi, Mum!” He cried, and Mrs. Potter opened her arms wide, letting him run to her and scooping him up in a hug so fierce it nearly pulled him off his own feet.

“It’s been so long, dear!” She cheered, squeezing him tightly. “James didn’t tell us you’d be coming!”

“Yeah well, James didn’t know!” James shot, stopping next to Remus on the doorstep.

“Ah, no matter, you’re both here!” Mrs. Potter smiled, releasing Sirius and patting Remus on the shoulder. The gesture was friendly but Remus still baulked a bit. At least she hadn’t tried to hug him too.

“Come in then,” she insisted; “I’ve got lunch ready and Monty’s just out in the back garden reading the paper.” Still grinned ear-to-ear, Mrs. Potter flitted back inside, and Remus heard her holler across the house; “MONTY—the boys are here!”

“The boys?!”

“Yes! Ring the Pettigrews, let Peterbird know they’ve arrived! And put out the lemonade! They’re probably parched, the poor dears.”

“I think she’s happy to see you,” James said, taking Sirius’ guitar from him.

“Not as happy as I am to see her,” Sirius said, with a subtle wink in Remus’ direction.

Letting James take the backpack from him too, Remus followed his friends inside, taking off his shoes in the entryway. A long hallway extended the length of the house, emptying out into what appeared to be a salon and fine dining room. Around the rich artwork, which ranged from impressionist paintings to clay statues and carven wooden figurines, rows and rows of photographs hung on every wall, each of them filled with happy memories from James’ childhood.

“Look at the handsome tyke,” Sirius razzed, pointing out a photo of a much chubbier-looking James in a baby bonnet.

“I’d like to see some of your baby photos,” James scoffed. “That hair and nose? You probably looked like a rat.”

“Au contraire, I was a very handsome baby. In fact, it was the only time my mother ever bothered to show me off. Apparently it all went downhill the moment I learned how to talk.”

“That I believe.” James paused to look Sirius up and down. “By the way, what are you wearing?”

Sirius glanced down at his ill-fitting outfit. He still had his arse-clinging jeans on, but his shirt was about three-sizes too long for his

torso and combined with the oversized leather jacket he was absolutely swimming in fabric.

“What, don’t like my new look, Prongs?” He sniffed haughtily.

“Didn’t say that, it’s just different s’all.”

“Shirt’s mine,” Remus professed, much to Sirius’ apparent displeasure.

James peered on him, before looking back to Sirius and lifting the edge of his jacket sceptically. “Why’re you wearing Moony’s clothes—and how did you even *get* here?!”

At that, Sirius and Remus exchanged another glance.

“It’s… a long story,” Sirius said.

“Well,” James started, looking more tense than he had a moment ago, “you can tell me over lunch, I s’pose. Mum made kheer—it’s like a rice pudding. And a trifle too.”

“Ugh,” Sirius moaned happily, almost as though the very mention of dessert had soothed all of his troubles; “Prongs, your mum wouldn’t happen to be single, would she?”

* * *

Remus’ earlier assessment of Potter Cottage turned out exactly right—it was warm. The interior of the home was just as grand as its out, and every room felt rich with character. The mahogany floors of each hallway were swathed in vibrant rugs and lush plants sat in every corner. The furniture was all of quality—solid wood that looked as though it’d been carved by only the finest artisans. Eager to get his friends settled in, James showed them around to each room on the ground floor, including the salon, where the family kept their shrine. It sat in its own corner of the room, a large table covered in a silk cloth and decorated with images of deities, fresh flowers, incense dishes, and other silver and brass instruments meant for prayer.

“This is where Mum and Dad conduct Aarti,” James said. “It’s worship—sort of like communion but we can do it at home. They sent me to Hawkings for the education, but we’re technically Hindu.”

“Nothing technical about it,” Mr. Potter called, drifting into the salon

with his hands held lazily behind his back. There was no way to not mistake him for James' dad; they looked almost identical, from the wild thatch of black hair on their heads down to the dimples on their cheeks. The only differences at all were the thick streaks of silver lacing through Mr. Potter's hair and the square tortoise shell glasses he wore.

"James is right," Mr. Potter continued, "we sent him to a British school to receive a British education, but he is still a good Gujarati boy. Most of the time, anyway. Just don't tell your mother about the rest." Mr. Potter winked, and James and Sirius shared a small snigger.

"Sirius," he called after, fondly extending his arms, "it is so good to see you, my boy."

Sirius didn't hesitate; he rushed Mr. Potter with all of the same enthusiasm as he did his wife and let himself be held.

"It's good to see you too, Pops."

"James here was getting desperate. Couldn't very well sit still these past few weeks. I think perhaps he thought you'd forgotten him. Replaced him with a newer model."

"Dad," James moaned.

"Never," Sirius promised, pulling away and letting Mr. Potter ruffle his hair. Then he turned to Remus and held out a hand.

"Remus, I presume?"

Remus nodded and took the hand, only to be pulled into a great bear-hug of an embrace. He didn't fight it, but when Mr. Potter released him with a hearty laugh, he couldn't help the nervous chitter that followed. "It's nice to meet you, sir..."

" 'Sir' was my father, call me Monty," Mr. Potter said, waving him off kindly before clapping his hands together. "So, boys, what are your plans for evening? I've got the nets set up in the back garden. How 'bout we have a friendly game of—"

"Monty!" Mrs. Potter clipped from the salon's doorway; "Didn't I tell you to set out the lemonade?"

"Yes, yes, dear. Be right over." As his wife turned to leave Mr. Potter leaned over to Remus and murmured; "Scary, that one. But she does

make the most wonderful suppers."

While his parents set to preparing the table for lunch, James led them on a tour of the back garden, which did indeed boast a near full-size football pitch along with a large oak cradling a treehouse that appeared bigger than some flats Remus had been to in the East End. On the door was a small sign bearing the words *'James' Place – only smiles allowed'.* Along with the vast field and heavy oak, Mr. Potter kept an immaculate lawn, which he decorated with various fruit trees and a porch big enough to entertain dozens of people.

After the backyard, they finally ventured up to the second floor, where James showed off his father's office, which doubled as a library, Mrs. Potter's studio (she was on leave of work for the summer), and several impressive guest rooms. Each was large enough to house a king-size bed and every door seemed to open up to a room more lively and large than that before it.

"We have family come and stay with us lots," James said, after showing them the third bathroom. "You'd love my cousin Ajay, he's got great taste in music, but he's living in Boston right now. Going to Harvard."

"Hey, you still got that picture of Farrah Fawcett pinned to the ceiling over your bed?" Asked Sirius.

"It's a movie poster!"

"Yeah. Of her tits."

"Now why would that be hanging over your bed, Prongs?" Remus added with a smirk.

Rolling his eyes, James led them down the hall to his own bedroom, which was easily four times the size of their dorm room Hawkings. Every wall was plastered with photographs, Arsenal team banners, and posters showcasing his favourite bands. The second-hand guitar he'd received that same summer was leaning proudly up against his desk, and above that hung the framed Kink's album *Something Else,* which was amazingly signed by the entire band. Mr. Potter had picked it up at auction a few Christmases ago and Remus had been infinitely jealous when he'd heard about it, but James never took the thing off the wall even to bring it to school, too worried it'd get ruined.

"Mum says you guys can take whatever guest room you'd like," James

said, sitting on his bed. “Pete’s gonna stay over too so it’ll be just like school. You are staying, right?”

Remus nodded. “Giles gave me a week or so.”

“And you?” James looked to Sirius sternly. “You gonna tell me what’s been going on—why I haven’t heard from you all summer and then you just suddenly turn up on my doorstep with Moony?”

Sirius rubbed the back of his neck like Remus did when he was feeling guilty. “I’d rather wait until Pete gets here. Don’t really want to go over it twice…”

James looked like he wanted to argue, but in the end he only nodded in agreement. “You’re okay though?”

Sirius chanced a glance at Remus. “Yeah, m’okay.”

Staring at his best friend a moment longer, James eventually turned his gaze on Remus, who smiled comfortingly. He looked down, but just then Mrs. Potter’s voice carried up to them from the ground floor; “Boys, lunch! And Peterbird’s here!”

“ ‘Peterbird’?” Sirius echoed wryly.

“Don’t you say anything,” James groaned. “Mum’s been calling him it forever, but I know he hates it.”

“Heh—couldn’t imagine why.”

Shaking his head, James jumped up from the bed and slid his arm around Sirius’ shoulders. “C’mon then,” he said, “let’s eat.”

After Peter had had his turn to sputter and gape at Sirius’ arrival, they took lunch under one of the apple trees in the backyard, laying out a blanket and sitting around one another as the summer breeze tousled their hair. Peter staunchly remained in the shade, still nursing a terrible sunburn he’d gotten on holiday, and Sirius restrained himself and only teased him for the nickname twice.

While they’d been setting up, Remus had caught Mrs. Potter staring at them while she set the porch table for herself and Mr. Potter. It took him a while to realise that she was in fact staring at Sirius; the look on her face simultaneously worried and baffled, as though she were simply waiting for him to disappear in front of her eyes. It was obvious that she knew something was wrong—maybe that was just

what it meant to be a mother—but she always held her tongue, pinching Sirius' cheeks every time he turned to her. On the other hand, Mr. Potter didn't seem all that interested in prying. Out of all of them, Peter was the least subtle. He eyed Sirius' clothes and general lack of belongings like the whole thing were a puzzle he'd yet to solve, and when Sirius brought Andy's guitar out he couldn't help but blurt;

"I thought Moony had the guitar?"

"I did," Remus surmised automatically, "but it's Sirius' guitar."

"So he was with you then?" Peter asked, not missing a beat.

Thankfully, it was Sirius who answered; "I called Moony a little while ago," he said. "He helped me out, made sure I could get here."

"Why didn't you call me first?" James demanded. "No offence, Moony."

Remus waved him off, picking at one of Mrs. Potter's homemade sausage rolls.

"I couldn't remember the number for the summer house," Sirius said. It was a lie, Remus knew. Sirius didn't forget things easily, especially not his best friend's phone number. James however, didn't seem to make the connection. He slumped back on his spot on the blanket and glared down at his lemonade grudgingly.

"So… what happened then?"

Strumming gently on the guitar, Sirius sucked on his lower lip. "Got disowned."

"Your parents threw you out?!" Peter gasped, with as little bedside manner as usual.

"Not exactly. They sent me away. To this school… in Belgium."

James and Peter's reactions were not all that different from how Remus' own had been. Their jaws dropped and they looked around, blinking as though they were waiting for each other to make sense of it.

"B-B-BELGIUM?!" Peter ended up sputtering. "What the bloody hell were you doing there?!"

"Like I said, it was a school," Sirius continued. "Got sent there for 'bad

behaviour', but I managed to break out and hop a train into France.

"France?!" James cursed. "You mean you just casually hitchhiked through two countries?!"

"Not really. After the train I caught a ferry to Dover, and then Moony picked me up. Been staying at his place ever since."

"For how long?" Asked Peter.

"A… few days."

"A few DAYS?!" James shouted, before turning on Remus. "You had a few days with him and you couldn't be bothered to pick up the phone and let us know? You knew he was okay and you didn't say *anything?!"*

"I told him not to, Prongs!" Sirius insisted. "I didn't want to ruin your guys' holiday."

"Holiday-schmoliday! I thought you were dead—or—or at least in trouble!"

"He was in trouble, haven't you been listening?" Remus lashed, suddenly more annoyed. "They tried to disown him and then sent him out of the bloody country! You were in Devon—what was he supposed to do?!"

"Moony," Sirius said, placing a hand on Remus' thigh; "it's okay. They didn't know."

"Everything alright, boys?" Mr. Potter called. He and his wife were sitting across the lawn on the patio, but James had certainly been yelling loud enough for them to hear. The sudden attention made Remus spring upright, and gently nudge Sirius' hand from his leg.

"Yeah, Dad, everything's fine," James called before huffing and turning back to the pair of them. "This is fucking mental," he said in a low voice; "You know this is fucking mental, right?"

"Yeah," Remus and Sirius said together.

"Great, now that we're all on the same page… You're gonna to tell us what it is we 'don't know'?" Still glaring at them, James snatched up a roll and bit into it fiercely, as though his mother's home cooking could calm him.

Sirius shifted uncomfortably on the blanket before setting the guitar beside himself. “I’m not going back to school.”

“Not going back?” Peter echoed, perhaps his millionth question since the entire conversation started. “Why, ‘cause you were disowned?”

Sirius nodded.

“Couldn’t you ask your parents to take you back—convince them to change their minds? Maybe if you say you’re sorry, they’ll take you back.”

“Of course he’s not gonna say sorry!” Remus snapped. “Don’t you know what they’ve done to him? They’re monsters—how could you even think that, Pete?”

“Well, at least then he could go back with us,” Peter said sorely. “School’s almost starting anyway—he won’t even have to see them soon!”

“You mean you’d actually support him going back there? Just like they want? *What the fuck, Peter?!”*

“Okay,” James started, throwing his arms out, “so going back home isn’t an option then, but you can’t just drop out!”

“I can’t access Alphard’s inheritance until at least November,” Sirius said, “that’s too late for tuition.”

“I bet you could talk to McGonagall,” Peter reasoned. “Get a payment plan or something. Maybe she could make you a scholarship student—like Lily!”

Sirius scoffed sarcastically; “If by some miracle, McGonagall agreed to let me come back without any incentive, she’d still have to tell my parents.”

“Why don’t we just pay your tuition?” James said.

Instantly Sirius turned stony. “No. No way.”

“Why not? Any one of us has the money, we just gotta ask our parents. You can stay here too—until school starts. My parents won’t mind, they love you.”

Sirius’ grip tightened on the neck of the guitar. This was the conversation Remus knew he’d been dreading the most—and Remus

had been dreading it because just like James, he couldn't understand why Sirius wouldn't accept the help he was definitely owed.

"I love them too," Sirius said, "but I still can't accept."

James smacked a hand down defiantly. "You're telling me that after a decade of friendship and enough bullshit to sink the bloody Titanic, you can't accept a bit of money to come back to school with us?"

"It's not just the money," Sirius said stubbornly. "If you tell your parents what happened they'd have to tell somebody and then I might get sent back."

Sticking his hand into his lemonade, Peter brought an ice cube up to cool his sunburned forehead. "I thought you said you were disowned? Why would they even want you back?"

"Watch the tone, Pete," Remus snapped.

"I didn't mean it like *that!"*

Sirius scratched his head. "I guess I don't know for sure if I've been disowned, but I'm also not really looking to find out. I just need to get by until I'm eighteen and then I'll never have to worry about it again. Moony's right, I won't go back to them."

"Then come back to school—with us!" James pushed. "My parents aren't just gonna let you walk back into that place, not if you explain everything! I'm sure there's something my dad could do legally, and then it wouldn't matter what your raving mother has to say."

"And what would I tell them? Your parents?"

"The truth! Tell them they sent you fucking Belgium."

"It's just a school. It'd be like Moony's dad sending him to Hawkings—nothing against the law there."

"Tell them you've been mistreated then," Peter supplied. "I mean you have been, haven't you?"

"It'd just be my word against theirs," Sirius said. "And they've got the influence, while I've got no proof."

"Yes, you do."

The words had come out before Remus could stop them, but he didn't

regret them—not even when Sirius' sighed and dropped his head.

"You have your scars," Remus said firmly, grabbing Sirius by the shoulder and forcing him to look at him. "You could start telling people what happened. Show them. It's proof."

"They're six years old, no one's gonna care."

"But they might if you tell them your parents forcibly sent you out of the country to an institution that tried to cut your hair and beat you when you wouldn't let them!"

Sirius scowled bitterly, like he'd been betrayed, but Remus didn't have it in him to worry about it. He wanted Sirius to come back to school just as badly as the others did, and if he had to play bad cop to do it, he would.

"They really tried to cut your hair?" James asked.

"Yeah, and then they ripped it out," Remus answered for him, while Sirius just glared.

"Show us your hair, Sirius," James said firmly.

Huffing, Sirius broke away from their staring contest just long enough to reach up and rip the elastic from his hair. After a bit more finessing, the braid he'd been sporting for several weeks fell apart around his fingers. For a long time he didn't move, staring at the gingham picnic blanket. It was obvious he was reluctant to put his pain on display, but it was too important to back out now.

Willing to be brave enough for the both of them, Remus reached over and took Sirius' arm, squeezing it comfortingly. "Hey, it's just us," he murmured.

Sirius eyed him, but with a final sigh, eventually turned around on the blanket. James and Peter were on their knees a second later, leaning in to get a good look at the bald patch at the very base of his skull. After three weeks the hair had grown back sparsely, but at least the skin didn't look raw anymore.

"Oh Sirius, mate," James whispered, "you gotta come back with us. You gotta tell my parents."

"I didn't even want to tell you," Sirius grumbled, turning around again.

“I know,” James said, the pain clear in his voice, “but we’re thankful you did.” He reached over and took both of Sirius’ hands in his own. It was an intimate thing, but Remus wasn’t a bit jealous. He loved James too.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” James promised. “Screw school, then. There doesn’t have to be a timeline—no expectations. We’ll figure everything else out as we go.”

Pressing his lips together, Sirius squeezed James’ hands back. Then they smiled at one another, brothers in all but name, and it was enough. Sirius simply took up his guitar and James settled back into his spot on the blanket, renewed and the same all at once.

“If it’s what you want, then I’ll talk to them,” Sirius murmured, setting his fingers to the cords.

James nodded. “Thank you, Sirius.”

Remus didn't say anything; he didn't need to. He and Sirius had their own ways of talking to each other, but James and Sirius were a beast of their own nature. Only James could get through to Sirius that way. Remus tried to tell himself that it was normal to be jealous. He just wished he could see Tomny, or at least stop missing him.

While the rest of them continued to eat their lunch in relative peace, Sirius began to play. It was Remus’ song, the one they’d practised in the park. Remus could hear all the words in his head.

When those two kids found each other,
Heaven opened up and cried,
Dear lovely children, come to me;

And so our Johnny found his lover,
He felt a light that they couldn’t see,
He prayed away the heartache on his knees;

The Mary-Anne her mother once knew,
Never left her childhood street,
Instead she found her answers in her dreams;

Head held high, never cry,
Our lady's love is nigh;
Hear our Lady of Conceptual Hope's sad lullaby…

"What's that tune?" James asked, over another mouthful of sausage and chutney.

"Moony's new song."

"It's a work in progress—show you later," Remus said, before anyone could ask him to start singing.

"Glad to see you've been doing some homework," Peter said wryly. "But are there any more surprises we should know about? Like, neither of you are suddenly getting hitched, right?"

"No, Wormtail," Sirius smiled; "Though I wouldn't put it past Prongs and Evans."

"Oh, I dunno. That probably depends on how Lily's going to take the news of James and Farrah Fawcett," Remus sniggered.

"You're all wankers," James said, already moved on to the trifle.

* * *

To no one's surprise, it turned out to be much harder for Sirius to get the words out in front of Mr. and Mrs. Potter. He and James waited until that evening when all of them were sitting around the table and playing cards. Mr. Potter had already kicked their arses at whist and they'd just moved onto blackjack when Mrs. Potter had strolled into the dining room with drinks for all of them. They'd been having so much fun together that Remus had almost forgot the biggest purpose for their visit, but Euphemia kindly reminded him when she asked the fatal question:

"So, are you boys excited to return to school?"

Immediately, all four of them exchanged a look, but thankfully it was James who spoke first.

"Mum, there's something we have to tell you."

Their eyes connected—kind eyes—and just like that, the entire mood shifted. James hadn't needed to say anything else, it was an automatic. Just the faintest look and all that was left was… *poor dears.*

Under the table, Remus gave Sirius' hand a squeeze.

While the rest of them retired to the parlour for evening tea, Mrs. Potter took Sirius into the study to talk. Remus sat back with Peter while Mr. Potter prayed at the shrine—James joined him, though he looked much more sombre—and as Mr. Potter was ringing his bell, he sent up a silent prayer of his own, to no one in particular.

Whoever might be listening, please just let this work out. I don't think I could let him go.

When the Aarti ceremony was over, they tried watching the telly. A game was on, Arsenal vs. Newcastle United, but not even James could pay attention. While his father sat back in his armchair and smoked a pipe, James paced the room, peppering him with reasons why Sirius couldn't be sent back until he sounded downright whiny.

"You don't get it, Dad—they're evil! They hate everything and force him to obey every single stupid rule, and even when he does he's punished! I *know* they made sure he couldn't contact us for help! They wanted him to feel alone!"

"Your mother is talking to Sirius right now," Mr. Potter said, the picture of calm. "We can't jump to any conclusions. Afterwards, we'll figure out how to contact his parents."

"NO!" James shouted. "You *can't* call his parents! If you do, that witch'll show up and drag him out by his hair just like last time!"

"It won't be like last time, *beta, "* Monty assured him.

"But you *saw* his hair, didn't you, Dad? They mutilated him! And there's bruises all along his neck like he's been strangled!"

Remus bit down on the edge of his teacup. He wasn't sure it would help very much if he told James that the bruises were actually from the three weeks he and Sirius had spent snogging from dawn till dusk.

Mr. Potter tapped his pipe out on an ashtray. "Your mother will know what to do, James. Give them time."

Bitterly throwing himself back into the sofa, James crossed his arms

and sulked. Peter ended up offering him a mint from the bowl on the coffee table but he just shook his head, glaring at the television. Remus understood how he felt perfectly; it wasn't fair. Finding Sirius at that Devon port made him more sure than ever that if he returned to Bath they'd never see him again. Even if Sirius eventually decided that he wasn't interested in bringing their summer fling back to school with them, it didn't matter. Sirius was his friend before anything else, and if it came down to leaving him behind while the rest of them returned to Hawkings, then Remus was sure they'd smuggle him in first.

Halfway into the match, with Arsenal leading 3 to 1, Sirius emerged from the study looking tired and grim.

"She wants to talk to you, Mr. Potter," Sirius said, though he'd never called Fleamont anything other than 'Monty' or 'pops'.

Mr. Potter stood up from his chair and moved past Sirius into the hall, pausing only to set a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Chin up, son," he told him, and Sirius gave a half-hearted shrug. After Mr. Potter had gone, Sirius slumped down on the sofa next to Remus, who had to restrain himself from reaching out and taking his hand.

"What'd you tell her? What'd she say?" James demanded straight away.

"She's gonna call my mum," Sirius murmured lifelessly.

"No! Didn't you show her everything, and tell her about Belgium and —and how you got your scars?"

" 'Course I did," Sirius snapped, "but what's it matter? I'm just a stupid kid who can't do anything on their own."

James was on his feet in a second. "Fine then. I'll just go talk to them."

"James, no," Sirius said, reaching out and taking his arm, "I'm not gonna argue with your parents."

"Then let me argue for you!"

"Look, I know you mean well but they're your *parents."*

“And they should be yours too!” James huffed, nearly whimpering. “No one deserves parents like that or a family who hates itself so much.”

“He’s right, Sirius,” Remus said. Sirius turned on him, giving him an incredulous look that said *‘who are you to talk?’* He knew that were they alone, Sirius would’ve said as much aloud, but Remus didn’t care. “It’s okay to ask for help," he told him. "You asked for mine, right?”

Sirius sagged, and his hand on James’ arm slid free, letting James march down the hall toward the study.

“Don’t you want to stay?” Peter asked from his own couch. “James wants you to stay. We all do.”

Sirius smiled sadly. “I know, mate.”

“We could be a real band if you did. We’ve been practising, right, Moony?”

“Yup.” Remus gave Sirius a sideways glance. “It’d be a shame if you gave up on us now.”

Sighing, Sirius set a hand on Remus’ knee, squeezing it tightly, and this time Remus did not pull away. To anyone else it might have looked like a friendly gesture, but he understood. It was as close as they would ever get to be in front of others.

Neither James or his parents emerged from the study for a long time. Because he could be kind sometimes, Sirius distracted Peter with talk about his new drum kit. All too eager to be the centre of attention for even a moment, Peter began rattling off the kit’s specs and everything he’d managed to play half-decently since school had gotten out. Sirius listened with his entire body—recognising Peter’s worth and giving him the consideration he deserved in that subconscious way of his. It was one of the things Remus admired most about him. He wanted so badly to kiss him.

When James finally returned he was fuming. He marched back into the salon with his fists clenched and threw himself down on the sofa next to Peter.

“How’d it go?” Sirius asked cautiously.

“Fucking terrible,” James growled. “They keep saying they have to notify your parents otherwise they could be charged for kidnapping

since you're still a minor—can you believe that? Bloody kidnapping?!"

"That can't happen!" Sirius gaped, surely horrified by the idea that the two adults he admired most in the world could be punished for his indiscretions.

"I agree, so change of plans—we're gonna kidnap you!"

"What?" Peter chirped.

"Yeah, it's our backup plan! We just need to hide you until school starts. We can go somewhere and hide until the first, and then we'll take the train north and sneak you into school. At least there we'll have plenty of time to figure out what we're going to do."

"That's such shite, where would we even go?" Sirius asked scornfully.

"Moony's maybe?"

Remus bit his lip. Hiding Sirius was one thing, but keeping four Marauders?

"We can't go to Moony's," Sirius cut-in; "His dad's no better—no offence."

Remus did not feel offended.

"What about the tree house?" Peter suggested.

"You mean in the backyard?"

"Oh yeah!" James gasped. "It's brilliant! No one ever uses it anymore, Dad can't even get up the ladder most days because of his knees! We could bring you food at night, it's genius!"

"Okay sure," Sirius scoffed, "but what'll you tell your parents? They're gonna ask where I went."

"We'll tell them whatever—tell them you ran off because they refused to help! Maybe then they'll feel guilty enough to actually do something."

"No, this is insane," Sirius said, "I'm not going to lie to everyone and hide out in your bloody treehouse just so your parents'll feel guilty!"

"Would you rather go home? Because that's exactly what's gonna happen if they call her and your mum shows up on our doorstep!"

“You could call Andy,” Remus suggested, making Sirius glare at him again.

“No—”

“Yes!” James agreed. “Andy—that’s brilliant!”

‘Stop saying everything’s brilliant!” Sirius lashed. “I’m not gonna risk getting Andy in trouble just so I can avoid my parents—her they’ll actually sue! You don't know how they are with family.”

“But she said to call her if you needed anything,” Remus interjected. “And I think this qualifies as needing something.”

“You talked to her then?” Peter asked.

“Not just talked—we ran into her and Ted this morning.”

Sirius punched him in the shoulder. “Stop spilling all my secrets!”

“You saw her?!” James practically shrieked. “You mean you actually saw her in person and you didn’t say anything?”

“Been a bit distracted, in case you haven’t noticed, Prongs. Besides, she doesn’t need to worry herself over some fight between me and my parents.”

“ ‘Some fight’? *Ugh!”* James smacked a sofa cushion in frustration. “I swear to god, you’re never dramatic when we need you to be!”

“It’ll be alright,” Sirius insisted again. “I’ll find a job or something to tide me over until November. It’s just two months!”

“You sound like you’ve already given up,” Remus hissed. “Don’t you want to come back with us?”

“Of course I do, but it’s not that easy! I need a guardian’s signature just to get back onto school grounds, so the money’s obviously not our only issue here!”

“We can forge the signature!” James cried. “Pete can!”

“I can!”

“And what if my mum shows up at school—what then?” Sirius demanded.

“Well… we—we could…” James rubbed at the back of his neck sorely. He glanced at Peter desperately, but apparently neither of them had considered that Sirius might not want to return to Hawkings because that’s exactly the place his parents expected him to be.

“I’ll take the train with you,” Sirius started, more softly now, “but you have to let me figure the rest out. It’s not as scary as you think it is.”

Remus wanted to correct him, *of course it was scary,* but he couldn’t.

If I stopped worrying about every threat my mum spat out, I’d never feel brave again. Sirius had told him that once. And though it’d been before everything, Sirius still found it within himself to be brave now. Remus supposed he owed it to him to be brave too.

“Okay,” he said, making Sirius look at him, “we’ll do whatever you want, Sirius. Just don’t ask us to let you go. We need you.” *I need you.* “We… need our Padfoot.”

Smiling sadly, Sirius nodded. Then he reached down and took Remus’ hand, making his heart jump until he reached out the other to James. James took it without hesitation and extended the same to Peter before forcing his face into that friendly James Potter smile.

“We’ll figure this out,” he promised.

Sirius nodded again, more firm this time, but just then a door slammed open down the hall, rattling every photo frame on the wall. A few seconds later, Euphemia Potter burst into the parlour, waving her hands frantically while her husband brought up the rear.

“I cannot *believe it!”* She seethed. *“Oooooh that WOMAN! I swear I’ll—”*

Mrs. Potter launched into a series of expletives only James and Mr. Potter understood while waving her hands about furiously. Her loyal husband followed her about the salon, wincing and trying his best to calm her.

“C’mon now, Effie,” Monty said, “let’s not do this in front of the boys.”

Undeterred by the obvious show of rage, James jumped to his feet, looking delighted. “So how’d the call go, Mum?”

“That—THAT—WITCH!” Mrs. Potter let out another frustrated wail while her fists trembled at her sides. “How could she say such—and

about her own—!" Stopping short, Mrs. Potter took a deep breath and passed right by her son, instead stepping up to Remus and Sirius' sofa. Remus couldn't decide if she looked like she were going to scream or burst into tears, but then it didn't matter anymore. Mrs. Potter had already knelt before Sirius on the rug and clasped his hand in her own, making the bangles at her wrist twinkle.

"Sirius," she started, "would you like to stay here for the rest of the summer?"

Sirius' eyes turned to dark saucers.

"Well, I-I—"

"I know it's only a few short days until your term starts," Mrs. Potter rambled, "but I want you to know you are *welcome* here, *beta,* and that you may stay however long you wish."

It was possibly the first and only time Remus had seen Sirius without words. When several more seconds had passed and Sirius still had not said anything, he nudged him pointedly. Sirius blinked as if his entire body were resetting, and then coughed, turning red all over.

"I…"

"You don't have to, of course," Mrs. Potter continued, "but if you'd like to, I want you to stay with us. From tomorrow until forever, if need be."

It wasn't a question, not even a suggestion. She wanted him. It was crystal clear then how Sirius had become so taken with the family, despite only ever having visited the one time. The Potters did not wait for you to want them in return, they simply expelled their love, and waited for you to collect it. And Sirius, who so desperately craved being wanted, could not deny them.

"Yes," Sirius said, voice small like a child, "yes, I would like to stay… ma'am."

And just like that, Mrs. Potter straightened up, a relieved smile on her face. "Wonderful! I'll call the school in the morning and we can get everything sorted! We'll have to get you some new clothes, and all of your school things, of course, but we haven't started that for James either so we'll just do it all together!" She prattled, stopping just long enough to place a kiss on either of Sirius' cheeks. "For now I think I'm going to start clearing out the spare bedroom right next to James'

room. We thought to put you up further down the hall since Monty's been using it for storage and lord knows he hasn't cleaned up in there in months, but that just won't do, will it? Hmm, yes, I quite thought so! But until then, you boys just relax, okay? Oh-kay!"

Stopping to kiss Sirius once more, Euphemia Potter smoothed back her dark hair and promptly strode back into the hall towards the staircase, humming in a tight voice as she went. James looked to his father, mouth still agape.

"Dad…? What happened over the phone?"

"Let's just say the call did not go how she expected," Monty surmised, before reaching over and patting Sirius on the shoulder again. "Like Effie said, you're welcome here, son. For now or for forever, there will always be room for you here."

Sirius looked on the verge of tears. "Thank you, Mr. Potter."

Smiling, Monty tucked the end of his pipe into his mouth. "Oh, so now it's 'Mr. Potter', Sirius?"

Sirius cracked a bashful smile. "I mean, thanks, pops."

Chuckling now, Monty pat Sirius on the shoulder. "Welcome home, *beta."* He nodded at each of the boys and then set off after his wife, humming more gently than she had as he ascended the staircase. Watching him go, Remus now fully understood just how James had come to be James Potter.

"So, Sirius?" James started. "Whatchu you thinking?"

"I think I have the best friends in the world," Sirius grinned. "And that I don't half bloody deserve 'em."

"I think you just have great luck," Peter said sarcastically, making Sirius sniff happily, before jumping up from the sofa to catch him in a headlock.

"Oh, how I love you, Wormy!" Sirius declared, grinding his knuckles over the shorter boy's head while he wailed. Remus laughed at both of them, but he was inclined to agree, and as he leaned his head back on the sofa and watched his friends, it occurred to him that maybe his own luck wasn't all that bad either.

Chapter End Notes

'Plonk' is slang for very cheap wine, so 'plonk change' would mean very cheap.
'Aggro' is slang for deliberately aggressive or provoking.
'Roundhouse' and 'Dingwalls' are both live music venues near Camden Lock.
The 'chokey' is slang for prison.
A 'pram' is a baby stroller.
'Trifle' is a dessert. It's like the fucking best.
'Beta' is an Indian pet name meaning something like 'son' or 'baby'. (Thank you to mendokayalways for the correction ^^)

Dw, summer's not over yet for these boys! See you next week :^)

Chapter 70: If Wishes Were Horses...

Chapter Summary

Remus wishes... and he wishes... and he wishes...

Chapter Notes

C/W: Smoking, illicit drugs & a bad trip (LSD), allusions to mental illness (Remus/Hope), homophobic language (internal monologue), and severe internalized homophobia—mostly triggered by an internal event. There are NO hate crimes or the like.

But I repeat, this chapter goes HEAVILY into Remus' subconscious. Remus experiences a BAD TRIP. If you are at all sensitive to drugs or internalized struggles or don't care to see the development of this PARTICULAR queer identity from the ground up then perhaps this fic isn't for you. (And that's okay.) This struggle (drugs/his sexuality) will not follow Remus in the same way forever, but it will be something he contends with for much of his life. This aside, struggling with your own internalized guilt/ prejudices doesn't mean that you are hopeless and/or incapable of honest love. I hope you'll understand that I'm trying to portray the story in a way I feel is honest to myself and the characters I've built, and that this is a transformative chapter. Transformation isn't always nice or easy. Peace and love <3

A/N: I got a msg recently regarding whether the 'Alice' (Simeon's friend) from chapter 24 'Come Together' is Alice Longbottom, and just so it's clear—NO, she is NOT the same character. She just happens to share the same name, which in hindsight, I can see as confusing. Just note that unless 'Alice' is explicably stated as being 'Alice LONGBOTTOM' (as in, we haven't met her in story—YET, lol) then assume she is another background OC. Thank you xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Holy Moses, I have been removed,
I have seen the spectre, he has been here, too;
Distant cousin from down the line,
Brand of people who ain't my kind;
Holy Moses, I have been removed…

- “Border Song” Elton John, 1970

The time they spent at the Potters was short but soothing, and when two days had passed and Walburga Black hadn’t shown up on the doorstep breathing fire and screaming blue murder, Sirius was finally able to relax some. This meant that his friends were able to relax, and eventually the gentle lull of the house had soothed all of them. Every evening when Mr. Potter arrived home from work, they played football in the back garden while Mrs. Potter took photos or busied herself by hanging laundry on the line. The house was considerably busy, since Peter had elected to stay over as well and Mrs. Potter was working from home at the moment, but Remus was used to sneaking around. In front of others, he and Sirius were as normal as they’d ever been. It was only when they were alone that things became different.

They learned quickly how to recognise the patterns of their fellow inhabitants so that they could steal away for those precious few cheeky or otherwise chaste moments. Everyday around eleven o’clock, Peter would lose himself in some day-time comedy show and James would phone Lily. This guaranteed them at least a half an hour, which they never wasted. The minute their friends were securely distracted, Remus would meet Sirius somewhere they could be alone; in their bedrooms, but also behind the garden shed, or in the upstairs bathroom, or even the hallway broom cupboard where that hoover had fallen over onto Remus’ ankle and left him limping for the rest of the day. It was a bit thrilling, but also entirely terrifying… and whenever Sirius turned those wicked eyes on him, Remus could not bring himself to resist.

The days were good, and Remus was enjoying himself, but he couldn’t deny that the in-between moments—like his dreaded shit-all hour—felt slightly Spartan. He’d always had a tendency to drift off into thought; when he was twelve a teacher had even given him the strap for day-dreaming through an entire test, but something about the soft, ambience of Potter Cottage brought out the worst of it. The summer air wafted through open windows, shifting the sheer curtains of every room like merry ghosts. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why James was so James; even his ghosts were happy.

The daydreaming didn’t always prove an inconvenience, but more than once it’d unearthed a memory Remus hadn’t even known he’d had. These mostly materialised in the tiny moments, like watching Mr. Potter read his morning newspaper. He bobbed his foot while he did

so, and every so often the soft flapping of paper flutter would fill the air as he tapped the pages straight on his thigh. Remus almost always thought of Giles, but occasionally an echo of Lyall would slip through —of him sorting through document after document at the breakfast table. No meal in front of him, only coffee and that morning's briefs penned by some nameless assistant. How vast the table between had felt then.

'Remus, sit up straight,' the memory went; *'You're a boy, not an animal.'*

It was somehow worse with Mrs. Potter; she had a sing-song quality to her voice that was simultaneously comforting and yet all too jarring. Despite her friendly disposition, she was still a mother, and she was constantly going after James for the state of his hair or the perpetual grass stains that were always showing up on his trousers.

"Honestly, I should just cut them off at the knee! Leave you looking like an abnormally tall boy scout!" She grumbled that morning, after striding out of the utility room to shame her son for another pair of ruined slacks.

" 's not meh!" James said over a mouthful of toast. His mother's eyes narrowed and he swallowed very quickly; "Sirius wore those yesterday! Honestly Mum, you'd think he gets dragged around by raging bulls for fun."

"You Judas!" Sirius gasped scandalously. "That's merely the evidence of all the time I spend on my knees."

James just about choked on his fork. "Doing what?!"

"Praying, obviously. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Ha! Could've fooled me!"

"You calling me a slag? At your mother's breakfast table? Why I oughta…" Looking no less than delighted, Sirius then used the end of his fork to flick a sausage in James' direction. Unfortunately he overshot and it landed in Peter's teacup, making the poor boy shriek as hot tea surged over the sides of his cup.

"There you go, now you've stained the table cloth too!" James cackled.

"It's too damn early for this," Peter moaned, using a fork to scoop the sausage out onto the aforementioned table cloth.

“Oops! Sorry, Pete,” Sirius chittered. “Just think of it as your daily source of protein. Better than anything Potter’s offering up.”

“Eugh!” James howled, absolutely tickled pink.

As Peter began dabbing sorely at his lap, Mrs. Potter tossed the dirtyv tousers up over her shoulder. “Oh, you boys,” she huffed; “What am I to do with you?”

She marched away, leaving them to giggle like they were twelve and not about to be eighteen. Even Peter found it funny after James ‘accidentally’ fumbled the sugar bowl onto Sirius’ eggs, but Remus wasn’t really paying attention. He was off on his own; lost and drifting.

‘Remus, darling, you’ve a hole in your trousers. Did it happen while you were playing outside? Ah well, take them off so Mummy might mend them.’

It was a stupid memory—he didn’t even know if it was *real.* He couldn’t recall ever having seen Hope Lupin thread a needle. Her hands were always shaking, at least when he’d known her.

Silly, I used to mend your clothes all the time, Hope said into his mind. *You were so tiny, nothing ever seemed to fit right. Your father wanted them to be tailored professionally, but how could I let anyone else touch my baby’s clothes? My sweet, sweet baby… My lovely darling boy…*

Remus wasn’t sure when the voice had warped into hers. He wasn’t even sure it *was* her. Every time he thought too hard on it, the idea would come apart and the voice would fall silent, like smoke through his finger tips. He just wished it would all stop.

“So whadda think, Moons?”

Remus looked up. He couldn’t even tell how long he’d been out of it.

“Er… ‘bout what?”

James was picking his teeth with a fingernail. “Croquet. Dad pulled the set outta the garage yesterday. You game?”

“I dunno know how to play.”

“You knock the ball into the hoop,” Sirius said wryly. “Surely you can manage that, sports star?”

And because *even* Remus could manage that, they spent most of the

afternoon in the garden, knocking colourful plastic balls through less colourful plastic hoops. As it happened, Remus found that he wasn't entirely terrible at croquet; he and James won the first two rounds, but then they switched partners and it became quickly apparent that the victories had just been a combination of James' skill and beginner's luck. After lunch Lottie made the trek over, sporting a pretty blue dress and sunhat that was so wide-brimmed she could've fit an elephant beneath it. Her appearance turned their group of four into a group of five, which apparently meant that one of them would have to sit out. Remus tried to volunteer, but in the end it was Peter who grudgingly flopped down on the shaded picnic blanket so his sister could play.

"Don't you have any of your own friends to hang out with?" He grumbled, sitting cross-legged with his cheek pressed into the side of his mallet.

"None who are as mindlessly unoccupied as you four," Lottie answered coolly, adjusting the brim on her ridiculously large sun hat. "Mary's still in Paris, and Marlene and Lily are decidedly unavailable. There's always Bethany, though she's in Croatia visiting family. And Anette's taking a sculpture course in Florence. And Pernilla's in Sweden again, though she just wrote me and—"

"Alright, we get it! Take your shot already."

Lottie crossed her arms. "It's Sirius' turn."

But Sirius wasn't listening. For the last several minutes he'd been creeping closer and closer to Remus on the other side of the hoops, a look of sceptical concern on his face.

"You sure you're okay?" He asked, for perhaps the dozenth time.

"Yes," Remus replied, "just tired."

"Did you not sleep well or something?"

"S'fine. Must just miss my own bed, I guess."

Sirius wiggled both eyebrows. "I miss your bed too."

"Stop," he hushed, just as James thumped his croquet mallet into the lawn to get their attention.

"Black! S'your turn!"

Eager to advance the game, Sirius left Remus and scuttled over. He'd already drawn his sleeves up and promptly knocked his black croquet ball through the second hoop, immediately whooping with glee. As he lined up to take his awarded second shot, James let out a spectacular *'LOOK OUT!'* and Sirius flubbed it all, sending the ball sideways several metres to rest by the old oak.

"Whoopsie, must'a been seeing things," James sniggered.

Sirius whipped his head around; "You toff! We're on the same team now!"

"Oh… right."

"So immature," Lottie sighed, shaking her head. "Really, you boys should be more careful. No girl's going to want to marry any of you if you don't grow up some. Like I met this guy recently, and—"

"I knew it!" Peter cried suddenly. "You didn't want to come hang out with us, you just needed someone new to brag to!"

Lottie gasped, offended. "I wasn't bragging! *Hmph*—honestly Petey, far from me to want to include my own brother in my wedding plans."

Peter clasped both hands over his ears. "I'm not listening—I'm NOT LISTENING!"

"Lot!" Sirius gasped, his jaw practically dragging the dirt; "You mean you're actually engaged?!"

"No *way,"* James said, equal parts aghast.

Lottie twisted an innocent blonde curl around one finger. "Well, I suppose not *yet.* But it's only a matter of time."

"I didn't even know you were dating someone," Remus said, practically overcome with chills at the idea of being married at seventeen.

"She isn't!" Peter shouted, hands still over his ears. "She's just deluded herself into thinking some guy she's met twice is in love with her!"

"I thought you weren't listening?" Lottie scoffed. She recovered a second later, looking pleased as punch as she dropped her croquet mallet down and lined it up with the yellow ball. "His name is Roger, and I'm going to marry him—even if he doesn't know it yet."

With a fine clatter, Lottie sent her ball whizzing over the grass, right through the third hoop. Sirius whistled and then clapped for her, before leaning casually on the top of his mallet.

“So where’d you meet this prince charming?”

“At Daddy’s office. I was filing some paperwork for him. Almost refused—it’s terribly dreary in there—but the secretary called in and I knew the system so I sort of thought, why not?”

“Sounds like the best ‘why not’ of your life,” James said. “What’s he do for work?”

“Oh I dunno, must be something important. He wore a suit and Daddy just about tripped over himself to shake his hand.”

“Did you actually talk to him at all?” Remus asked.

“Obviously, I’m not a total lunatic. The first time we got to chatting about the business, and other stuff like my nails—he complimented the colour. Then the second time I saw him he brought me the loveliest bouquet of flowers.”

“Which you said he plucked from the vase in the hallway!” Peter bleated.

“Shush. It’s the thought that counts.”

“Wow, Lot,” Sirius mused; “Sounds like you found yourself a real keeper. What’s he look like then? I at least hope he’s fit.”

Peter smacked the picnic blanket with an open palm. “Stop encouraging her!”

“Oh yes,” Lottie grinned, lining up her second shot; *“Very* fit.” She took the shot, which sailed across the lawn and went straight into the fourth hoop, and celebrated by giving Remus a tight hug around the middle as her teammate. As Remus patted her on the back in congratulations, James just sighed and looked sadly at Sirius’ ball, still adrift beneath the oak tree.

“Next time, I’m her partner.”

Sirius flipped him the bird.

“You should knock Remus out,” Lottie instructed the next round, when Peter had gotten up for his turn.

“Which daft idiot let you in here?” Peter grumbled, before ignoring his sister and trying for the hoop instead. He missed, and huffed vexingly before allowing Remus up to take his shot.

“Yeah, go Moony!” Sirius cried apathetically from the picnic blanket. He was lying down with his sunglasses over his eyes and not even paying attention, but did raise his fist as a show of moral support.

Licking his lips, Remus drew back his mallet and struck the ball. He was aiming for the hoop, but alas, he only managed to clip the edge. Immediately the ball spun wildly off course, knocking Peter’s aside with a mournful *thwack!*

“Told you,” Lottie said, as Peter groaned.

“Nice clear!” James said from the other side of the hoops.

“Oh! Did he get it in?” Sirius demanded, lifting his head. “Good show!”

“I was aiming for the hoop, honest,” Remus said to Peter, who just waved him on while scowling at Lottie.

“Go on, take your shot, Remus,” Lottie said. He obediently lined up the mallet, trying his best to aim while James, his partner this round, flapped his arms up and down enthusiastically.

“Yeah, you can totally sink it!” He called. “Straight on through the middle—don’t blob it! You want it right offside, yeah?”

“I had sports jargon,” Remus grumbled, drawing the mallet back. He’d just about sent it when another voice called out;

“Might want to move your hands up ‘a bit.”

Remus stopped dead and looked up to find Simeon Pettigrew strolling out the Potters’ back door. He looked tanner than Remus had last seen him, and the sun had turned his flaxen hair a deep honey blonde. He was wearing a navy polo and beige slacks like he’d just come from the country club, which he very well could’ve. On anyone else Remus might’ve found the attire entirely unappealing, but on Simeon it just worked. Maybe it was the earring…

“What are you doing here?” Peter asked, squinting at him.

Simeon flashed him a dazzling smile. “Mum sent me to pick you up,

it's almost tea. You guys been out here all day?"

"We're 'taking the air'," Peter drawled, just as Sirius bolted upright on the picnic blanket and raised the sunglasses from his eyes.

"Oh shit—Sim!"

Simeon waved. "Alright, Black?"

Rather than answer, Sirius jumped to his feet and raced over, taking Simeon's arm fondly while they both clapped each other on the back. "How's Oxford?" Sirius asked.

"Eh, you know how it is. Just 'a bunch of wanna-be philosophers crammed into the same five-by-five cubicle. But what about you, eh? You lot look good. Who's winning?"

"Lottie," all four of them said at once.

"Figures," Simeon said, as Lottie took a commemorative bow; "only one person's ever been able to beat my little sister at croquet."

"Who?" Sirius asked.

Simeon crossed his arms, looking smug. "You're looking at him."

And that was how they ended up getting their arses handed to them on a silver platter for the remainder of the hour. Peter gave up early, hating anything that might pit him against his brother, but Sirius was all too eager to fill the gap and the rest of them cycled on and off as they so pleased.

"I was so close that time!" Sirius insisted, after his ball missed the hoop by only a hair and skipped out of bounds.

"Close only counts in horseshoes," Simeon answered, poking him with the end of his mallet.

Having given his mallet up to James that round, Remus stood back on the sidelines and watched. Simeon's sudden entrance had left him feeling a bit joltish, and though he was happy to see him, it was much easier to let Sirius take the brunt of the attention. Under the impression that a cigarette or two might help calm his nerves—he hadn't had one since that day in the park with Sirius—Remus had just begun to entertain the thought of sneaking off when Mrs. Potter came strolling out the back door, announcing carved watermelon and

lemonade for everyone. As they all jumped up and made a beeline for the porch, Remus hung back to pat his pockets, but he'd forgotten his cigarettes in the house.

"Moony, come get some lemonade," James called, flagging him down from the porch. Remus nodded back, and started across the grass, but then Simeon fell into step with him and he promptly fumbled his croquet mallet.

"Hellooo there," he drawled, staring at him with those baby blues.

Swallowing thickly, Remus bent over to pick up the mallet, and when he straightened up he found Simeon waiting for him, stopped in the middle of his path to the porch. "Hi…"

"Lose something?"

He glanced over Simeon's shoulder, toward Mrs. Potter, who surely wouldn't approve of the smoking. "Er… nah."

Simeon's eyes tightened curiously at the corners. "I didn't happen to spit in your tea last time we met, did I?"

"What—no."

"Why are you ignoring me then?"

"I was just… playing the game." Remus gestured meekly to the mallet in his hand.

"Hmm… alright." Simeon looked him up and down. "You got taller."

It was true; Remus could look Simeon right in the eye now. In fact, he might've had a few inches on him—gangly inches, like a half-stuffed scarecrow.

"Maybe you just shrunk," he said. Simeon chuckled, biting his lip over a smile.

"Forgot you were funny. There aren't many funny people at Oxford. Tolerable, but too priggish for their own good most of the time."

"Why do you go then?"

"Expectations, I suppose. Why do you go to school, Lupin?"

"Moony!" James called again. He was holding up a glass, but nearly

dropped it when Sirius poked him in the bum with the end of a croquet mallet. Lottie let out a happy shriek as the two of them tousled, while Peter dove to save the plate of watermelon.

“Them,” Remus said, straight away. “Because of them.”

Simeon followed the look. “Ah… good reason, that.”

When he turned back to him, Remus felt his stomach drop a few feet. Simeon may not have spat into his tea, but he’d definitely been avoiding him. He couldn’t help being nervous, Simeon was so effortlessly cool. And he admired him—more than admired him. It was a *queer* feeling, he now realised. He wasn’t just a Siriusexual then —he was an entire queer.

“Are you staying for a while?” Simeon asked.

“A few days. We go back to school next week.”

“Right, right. Got any plans?”

His heart skipped a beat. “James mentioned a football game… and—uh, band stuff. Mostly writing, but we’re just gonna hang around I think…”

Simeon nodded thoughtfully. “Well, I’ll be in and out. Trying to visit as many people as I can before heading back for the term. Alice lives in Wembley now, and Cass’s gone off to Enfield. Might pop the train to go visit him, but…” Simeon leaned in; “try to keep Sunday night free.”

“What’s Sunday night?”

“Nothing, yet. But the week is young, and you’d be surprised what people can throw together by Sunday.”

“Oxford people? Thought you said they were all prigs.”

“Oh, they are. But the parties aren’t all bad.” Simeon winked, and Remus felt *queer* all over again.

Sirius, he told himself. *Sirius, Sirius, Sirius!*

“You save us any ‘a that?” Simeon called, already steering away from Remus toward the porch. Halfway there, Mrs. Potter reappeared and called out to him;

“Oh Sim, dear, your mother’s quite upset you’ve been gone for so long. Might be a good idea to get along.”

“Yeah, we’re going,” Simeon replied, jumping up the porch steps and grabbing Peter by the shoulders. “C’mon, little bro, get your things together! Just let me know if you need help tying your shoelaces!”

“Gerroff!” Peter grunted, batting his brother away. “I’m going!”

“What was Simeon saying to you?” Sirius asked, after James and Mrs. Potter had gone to see the Pettigrew siblings off.

“Ha, curtain-twitcher,” Remus said, stuffing his face with watermelon.

“I am not a curtain-twitcher! I just asked what he said to you.”

“… Nuffin’.”

“Didn’t look like ‘nuffin’,” Sirius grumbled.

Remus swallowed and turned to him. “He only asked vague questions and made vaguer statements. Probably just wanted to seem ‘cool’.”

“Mhm, sure.” Just then Sirius reached around, copping a handful of Remus’ bum. “Just remember, I had this first.”

“Hands off!” Remus hissed. He was just in time too—a second later Mrs. Potter rounded the back door.

“Boys, Monty’s just rung me and he says he’ll be getting off early tonight. Shall we head into town to get you some new things, Sirius?”

Tucking his hands behind his back, Sirius began to worry at his bottom lip. “Sorry, Mum, but I… don’t have the money.”

Effie frowned at him, then smiled. “Don’t worry about that, *beta.* Both of you just get your shoes.”

She vanished again, as quickly as she’d come, and Sirius flashed Remus a bashful look. “Don’t be jealous, but I think I’m in love.”

Remus shoved him.

* * *

The car almost felt crowded with five people. Mr. and Mrs. Potter rode up front of course, and after folding himself into the two-door coupé, Remus found himself pressed against the driver's side window, with James and Sirius crammed next to him. They were excited, and even tried playing a round of bumps until Effie snapped at them to cut it out. Remus thought briefly that this must be what it felt like to be a part of a normal family; to have two parents that liked each other and prattled on about new school clothes and sensible footwear, and to have brothers who couldn't help but get themselves in trouble and never really meant any harm by it. That was, if you were shagging one of them.

They went first to the tailors, the same shop where the Potters had been ordering James' uniforms since he was in year two. It'd taken quite a bit of coaxing on Mrs. Potter's behalf for Sirius to fess up just how little he had, but his general lack of anything—let alone an appropriate uniform—had been apparent since their arrival. It cost an atrocious amount to have the uniforms rushed in time for September 1st, but Effie didn't bat an eye. She simply wrote the tailor a cheque and that was that.

"Remus, shall I put in an order for a uniform for you?" Mrs. Potter offered kindly. "Just in case you've grown at all over the summer?"

"Thank you, but I'm sure my dad's got it covered."

She nodded, but plucked a light blue dress shirt off one of the tailor's racks. "How about this then? To wear on your off days?"

That would look wonderful on you, darling, Hope whispered. *It'll bring out the blue in your eyes.*

Remus tried to stifle the voice. *I don't have blue eyes.*

Of course you do. You were my perfect blue-eyed angel.

"No thank you, ma'am," he managed. "I've got clothes at home."

Effie held his gaze a moment, smiling in understanding and returning the shirt to the rack. "Don't mind me then," she told him, "but if you're in need of anything—even a pencil—make sure you let Monty or I know."

Remus nodded. He wanted to reply in the same kindness, but the short interaction had exhausted him. Retreating like a coward, he hung around at the front of the shop until Sirius and the Potters were

finished, all the while desperately longing for a cigarette.

Afterwards they drove all the way into Fitzrovia, where Mr. Potter escorted them to his personal barber. The empty patch of skin on the back of Sirius' head had mostly grown over by now, but it'd left a wonky hairline in the back, and Mrs. Potter insisted that it would be better to have the entire thing cleaned up before they returned to school and some nasty teacher complained of disorderly uniform and tried to cut it with sheep's shears.

"But what if they cut all my hair off? What if they leave me bald?!" Sirius fretted, as they made their way down the street toward Winmore Barbers and Co.

"They're just gonna fix up the back," James reassured him. "Moony, tell him he's worrying for nothing."

"You're worrying for nothing."

"There! See—"

"Wigs exist, after all."

Sirius shot him a venomous look, but when Mrs. Potter held the barber shop's door open for him, he reluctantly plodded inside.

"We'll meet you back here at half past," Mr. Potter called, before ushering James and Remus back down the street. They stopped outside a large two-floor bookshop, and Mr. Potter pulled James' return to school letter from his pocket to squint down at it from behind his thick glasses. "Let's see if we can tackle some of this reading list before supper's come and gone, eh boys?"

Remus, for one, was more than relieved to be back in a bookshop. He hadn't had the chance to visit one for weeks, not since Sirius had arrived, and almost said as much to James when he commented on the sudden improvement of his mood. He caught himself when he realised that Sirius wasn't *supposed* to have been staying with him for so long, and afterwards Remus resolved to be more careful. He still wasn't exactly sure what the *'this'* was between them, but he was positive he wasn't ready to tell anyone.

As Mr. Potter followed a clerk around the shop, piling James' arms high with class reading and A-Level exam workbooks, Remus gave the excuse that he needed to use the loo and slipped away on his own. He wanted to try and find something that might help him make sense of

what he was feeling, but for all the times he'd been in a bookshop, Remus had no idea where to start looking for literature of such a *queer* variety. There was no way he was going to ask one of the clerks, and so he stumbled along on his own, doing his best to avoid James and Mr. Potter, until he eventually made it into the Philosophy and Cultures section. From there he was right and truly lost. Half the section was made up of tomes the size of his forearm, with titles that he probably would've had equal chance of deciphering were they in Latin. There was a small section dedicated to 'lifestyle', and Remus began to silently thumb through the covers, running keywords through his mind as he did so.

'Homosexual' felt the most academic. But there was also queer… gay… *Poofter… Shirt-lifter—Bender—Arse Bandit—SISSY—QUEENIE—* ***FREAK!***

Hunched over, Remus put his head in his hands. He hated himself.

He *hated* himself.

Sirius, I'm sorry, he pleaded. *I don't know if I can do this…*

You sure you're not just lying to yourself, the voice said. Not Hope—the vicious Moony. He was back.

Hmm? Did I go anywhere? Or did you just become more deranged?

I hate you too, Remus thought.

Remus pulled his hands down to his neck, releasing a long sigh. This was what was exhausting him, he knew, the nonsensical unsurety of it all. But as chance would have it, when he opened his eyes again he found exactly what he was looking for: a small journal titled, *Early Recollections of Homosexuals as Indicated by Lifestyle.*

Ripping the book off the shelf, Remus glanced around to make sure he was alone before flipping it open to the introduction. It read;

This book is a collection of academic studies performed and founded in the science of psychology, created and curated by the finest minds within the field. Although a number of studies have sought to determine the homosexual problem at its root, few have looked toward its ongoing circumstances; that which help the problem persist. By examining the homosexual lifestyle, we seek to answer but two questions, how is the

common homosexual related to its fellow man, and does there exist a common measure of lifestyle?

Remus could feel every heartbeat thump in his ears. *Lifestyle? Problem? 'It'?!*

He flipped several pages deeper and kept reading;

To begin, it is helpful to translate how one might have a tendency to choose the homosexual lifestyle in the first place. It is worth noting that children who choose to become homosexuals are either those who have developed a feeling of weakness and inferiority toward the opposite sex within the environment they have found themselves, or alternatively, have been so petted that a very early desire for being protected and coddled takes on an intensive form. This can be true for both pampered and neglected children, for both extremes feed and intensify the child's longing to attain a future in which he/she will remain entirely untouched by life's difficulties. If additional familial difficulties do persist, they are likely to seek out the familiar, and this becomes no more apparent than in that of the attraction to the same sex.

This was worse than he could've imagined. It was a total mistake. He'd been looking for answers, just a single word that might help him make sense of it all, and rather he'd found condemnation—contempt. Remus wanted to stop reading, but it was as though his eyes were glued to the page. On and on the book went, reducing people's lives to that of uniformed trauma. He didn't want to fit these boxes, but he checked them all. *Tick, tick, tick.*

And then the real kicker came;

Homosexuals by nature, may be distinguished from heterosexuals by the following descriptions: weaker self-identity, lesser degree of initiative or motivation, or general lack thereof; greater degree of dependence, lack of religious association, effeminate tendencies, strong sense of the world as a hostile and dangerous place, issues with temperament, familial despondency, physical deformity and/or mental disorders, and more severely impaired gender identity.

Remus felt his heart break. It was just one book—one book in thousands—and yet it was enough to reduce him to what? To nothing.

His arms sagged as though they were failing him, and the noise that left his mouth with the next breath sounded more akin to a whimper. Then he realised;

A man was standing beside him. He was looking at him. Looking at him up and down.

It was not with kindness.

Wearing a tailor suit, with a smart-looking hat and briefcase, the man's frown deepened, drawing deep crevasses across his aged face. He shuffled away in expensive loafers; he'd seen what Remus was reading, and he was disgusted.

Remus snapped the book shut and raced from the aisle. He did not leave the book where the man could find it, instead he shoved the book into the display case beside the shop's front door, and whipped out onto the street into the hot evening sun.

* * *

To his credit, Remus did not run the entire way home. But he had to be away somewhere, so he took a lap around the corner and back, and after choking down no less than three cigarettes, he returned to find James and Mr. Potter desperately searching for him outside the shop.

"Sorry," he blanched, "saw a friend, got caught up chatting." James gave him a look, and Remus saw it for what it was immediately. "… Not Tomny."

With two sets of fresh texts weighing them down, they made their way back to the barber where Mrs. Potter was having tea in an outdoor café with a freshly trimmed Sirius sitting across from him. The barber had not mangled him, but Remus had never seen Sirius' hair so short. The crisp black waves were now clipped just below his jaw, with the bits on top shorter and more tousled to give what Mrs. Potter determined was 'more body'.

“Does it look alright?” Sirius asked, appearing genuinely nervous.

For a moment, all Remus could think to do was begin applying homosexual signifiers to Sirius. *Effeminate tendencies, issues with temperament, familial despondency—*

He could’ve kept going, except it was Sirius looking at him. *Sirius.*

“You look great,” he told him, genuinely; “You… It suits you.” *Everything suits you.*

Sirius smiled, still shy, and Remus wished he could’ve looked at it forever. He wished he’d never gone looking for that book. He wished the word *queer* did not exist.

By then it was getting late into the evening, and Mrs. Potter determined the rest of the errands, such as securing Sirius new school shoes, could wait for another day. After piling back into the coupé, they made their way back to East Finchley and to Potter Cottage, where they cleaned up the back garden and Mrs. Potter served up a wonderful dinner of paneer butter masala.

“Don’t worry, Sirius, I think you’ll be able to handle this dish,” Mrs. Potter teased, as she served up his plate with more than double Sirius’ usual helping.

“I still don’t understand how you managed to make yesterday's dessert *spicy,”* Sirius moaned, making the entire table dissolve into laughter.

Remus ate quietly for the most part, and when it’d become clear that he wasn’t going to be able to keep up with conversation or stomach the rest of Mrs. Potter’s delicious cooking, he apologised and asked to leave the table early.

“Are you not feeling well, *beta?”* Mrs. Potter asked, reaching over to press the back of her hand to his forehead. “You don’t feel warm.”

“Just tired. Probably gonna tuck-in early.”

“You did spend a lot of time in the sun today,” she said, then; ‘Alright, you head on upstairs. I’ll wrap up your supper. Make sure you take a glass of water with you.”

Remus nodded and untucked himself from the table.

“See you tomorrow, Moony,” James called. “Remember, it’s the

Arsenal scrimmage." He flashed two thumbs up, and Remus responded meekly, before turning for the hall. He did not look at Sirius, too afraid that if he did, he'd see right through him.

Remus' room at the Potters' was spacious and clean. He found his small bag of things waiting for him amongst the fine furniture; one large bed, an ottoman, and a wardrobe hutch carved delicately in the shape of peacock feathers. The wardrobe itself was a beautiful piece, but at night he'd found that the feathers would turn into a hundred eyes, each of them silently watching and judging as he slept. The sun hadn't even set yet, but as the yellow glow came through the bedroom's window, it cast a shadow over the hutch, and one hundred eyes turned on him. *What would those eyes say if they had a mouth?* He wondered.

Get a load of this queer, probably.

Because he couldn't stand any of it, Remus marched over to the window and threw it wide. The window's view overlooked the back garden and also happened to let out over the porch's roof, an ideal place to sit and mope and not be found. He didn't even bother to test his weight; he was feeling rather reckless anyway. Shimmying out the window, he sighed against the warm summer air and leaned back against the side of the house. It wasn't the most comfortable perch, but it was private enough.

That night was the first time Remus considered running away from the Potters'. As much as he knew he loved Sirius, Remus missed who he'd been before. He missed spending summers at the flat, where he could wrestle with his mates and not have to worry that anyone might think he had more shameful intentions. He missed not feeling guilty for being attracted to someone, girl or boy. Nowadays it was both. Attracted to Sirius and he was queer; attracted to girls and he was what—a cheater? Were they even in a relationship in the first place? … They'd said the fatal 'I like you', but things didn't feel all that different from when they'd just been hooking up.

Remus lit a cigarette. Maybe they were just hooking up. Sirius didn't want whatever he'd had with Miles… whatever *that* was. Hmph—*this* or *that.* What a horrible way to think about it.

Somewhere distantly below him, the sound of the Potters' happy dinner conversation drifted up through an open window. First it was just chatter, then laughter, and then miraculously, Mss. Potter began to sing. It was a song Remus didn't know, in a language he couldn't

understand, and yet he still felt sentimental.

I used to sing to you too, Hope said. *Everyday. I was much better than her.*

You were sick, Remus replied, in that place that did not exist; *You made me sick too.*

Shall I sing to you now?

Just shut up.

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?

Shut up!

Where have you been, my darling young one?

"FUCKING SHUT UP!"

"Woah—haven't even said anything yet!"

Remus whirled to the window to find Sirius already halfway out onto the roof, hands raised in surrender. *Fuck.*

"Are you alright?" Sirius asked, appearing genuinely concerned. And why shouldn't he be? The guy he was hooking up with was shouting at nothing like a raving lunatic. Embarrassed, Remus rubbed his nose to hide his flush and took another sharp drag from the cigarette.

"Sorry… just a bit out of it."

"I could tell," Sirius said, crawling the rest of the way out the window to take up space next to him. "Told the others I needed to use the loo, but thought it best to come check on you instead. Mind if I sit?"

"You're already sitting," Remus grumbled.

"Convenient." Sirius reached over, grasping Remus' hand by the wrist and bringing it towards his mouth. He smoked the cigarette right off his fingers, and after he'd exhaled the smoke, leaned in to kiss him.

Because they were alone, Remus kissed back. He was a weak man, and Sirius was *oh, so beautiful.*

The kiss progressed slowly, mostly due to Sirius. He leaned up into Remus, nibbling his bottom lip in wordless ask and when Remus opened his mouth for him, Sirius pressed in deep. They breathed

heavily out of their noses, chests turning to chests, hands reaching to graze hungrily at neck and jaw and cheek.

“You’re trying to distract me,” Remus mumbled.

“Heh.” *Kiss.* “Is it working?” *Kiss, kiss.*

Remus broke away. “Sirius, I can’t.”

“Sure you can,” Sirius said, nipping playfully at his ear; “You just open your pretty mouth, and I’ll—”

“No, I mean I can’t do *this.”*

Sirius snorted as though he assumed they were still playing, but then he caught sight of Remus’ expression and his entire face fell. “And by ‘this’ you mean…?”

“I don’t think I can be queer,” Remus said shamefully. “I just… it’s not me. I can’t be…”

Sirius’ full lips flattened into a severe line. “Can’t be… or don’t want to be?”

And because he was cruel, Remus almost laughed. “Same thing, innit?”

Sirius wasted no time; he leaned back and popped to his feet, barely stumbling on roof tiles at all as he backed away. “Fine. Guess we’ll just stop all of *this* then.”

Wait—no! Don't stop!

“Hold on!” Remus quickly stubbed out his cigarette, trying to desperately beckon him back. “I never said I wanted all of it to stop!”

The look Sirius gave him when he turned back around was absolutely incredulous. “Bloody—*what?!”*

“I just meant that I can’t *be* that, Sirius. That—that *word."*

"Queer?"

"Yes! I’m not like—*that.* I’m… I’m not.”

“Well then, what are you?”

The question was like being flattened dead by a tumble of stones. *What are you? What are you? What are you?* Remus wished endlessly that he had an answer.

“I like you,” he said instead.

“Fuck you.”

He supposed that was fair. “I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

Sirius just shook his head at him, squaring up his shoulders like he was readying himself for a fight. “James told me about the girls, y’know. Yeah, that’s right—*girls.* As in plural. You told me it’d been one, so why’d you lie?”

“I–I don’t know!” Remus spluttered.

“I thought you were lying because it’d been a mistake! That shagging those girls was just your way of getting it out of your system. You saying it wasn’t? Am *I* the fuck you just have to get over?!”

“No!” Thinking of the family sitting just a few metres below them, Remus scrambled to his feet, only to botch it and nearly send himself flying off the edge of the porch roof. “I like you,” he said again, crouched over the ground and surely looking quite pathetic. An ineffable beast, Sirius stayed decidedly upright, stepping over the tiles with all the grace of a trapeze artist.

“I’m not sure you do,” Sirius answered venomously. “If you did, you wouldn’t be saying any of this.”

“I’m *trying,”* Remus swore, keenly aware of the open kitchen window just below them. “I haven’t had as much time as you to sort through all of this, have I?”

At that, Sirius eased a bit. Relief coursed through Remus, and he grappled for it.

“Maybe it’ll just take more time, but I never meant that I wanted to stop.”

“What’s the answer then? You’re not queer but you like me?”

“Yes…? I dunno—I’m just… I don’t know if it’s that easy.”

"Who ever said any of this was going to be easy?"

Remus frowned. He wanted to apologise, but he didn't know how. "Would you rather I just say I'm queer, even if I don't mean it?"

A muscle in Sirius' jaw twitched. "That's not fair."

"I.... I know." Remus dropped his head.

They were at an impasse, it seemed. Queer, but not queer enough. Thank god these things had always felt more clear for Sirius.

“Fine. Couldn’t you just be queer for me then?” He said simply, slapping his hands against his thighs in a shrug. His tone might’ve been nonchalant, but he was still frowning. Too bad Remus was too shocked to notice.

“ ‘Queer for you’?”

“Why not? I mean, s’not like we’re gonna be telling anyone anyway. So… maybe you can just be queer when it’s us.”

“Is that what you are?”

Sirius’ hands flexed at his sides. “Erm… no.”

“So you’re—”

“—Fully queer, yeah.” Sirius almost gasped when he said it; “Erm… Most of the time anyway.”

The last part felt like a lie, but Remus was hardly the person to call him on it. Sirius always saw things in black or white; one or the other, with no middle ground. If you weren’t a friend, you were an enemy. It was just another extrapolation of his passionate nature, his Shakespearean methodology of life.

“But I’m not blind,” Sirius said stubbornly, “I appreciate the human form too much to not have the occasional tryst.”

Impossibly, the corner of Remus’ mouth tugged upwards. Perhaps he was more fickle a creature than he’d thought. Sirius was telling him he was queer—*queer*—and yet he wanted to laugh.

“ ‘Occasional tryst’?” He surmised.

“I don’t think you can talk anymore,” Sirius replied haughtily. “Prongs seems to be under the impression that your body count now rivals mine.”

“Impossible.”

“Naturally. Told him as much myself.”

“ … Slag.”

“Tart.”

Relieved for real this time, Remus slumped back down. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “I think I just got a bit spooked coming back here.”

“Well, I get that,” Sirius said, settling back into his spot next to him. “We had it pretty good, hiding out at yours. Almost miss it.”

Remus took his hand. “Almost. S’pose there are a few upsides to being here.”

“Yeah, like not having to eat your cooking anymore. I was growing tired of burnt eggs and beans on toast.”

“I was talking about our *friends.* And beans on toast are an English delicacy, you uncultured twat.”

“I’ll have you know that I am a *cultured* twat. I speak four languages.”

“As if I could ever forget.”

“Je t’adore, mon chou. Sollen wir rein gehen und ficken?”

“Was that German?”

“Mhm, and a bit of French.”

“Oh. Gesundheit.”

Laughing, Sirius jumped up and tugged Remus on with him. *“Allons-y, Moony! La notte è lunga!”*

The dots connected for Remus just as he fumbled back through the window and Sirius began tugging at the bottom of his t-shirt. “What—now?! You told them you were going to the bathroom!”

“I’ll just tell them my stomach felt a bit funny,” Sirius smirked. “Won’t be a complete lie.”

Sirius finished ridding Remus of his shirt, before grabbing him by the chain around his throat and hauling him back for another kiss. The

back of Remus' legs hit the bed a second later, and as they fell back onto it, chest to chest, there really wasn't much room left for argument.

* * *

The next morning was better. Remus did not think of the queer book or the voice of his dead mother, nor did he have to worry much about how close he and Sirius had sat at the breakfast table. They were in agreement; any queerness would be reserved for those special alone moments. In front of others they would remain normal friends. *In the closet,* Sirius had called it later. He'd said it with light disdain, but Remus couldn't bring himself to care, even now. The closet was safe. The closet was blissfully unaware and made more sense than anything else at all. *Revere the closet.*

The evening before, after Sirius had emerged from his prolonged bathroom break with a rather sheepish-looking Remus in tow, James had forgiven the odd behaviour straight away. After Remus had assured him that he wasn't feeling tired any more, James sprung the bright idea of 'lifting Moony's spirits' by indulging Remus' newfound love for all things gore and gruesome. Much to Sirius' apparent horror (apparently he was more squeamish than Remus had thought), they stayed up late to watch *The Exorcist* on BBC1. Because it was a TV showing they only got to watch the first hour and half, but Remus was rewarded anyway when Sirius used his discomfort as an 'excuse' to slip into his room after everyone had headed off to bed.

The next morning, Peter arrived bright and early for breakfast and James and Mr. Potter came downstairs already proudly sporting red polos in favour of Arsenal. Remus hadn't forgotten that he'd agreed to attend a real football match, he'd just hoped that if he didn't bring it up it wouldn't happen. As if.

"It's such crap that you have to take the train alone," James said to Remus over breakfast. Sirius' rush-order uniforms that arrived that morning after Peter, and they'd all been engrossed with talk of school ever since. Remus, as a prefect, would be the only one leaving on the thirty-first, but he wasn't worried. At least once he got to school he'd have Lily and the next day all his friends would join him and everything would be just fine.

"Can't help it," Remus said. "Pete, pass the butter?"

Peter did so. “Gonna be so boring though."

“I don’t really mind if it’s boring. Give me a chance to actually do some real reading. I promised Marlene I would finish her copy of ‘Ringworld’.”

“You didn’t read much over the summer?” Asked James.

“Not really… Just got busy.”

Under the table Sirius cheekily slid his hand across Remus’ knee and he retaliated by pinching him on the thigh.

“When did you say you have to be back, Moony?” Peter asked into his orange juice.

“Giles said tomorrow sometime. I haven’t really packed, and I’m supposed to have lunch with Sandra on Tuesday.”

“Oh right, your new mum. Think she—”

“She’s not his 'new mum',” Sirius scoffed straight away. “His dad’s just marrying her.”

Peter scowled. “Thanks a lot, Sirius. I was gonna say something and now you’ve gone and made me forget!”

“That’s hardly my fault, Wormtail.”

“You gonna be there for the wedding?” James asked over his friends’ squabbling.

Remus shook his head. “No, it’s at the end of September. Wouldn’t want to go anyway.”

Peter began digging his knife into the jar for the last bit of marmalade, watching Sirius apprehensively. “They going on a honeymoon?”

“Yeah. Spain or something.”

James whistled. “And all you get is Scotland.”

“Could be worse,” Sirius sniggered, “our school could be in Wales. Then we’d all be sheep-fuckers by default.”

“My mum was half-Welsh,” Remus said.

“Does that make you one quarter sheep-fucker?”

Only if it makes you the—Remus wanted so badly to say it, but their friends were around and so he bit his tongue and glared at Sirius, who smugly popped a grape into his mouth.

“So what should we do with our final night together?” James asked.

“They’re showing the second half of ‘The Exorcist’ on the Beeb,” Remus offered. Sirius immediately began to moan, but then suddenly Peter shot upright, flinging marmalade across Sirius’ face with his butterknife.

“Eugh! Watch your aim—!”

“I remembered what I was going to say!” Peter gasped. “Sim told me —there’s a party tonight!”

“A party?” James said. “Where? We’re not at school.”

“It’s not a *school* party.”

“I hope it’s not some bloody ball,” Remus said; “or a disco—please don’t let it be a disco.”

“It’s just a party,” Peter amended. “Some friend of his is throwing it on his family’s property. There’s supposed to be booze and stuff.”

“You seem pretty excited,” Sirius said, wiping the marmalade from his cheek with a paper napkin. “Considering it is Sim that asked you to go.”

“We don’t have to hang out with him,” Peter said indignantly, “we can just crash his party and drink his booze.”

Sirius looked to James. “I’m gonna hang out with him.”

“Where’s this party, Pete?” Remus asked.

“I dunno, Windsor or something. Sim said he’d drive if we met him back at the house.”

“Lottie coming?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “No, she has a date.”

Sirius perked up. “Would this be with the dashing Rodney?”

"Roger. And he's a dick."

"I think you're just too protective," Sirius razzed. "You're worried that your only sister's gonna get scooped up by a big, handsome man!"

In answer, Peter pointed his butter knife at Sirius' nose threateningly.

"We'll go," James agreed; "Good way to finish off the night after today's scrimmage. Arsenal versus Chelsea."

"Yes!" Sirius cheered. "Gonna be a good day."

"Not for you. Arsenal's gonna put Chelsea in a grave. All today's gonna be is at least two hours of slow and painful torture for you and your boys blue."

"Two hours?" Remus sat back in his chair and groaned. "Just when Peter had given me hope."

All the boys laughed at him and Sirius leaned into James. "Aw, Prongs, look—he's whining like you'll be when Arsenal loses today."

"You watch your mouth or you'll be sleeping in the treehouse after all," James warned, before glancing at Remus. "Best bring that book, Moons. Two hours is minimum, at least with Dad."

"This is cruel and unusual punishment."

"No, this is a gift! It's not even an official league match so they don't usually let in members of the public. We only get to go because Dad knows the stadium promoter."

"So it'll just be us in the entire stadium?" Sirius asked excitedly.

"Basically, but some others come too! Other fans and Dad's work mates. Sometimes we're there the whole afternoon."

Remus smiled sarcastically. "Brilliant."

As unexcited as he was to spend the next several hours sitting in a plastic stadium seat, Remus couldn't deny that Highbury stadium itself was rather spectacular. Mr. Potter led them in a back entrance after shaking hands with the doorman like they'd known each other their entire lives and suddenly they were in another world. The stands looked incredibly large without any people in them, extending at least a hundred feet high every direction.

“They can fit over seventy-thousand people in here!” James tittered excitedly as they filed in behind the team’s benches along with a few other families. Mr. Potter knew them all, and introduced James and Sirius with equal parts of pride while Remus and Peter hung back in their seats.

“Sim didn’t care to come?” Remus asked, watching disinterestedly as the different teams warmed up across the pitch.

“Sim hates football,” Peter said, marking jersey numbers down in a notebook.

“Explains so much,” Remus murmured, missing the older Pettigrew brother all over again.

“Look alive, boys,” Mr. Potter called, shuffling back into their row with James and Sirius in tow; “they’re about to decide who gets opening kick-off!”

True to Mr. Potter’s word, the teams flipped a coin and Chelsea took kick-off, which was met with much moaning from James and Monty. It was clear that just like his son, Mr. Potter was a die-hard football fan. When the first foul of the game went to Arsenal he jumped up onto his feet and hollered at the top of his lungs that the referee must’ve left his eyes at home. James, Sirius, and Peter all killed themselves laughing of course, but Remus just shrunk further into his seat, somehow embarrassed. As he did so, he noticed a girl about their age sitting four rows ahead. She’d turned around to gawk, and was now busy giggling at Monty’s incessant shouting, but when she noticed Remus staring she flashed him a shy wave. Only slightly unsettled, Remus turned his attention back to the field and scanned the green for the ball only to realise at the last second that he was looking on the wrong side. While he did, Chelsea scored a goal.

“Aw, man, what are they doing?” James groaned.

“I told you, you’d be whining today, Potter,” Sirius cackled, putting his feet up on the seat ahead of him. Mr. Potter immediately chided him for bad stadium etiquette and Sirius dropped his feet, grinning guiltily. Unbothered, Mr. Potter held a rumpled ten pound note out to them.

“Here, at least one of the concessions should be open. How ‘bout one of you go fetch us some drinks and a meat pie or two?”

“Me. I’ll go,” Remus said eagerly, taking the money and jumping up

from his seat.

“I’ll take a coke, Moons!” James called.

“Two pasties for me!” Peter added.

“And I’ll take a pint!” Sirius said, making Monty reach over and playfully bat him over the head.

“One pie, Remus,” Mr. Potter laughed, “and you can keep the change.”

“In that case, make it two pints!”

Making his way to the refreshment stand, Remus ordered everything, getting a coke and a Mars bar for himself. Once the clerk had passed him a box towering with drinks and meat pies, he did his best not to drop it while turning around, only to almost run headlong into the girl from the stands.

“Sorry!” She chirped, helping grab the food before it toppled over. “Didn’t mean to get in your way like that.”

“S’fine, don’t worry about it,” Remus mumbled, reaching out to right James’ coke.

“Do you need any help?” She offered, and Remus looked her over. She was short, only coming up to his shoulder, with long brown hair tied off in a ponytail and eyes large and green enough to rival Lily’s. She was pretty, and if he were the same person he’d been only a month ago, he might’ve entertained it, but not now.

“I’m good,” Remus said, stepping away.

“Not many people come to the practice matches,” she continued, seemingly undeterred. “My brother plays for Chelsea—number ten. Stephen McFry. Do you know anyone off the team, then?”

The name-drop might’ve worked for James or Sirius, but she’d picked the wrong Marauder. “Nope,” Remus answered, “just here with some friends.”

“Oh, well I’m Megan.”

“Er… Remus.”

She smiled sweetly, like she’d won a prize. “Do you know your way

around, Remus? I could give you a… tour of the stadium? Watching them practice can be so boring sometimes, and these things usually run for a while, so…"

Remus almost faltered. All of sudden he remembered why he'd never liked attention like this. Girls like Megan always saw him for more than he was. Exciting or dangerous, maybe. Stupid really, since Remus only ever saw an awkward, lanky git when he looked in the mirror. Perhaps that was why he liked Sirius so much—he saw all of the awkward and liked him anyway.

"I really don't mean to be rude, but I'm sort of with someone," Remus said staunchly. "So… no thanks."

Megan's smile fell instantly. She sort of just gaped at him for a while, but before Remus could say anything else, she turned and fled in the other direction. Satisfied, albeit a little embarrassed he'd just been run from, Remus made sure he had everything and finally returned to his own seat, passing the food and drink out to his friends.

"Who's winning?" He asked, eyeing Megan, who had reappeared in her seat with her back firmly turned to them.

"Still Chelsea," Sirius answered, sipping his coke and not bothering to complain that it wasn't a pint. Remus watched him and Sirius finally caught on, flashing him a smirk around his straw.

"Got something on my face, Lupin?"

"No," Remus said quietly, "you're just pretty."

Face turning instantly red, Sirius glanced down the row before tapping James on the shoulder. "I'm gonna show Moony where the bathroom is," he told him, before standing and ushering Remus back towards the stairs.

"Kay," James answered, eyes never leaving the field. "… Wait, do you even know where the bathroom is?"

* * *

"James Potter, you boys are going to miss your movie!"

James dashed to his bedroom door, opening it and sticking his head

out. “We’re on it, Mum! Pete’s gonna call!”

“Just make sure you don’t keep Simeon waiting,” Mrs. Potter returned from the bottom of the stairs.

James shut the bedroom door.

“You told her it was a movie?” Sirius snorted from atop James’ bed. He was currently standing, reaching up to the roof of James’ four-poster to draw a moustache on Farrah Fawcett’s glamorous headshot.

“You try telling her we’re headed to a ’college’ party,” James snapped, “she’d be burying us in the garden before we even made it up the drive.”

“Not all of us,” Sirius corrected. “Remember, you only need to be faster than the slowest runner.” He pointed at Remus from behind his other hand and Remus retaliated with a pillow in the gut.

“I saw that, wanker.”

“Don’t feel bad, Moony,” Sirius sniggered; “If Pete were here you’d have nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, but I’d take Peter over you right about now anyway, you leave your laundry everywhere,” James grumbled.

“You’re just in a shit mood ‘cause Arsenal lost today.”

“It wasn’t even a real league match. Hardly a loss.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Potter.”

James turned away like a scorned housewife. It was fitting since he was already going about the room, scooping up Sirius’ clothes from the floor. “If you’re gonna wear my clothes, the least you can do is make sure they make it to the laundry bin,” he said.

“Well, I’m not wearing your clothes today. Am I, Moony?” Still standing on the bed, Sirius turned his bum toward Remus, showing off his charity shop jeans and his backside in the same process.

“Stop it, you toff,” Remus muttered, pushing him away.

“Why? I’m just showing off my favourite jeans. You wanna feel them, Moony? Oh, they’re *sooooo* soft.”

“Stop torturing him and come get your shit,” James called. He’d just picked up the trousers Sirius had been wearing the day before. From the back pocket, he pulled a piece of rather dingy-looking paper. It looked like an old napkin that’d been doused in coffee then put through the dryer and hung to dry outside. James began to open it, innocently curious, but Sirius was there in a second, leaping off of the bed and racing over to snatch it up.

“That’s private,” he snapped, carefully sliding the paper into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Sorry,” James apologised, “didn’t mean to snoop, assumed it was rubbish.”

”What is it?” Remus asked, not as innocent.

”Nothing. S’just a song—haven’t finished it yet.”

Sirius cleared his throat, chancing a quick glance in the direction of the door. They might’ve been able to push him into saying more on the subject, had the phone not begun to ring downstairs.

“Suppose that’ll be Pete,” Sirius smiled then, the picture of decorum. “Shall we get our party on, lads?”

As odd as Sirius’ behaviour was, neither Remus nor James mentioned it. Aside from their friend’s general lack of interest in talking about the mysterious paper, there really wasn’t time. It was a short jaunt down the road to the Pettigrews’—past the country club and down a short side road that was so gnarled and bumpy it could’ve taken a tire off the Rolls. What they found at the end of the lane was a true cottage, modest and suburban, with a brown picket fence and several more cars lined up in the driveway. Simeon and Peter were already waiting for them, loading several crates of beer into the boot of Mr. Pettigrew’s Humber Sceptre. Peter was looking very modest in a pair of jeans and a faded Cream t-shirt, but next Simeon, who was wearing flared trousers with a collared shirt open almost to his navel, he appeared quite homely.

“I see you two raided the offie,” James said as they strolled up the drive, gravel crunching underfoot.

“Ho, lads,” Simeon called back. “Just stocking up. Does this mean you’re ready for the best night of your puny teenage lives?”

“Why? Are we gonna meet Mick Jagger?” Sirius asked, streaking on

ahead to smack his palm against Simeon's in friendly greeting. "Or have you come to tell me that my mother took a long-awaited trip to the sea and turned up dead in the water?"

"Nothing so spectacular, I'm afraid."

Sirius shrugged, and Simeon lifted a single bottle of beer out of the car's boot and raised it high in the air. "Gotta christen the night," he said, before pulling a bottle opener from his pocket. It was conveniently hanging from his key ring, which Remus thought had to be a decent investment. Save him from using his teeth at least, though that was mostly a party trick anyway.

After popping the cap, Simeon drank deeply from the bottle and passed it along. By the time it made it around to Peter it was empty, and Simeon took the bottle and tossed it away across the lawn.

"I'm not picking that up in the morning," Peter said.

Simeon sighed. "Just get in the car, Petey."

And so in the car they went. Sirius called bagsy and none of them fought him on it, but thankfully the Sceptre had more room in the back seat than Mr. Potter's sedan so Remus' knees weren't horribly cramped the entire way. The party was taking place in the historic parish of Harrow on the Hill, which meant that the home and the family it belonged to was surely to be affluent.

"Just don't act lame and maybe you'll manage to fool one of these university girls into going home with you," Simeon told them as they were passing through Wembley.

"Not us! Pete and I are already off the market," James said. "Guess that just leaves the two of you!" He clapped Remus on the shoulder enthusiastically, and Remus tried not to notice the look Sirius gave him from the front seat.

They arrived when Simeon pulled the Sceptre up to a manor estate with an already full driveway. The lawn was also packed, creating a checkerboard of expensive cars as far as the eye could see. The entire property, which was made up of the manor and several outbuildings, was surrounded by a nest of trees that cut it off from the rest of the village. Remus might've actually believed they were in the countryside had they not passed a roller rink and a Woolworths on the way in.

"Remember, just be cool," Simeon said, as they unloaded the car's

boot. “Oh, and if someone comes up to you with a silver chalice and starts gabbing about ‘initiation’, run the other direction.”

“Silver chalice?” James murmured, as he hauled a crate of beer up to his chest.

According to Simeon, their hosts were a pair of brothers named Guy and Hugh. Both were econ majors at Oxford and shared several classes with him, but considering they looked identical, Remus gave up on trying to tell them apart the moment Simeon pointed them out from across the lawn. Not that it mattered; there were enough people at the shindig that he could’ve been introducing himself all night and still not have had the time to meet everybody. The party itself wasn’t even going on inside the manor, instead Simeon had had them carry the heavy crates around the side of the building and out into the back garden, which boasted an incredible lawn and courtyard, a stone porch-way, and of all things, a pool.

“Who the fuck has a pool in London?” Remus said, watching as hordes of kids lounged around the brightly lit water, some fully clothed, others wearing little more than bikini tops and swim shorts.

“Probably costs a bomb to heat it,” Peter added.

“I want one,” Sirius said straight away.

Across the courtyard, a sound system the size of a small house had been set up, playing top hits and the likes of Boney M. and even more Donna Summer. Kids swayed along, drinks in hand, and with the sun long gone from the sky, there were endless shadowed corners left for the more promiscuous couples to sneak off to. This was usually one of the more eventful parts of a party—seeing who hooked up with who—but this wasn’t Hawkings. All around them were strangers, and the four Marauders seemed to watch on in a slight daze, as though none of them could decide what to do next.

“Stop standing there gawking,” Simeon teased, strolling up and passing them each a fresh beer. “Go. Mingle—make friends. It’s the only real way to find the good stuff.”

James’ eyes widened. “And by ‘good stuff’ you mean…?”

Another person called Simeon’s name from across the courtyard and he turned away before throwing up an arm in greeting as a pair strolled up to them. Remus recognised the girl instantly; Alice. She was wearing a black mini skirt and silk top under a heavy leather

jacket, and with her mod-looking bob and thick Edie Sedgwick eyebrows she looked straight out of an Andy Warhol film. Beaming, Simeon leaned in and kissed her on the cheek before clasping the shoulder of her male companion.

“Was wondering when you were going to turn up,” the guy said. He had long hair gathered into a ponytail at the nape and a thick moustache that made him look twenty and forty all at once.

“Got weighed down some,” Simeon said fondly, before gesturing to the rest of them. “Lads, you know Alice. This here’s Robbie. Alice, Robbie—I present to you, my brother, Pete, and his friends, James, Remus, and Sirius.”

“Haven’t seen any of you for a while,” Alice mused, looking them over. “Unlike you to be so generous, Sim.”

“I’m plenty generous, ask anybody,” Simeon said. “Thought I’d give ‘em a taste of a real university party.”

“Nah, ain’t real unless someone ends up streaking across the quad bare-arsed,” Robbie said. “Which the four of you might just have to do, considering you’re not even initiates yet. Fresh meat gotta fry, right?”

Robbie elbowed Simeon suggestively and Simeon nodded. “We could have them try bobbing for dead rats, like the cricket team did with their newest recruits.”

“Don’t let these two idiots psyche you out,” Alice cut-in, as the other two stepped back to laugh. “Most of us don’t even go to uni, we’re just leftover private school kiddies. Everyone’s chill.”

“Avoid the blue cups though,” Robbie said, holding up a blue plastic cup of his own. “Or you know, don’t.”

The three of them began to snigger at the obvious inside joke, but by then someone had called Robbie’s name and they were already shambling off. Almost making to follow, Simeon spun around suddenly like he’d forgotten they were there.

“Kay, so… drinks are over there—take what you want, no one cares. Someone usually tries to start a fight or two but they’re basically all talk so don’t worry about it. If anyone comes up to you asking for ‘Barbra-Ann’, they’re looking for molly. If someone asks for ‘Molly’, they’re looking for barbs—backwards, I know. Let’s see, what else…

Erm… Don't take any stardust if you want to be able to breathe in the morning, watch out for the chick that calls herself 'Stardust', she's not that great a lay. Oh and remember—always wrap your willy. Kisses." With that, Simeon began strolling off in the direction of his friends. "And mingle!" He called sharply, before rushing to meet Guy or Hugh —Remus couldn't tell which—and leaving them to their own devices once more.

"Alice is pretty… pretty, don't ya think?" Peter said after.

"I'm telling Moira," Remus grinned.

"I was merely being observant! I never said that *I* thought she was pretty!"

James touched his top lip wistfully. "Wish I could grow a moustache like that…"

"Alright, you lumps," Sirius interjected; "You heard the man—get to mingling. If it's Moony's last night of freedom before he's to be 'Pecky Prefect' for the rest of the year, then I think we should all be sufficiently gassed."

Briefly, Remus considered pushing Sirius into the pool.

None of them knew it at the time, but being a party where no one knew your name was quite freeing. Eventually there would come a time that this would no longer be the case, the party would be thrown by an acquaintance on their payroll, or by a company head looking to make connections amongst different agents, stars, and producers. Then the parties would be thrown for them, in celebration of their first, second—dozenth chart-topping hit. Suddenly people would be asking for them, *looking* for them. Amongst a sea of money and fame, everyone would know their names. But for now they were nobodies; just another handful of insignificant kids that showed up because of a friend of a friend.

"Think they rented it?" James asked, when he and Remus had stopped to take in the stacks upon stacks of ugly black boxes that made up the party's sound system. The music itself was still pop-y, but the sound was almost garbled, like it'd been squeezed through a drinking straw. Remus had seen similar speakers being used on stage by the likes of the Who and Deep Purple.

"Must've," he replied, wincing when more Donna Summer came on. He really hated radio sometimes.

Ooh I feel love, I feel love,
I feel love, I feel love,
I feel love…

A group of girls stood a short ways away, dancing on the grass. They held each other's hands, spinning this way and that. As he watched, Remus thought bitterly how easy it was for girls; no one would ever judge them for holding their friend's hand, or snuggling together on the couch. If they kissed one of their girlfriends on a dare it was hot, if a guy did it, it was gay.

"Don't look now, Moons," James said into his ear, "but I think you've got an admirer."

Remus swallowed. The girls had noticed him staring, and one of them raised a hand in a cheeky wave. Remus almost expected her friends to shriek and badger her for the gall, but they didn't. These were university girls, he reminded himself, they were used to batting their eyelashes and getting what they wanted.

"Go on then," James said, bumping him forward.

Remus dug his heels in and turned his back to the group. "Nah. Not really interested."

"Don't be shy, girls always like you. You're sensitive and you read books."

"Fuck off, that's rubbish."

James grinned. "Look, if you're worried about what I said before heading off to Devon, don't be. You're the sensible one, I know you'd never forget to wrap your john."

"Sensitive and sensible. What a great combination for a rock star," Remus replied blithely.

"Yes, well… we're not rock stars yet."

James continued to grin, but before he could insist that Remus go over and talk to them, Sirius and Peter appeared before them, each looking giddy and holding a blue plastic cup in their hand.

“Guys, there’s *acid* in the blue cups,” Sirius said, as Peter bounced up and down in place at his side. Remus immediately relapsed into thoughts of his first year at Hawkings, when he’d taken the acid and spent the rest of the night watching as the world melted around him.

“I thought the goal was to get drunk, not fried,” James said, gaping at them.

“But Robbie specifically told us *not* to avoid the blue cups,” Peter said. “Or was it the other way around…? Heh.” He stumbled sideways over a stereo cord and Sirius caught his arm, making them both burst into a fit of giggles.

“Are the two of you high already?” James demanded.

“ ‘Course not, these things take time to kick in,” Sirius said. “Ask Moony.”

Remus shook his head, but accepted the cup Sirius was offering. James was more wary as he accepted the one from Peter, and after an impatient, “Bottoms up!” from the both of them, Remus and James drank. It was just beer, but the drink came with a tangy aftertaste.

“Mum’s so going to kill us,” James said, crunching the plastic cup in his fist as he cleared his throat grimly.

“Vita brevis,” Sirius smirked.

Despite Sirius’ surety, It didn’t take long for the drugs to kick in. It felt the same as last time; floaty and heavy all at once, like he was underwater but had stones in all of his limbs. An hour in and they were all playing the idiot—two and Remus could’ve sworn he’d heard James arguing with a flower pot while calling it ‘Petunia’. Remus had never actually experienced being worried for James Potter, save the time he and Lily had gotten into it on his sixteenth birthday, but James had always been a bit of a stupid drunk. It came as no surprise to find that he was even worse while high off his arse. Like ‘Sirius Black’ worse.

“Think I could make the jump from the top ‘a the pool shed?” He asked Remus, as they laid back on a pair of deck chairs. The night had cooled off some, and the earlier swimmers had all vacated the pool, leaving the too-bright crystalline water to sit undisturbed with a collection of cans and other rubbish floating along its surface.

“No,” Remus answered lazily, staring up at the night sky and watching

as the stars grew and shrank in size like the rings of rain droplets. *Lucy in the sky with diamonds…*

“ … M’gonna try it.”

James launched himself upright, but luckily all Remus had to do was lift one leg and kick him sharply in the ribs. “Don’t you dare,” he swore, as James began to wriggle and moan in his chair.

From somewhere else, Sirius began to shout; “Moony! Moony, over ‘ere!”

“He’s so *noisyyyy,”* James whined, still massaging his bruised side. “Moony, tell him to shut up.”

“Shut up, Padfoot.”

“Moony! *MOOONY!”*

“I can still hear him!"

With a tsk, Remus looked away from his winking stars. Halfway down the pool deck, Sirius was surrounded by a ring of people, all of them looking his way expectantly. Sirius began waving his hands frantically when he got Remus’ attention, trying to flag him down as though he were an aeroplane coming in for a landing.

“Moony!” He screamed. “Come show ‘em that trick you can do!”

“Jesus Christ…” Grumbling, Remus sat up on his deck chair. Next to him, Peter had somehow found a deck of cards and appeared to be playing a game of poker against himself using gathered beer caps. “Peter, you watch James,” he said, and Peter snapped his head up.

“Wha…? OH! Oh, okay… Yeah, I’ll watch James, Moony. *Noooo worries.”*

“MOOOOOOONYYYYY!”

“I’m comin’,” Remus snapped, pushing up from his chair. His entire body felt like melted rubber and he stumbled a few times on his way over, unable to support such a weight. He needed someone to cut him in half, or scoop out his insides… make him into soup… yeah, Remus soup.

As he made it to the group of kids, which numbered well over two dozen, all sitting piled over one another on the deck, Remus

awkwardly weaved himself into the centre. There, Sirius pressed a lighter into his palm and began to pat him on the back hurriedly.

“Show ‘em, Moons! Show ‘em!”

Remus looked down at the lighter. Just a cheap disposable zippo.

“ … What?”

“The trick! The trick!” Sirius urged. “That one you showed me once! Remember, back in the astronomy building?”

It took Remus several seconds to understand what Sirius was going on about. When it finally clicked, he nodded and raised his fist. Every kid around them seemed to lean in out of anticipation, but Remus had seen the trick loads of times. It’d been Lee who’d taught him.

Taking the zippo in his other hand, he formed a small chamber with his fist and held the button down so the gas could build up in the small space.

“Watch this, this is the cool bit,” Sirius said to the guy next to him.

After a few seconds, Remus struck the lighter and opened his fist. What followed was a small burst of flame like a tiny fireball, right there in the centre of his palm. Every zooted kid within ten feet gave a loud *‘OOOH!’* and then suddenly they were all clapping.

“Yes! That’s my Moony!” Sirius cried, as Remus wiped his palm on his shirt, just thankful he didn’t light himself on fire. “Moony’s so cool, ‘e’s like magic. Just love ‘im, don’t you love ‘im?” He nudged the same guy as earlier, who gave a torpid nod, clearly high on his own shit. “Hey, Moony! I love ya!”

Remus’ heartbeat suddenly filled his ears. He began to feel itchy, like ants were crawling up his spine. “Sirius—”

“OH DAMN!”

The cry had gone up from the other side of the pool, where a group of guys were laughing and hollering, all of them pointing in the same direction. “FUCK YEAH, MATE!” They shouted. “JUMP!”

As much as Remus wanted to pause everything and peel out of his own skin, there wasn’t time. As a crowd quickly formed, he looked up to find James standing on the roof of the pool shed. Peter, when

Remus chanced a look, was still playing poker.

“It’s like I can fly,” James said, much to the glee of his audience.

“You can’t fly, James!” Remus replied, trying his best in his muddled state to calculate the distance between the roof of the shed and the pool edge. Several feet, at least.

“No, I can do it. I’m sure I can fly.”

The crowd immediately took up a chant; “FLY! FLY!”

“YEAH, FLY!” Sirius yelled. Remus smacked him for it.

“Are you crazy? He’s gonna die.”

Sirius glanced between James and Remus like he was just seeing them for the first time. “Uh… Don’t jump, Prongs. Moony says not to jump.”

“Moony says to jump?”

“No! Don’t jump!” Remus shouted.

But the crowd was against him. “JUMP! JUMP!” It cried, fists beating the air with eager want. It didn’t matter if James ran the risk of splattering himself on the pool deck, they wanted a show. Remus wished he knew where Simeon was, but he didn’t, so instead he just began shoving his way through the gathered bodies, until his rubber legs had carried him up to the side of the tall shed.

“James, come down.”

James squinted down at him in the dark. He was missing his glasses. “That you, Moons?”

“Yes, it’s me. Now get down here.”

“JUMP! JUMP!”

“I dunno… I think I’m supposed to jump, Moons. They want me to jump.”

“JUMP! JUMP!”

“Think of Lily,” Remus pushed. “Would she want you to jump?”

“Don’t listen to him,” someone heckled. “Jump already.”

But James was hesitating. “I really miss Lily,” he moaned.

“Alright, then come down and we can call her.”

“Really?” James lit up. “You’d let me call her?”

“Yes, just come down now and we’ll phone ‘er up! I swear.” Remus reached up, itching his shoulders. The winking stars had returned, and he felt hot and cold all at once.

“JUMP! JUMP!” The crowd continued to chant. James was looking all around, like he couldn’t decide where the noise was coming from. He was so close to the edge of the shed now, and Remus didn’t think he’d be able to catch him if he fell.

“James don’t—”

“JUMP!”

“Just come—”

“I’M COMING, LILY!”

And then, with all the stupidity granted to him at birth and that collected along the way, James Potter launched himself off of the roof of the shed.

Remus almost covered his eyes, except he couldn’t feel his arms. Overhead, James soared, carried by the roaring cheers of his fans, and straight into the deep end of the pool. He’d cleared the edge with several feet to spare, but as his dark form sunk to the bottom and did not immediately resurface, everyone began to crowd in.

“He alive?” Someone asked.

“I dunno… you check.”

There were a few mumbled responses, all of them equally as unsure, and Remus felt his chest twinge. He’d forgotten to breathe. Luckily, Sirius was still his ever-loyal self, even when high.

“I’ll save ya, Prongs!” He declared, before letting out a victory cry and throwing himself into the pool. This of course ignited a rallying cry, and suddenly dozens of kids were throwing themselves into the water, clothes and all.

Remus waited with baited breath until Sirius and James finally emerged. When they did, he found them laughing, and suddenly furious, he picked up another discarded beer can and tossed it at James' head before muttering under his breath that he needed to piss.

It turned out that for all the party's expensive sound equipment and endless booze, they did not have anywhere to take a leak. "Try the woods," a guy told him when he'd asked. Feeling irritable, Remus turned and made for the clearest crop of trees.

"Bloody friends… fuckers…" he grumbled to himself; "What's the point of 'em… keep 'em around to… to give ya heart attacks! … Fucking idiots…"

Stopping before a suitable tree, Remus steadied himself and unzipped his trousers. He'd just gotten down to business when a snapping sound filled his ears. At first he thought he was just hearing things—a common side effect when one was dropping LSD—but then the sound came again, followed by the muffled sound of voices.

Almost sputtering, Remus scrambled to do up his trousers and flee, except his legs had gone rubbery again, and when he stepped back he caught his ankle on a tree root and went down hard on his side. Wincing, he looked up, and just a few short feet away he found a couple in various states of undress, both of them rushing to adjust their clothes. It was dark amongst the trees, but Remus hadn't really gone that far in, and when his eyes finally focused, he found not just a regular couple, but a *couple of men.* And not only that, one of them was Simeon.

"Oh shit," Simeon said, when he realised who had caught them.

"Who's he?!" The other guy demanded. It was Guy… or Hugh. Remus still couldn't tell.

"Relax. I'll handle it," Simeon replied cuttingly. He'd only just managed to get his flared trousers back on, and his shirt hung open revealing his entire chest.

"Here, Remus, let me help you up," Simeon said, coming forward and grabbing Remus under one arm. Without bothering to wait for his friend, Simeon began leading him back toward the house. "Wow… You sure gave us a fright," Simeon said, forcing a chuckle.

"Didn't mean to… Only taking a piss," Remus murmured. He wanted to pull away; Simeon's touch felt like pins and needles, but he was

holding onto his bicep with an iron grip. “Didn’t see anythin’ really…”

“Sure you didn’t. But that’s alright.” Simeon was smiling, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Just as they reached the start of the lawn, he stopped and made Remus face him. “Remus, I know you might be thinking that—”

“I didn’t know you were gay,” Remus flubbed, stupidly.

Simeon’s gave a light chuff, like an almost-laugh. “I’m… not, but…”

That’s what they all say, Remus thought. He let his head rock back, blinking at the stars that winked for him. Puddles, puddles…

“Remus, this is a sensitive thing,” Simeon started. “People really can’t know that Hugh and I… hold on, Remus are you alright?”

“I drank from the blue cup.”

He began popping his lips, creating that little sound of a bursting bubble. He did it in time with the winking stars. Bop, bop, bop…

“Fucking hell…” Simeon shook his head, but he was smiling genuinely now. “Remus—Remus, look at me.”

Remus did.

“You can’t tell anyone. This has to be our little secret, alright? Maybe if it were someone else and not Hugh it could be different, but it’s not so… you can’t tell anyone. Do you understand?”

Bop, bop, bop…

“Remus? Did you hear me?”

“Yup,” he replied, popping the ‘p’. *“Ourrrrr* little secret…”

“Yes, our secret. No one else’s. Especially not Peter.”

Remus nodded. He didn’t want to tell Peter either. Or James, really. “Revere the closet…”

Simeon gave him an odd look, like he was puzzled but still amused, and finally nodded. “You always were funny,” he said, before hugging Remus and finishing with a quick peck on the cheek. “I’m gonna now. Shouldn’t leave Hugh to wonder, he’s a fretter. But remember, Remus —it’s our secret.”

“Our secret!”

Simeon waved him off, and then he was gone again, and Remus was as high as ever.

That was a development, the voice said, as he stumbled back toward the pool. It felt closer when he was stoned, like a real voice whispering in his ear rather than just his head. Remus swatted at the air over his shoulders.

Go away, Remus replied, stopping to lean on the side of the pool shed.

And where would I go?

I hate you.

*I **am** you.*

Suddenly he was itchy all over again. Remus regretted drinking from that blue cup. He’d heard Tomny say it before—*bad trip*. The moment when the good drug turns on you and everything becomes ten times as shitty as when you’d been sober. Tomny was the best at those, he’d experienced every bad trip in the book, and one time, when Remus was fourteen and had gotten fucked out of his head on mushrooms, it’d been Tomny who’d kept him grounded. He’d watched over him. It was just how it was. Now Remus was watching others, except he wasn’t any good at it. He didn’t know how to guide them through their downs, or even cheer them on during their highs. He was too miserable. He wanted Tomny.

Tomny.

“Tom.”

Tomny.

“Oi, Tom!”

Remus pushed the hallucination away. It was the voice again, taunting him with the one thing he couldn’t have. “Shut up, leave me alone,” he moaned, slamming his fist on the shed’s metal wall.

“Pfft. Skaghead,” a voice muttered disdainfully, passing him from behind. “Tom!” The guy barked. “Time tah go. Got the rich twat’s dosh so we’re outta ‘ere.”

“Yeah, yeah, hold on. Gonna find me that girl from before.”

“Plonker, as if that blue-blood bitch’s gonna want anythin' tah do wiff you.”

“Just admit ya don’t have any game and lighten up, alright Brecker?”

It was the ‘r’… The ‘r’ in Brecker. That’s what really gave him away. It was that touch of intonation, the hint of a Scottish drawl he’d all but lost since childhood.

Remus looked up. He thought he might vomit. There he was. Just… right there, a mere few feet in front of him.

Tomny.

“Diddya even see where she went?” Brecker asked, scanning the pool. His head was shaved nearly to the skin, and he had a nasty look about him. But not Tomny; Tomny looked the exact same. Same dirty-blonde fringe, always dipping down into his eyes. Same dimples, same sea-glass eyes. Remus imagined if he were closer, he could’ve spotted that little scar on his upper lip.

“Nah, but I’ve an eye for things like these,” Tomny said, smirking devilishly.

It was as though Remus had forgotten how to breathe again. He used the shed’s wall to drag himself closer, repeating the name in his head in hopes that just one of them would reach his lips. *Tomny. Tomny. Tomny.*

“C’mon,” Brecker said, nudging Tomny’s arm; “I’m tired of these rich prigs and I don' need Lee takin' off wiff the car.”

Lee!

"I told you we should've left 'im back at my place," Tomny said.

Oh god—Lee and Tomny. The flat! He must've been dreaming. But Remus was so close; he reached out.

Brecker spotted him first. Spinning around, he deflected Remus’ hand and scoffed. “Piss off, we don’t got no more, you zombie. Find your fix sumwhere else.”

Tomny began to turn. “C’mon, Brek, now that’s jus' bad business—” He froze. Remus couldn’t believe it. He saw him. He *saw him.*

“Christ…”

“Tom,” Remus whined.

“You know this guy?” Brecker demanded sharply. He looked Remus up and down, the same way someone like Lyall might had he seen Brecker on the street in all of his skinhead glory. Apprehension. *Disgust.*

“I…” Tomny shook his head in disbelief. “Lu… what are you fucking doing here?!”

Lu. Remus almost forgot how it felt to be called that. Relief surged over him like water, and he could finally speak again.

“S'a party,” he garbled; “I wassss invited. What'rrre youuu doin' 'ere?”

“It’s a job,” Brecker answered first. Tomny snapped his gaze to him, pressing his lips into a thin line.

“Brek, why don’t you jus' let me handle this one. I’ll... meet ya back at the car.”

Brecker looked like he wanted to argue, but no matter how much time had passed or where he’d gone, Tomny had always been a leader. It seemed that it still rang true now. After another suspicious glance at Remus, Brecker shambled off, hands in his pockets. Remus, who still hadn’t moved from the shed wall, leaned his forehead against it in attempts to ground himself. Everything was so muddled, and he wanted desperately to see Tomny clearly. To know that he wasn’t just seeing things.

“Are you really 'ere right now?” He whimpered, appreciating the touch of cool metal against his skin.

Tomny looked at him with sympathy—or pity, maybe. “Here, Lu,” he said, grasping Remus gently by the arms. “Let’s getchu sat down.”

He guided him back to the pool, to the very same spot Remus had been lying not ten minutes before. It was fate then, he decided. *Mean,* ironic fate. Remus looked around for his friends, but they’d gone. To where, he wasn’t sure, but somehow it fit. Thonas Armstrong simply did not exist in the same dimension as Sirius Black and James Potter.

“Feelin' any better?” Tomny asked, kneeling before him and eyeing Remus warily.

Remus ignored the question; “What arrrre... What are youuuu doin'

‘ere…?”

“Sellin' drugs to posh prats with money to burn,” Tomny said blandly. “Never thought I’d see you 'ere though… Never thought I’d see you again at all, actually.”

The comment stung a part of him that Remus couldn’t put words to. “I missed you,” he said.

“You’re drunk,” Tomny responded, “or high. Possibly both. Did ya take it on yer own or did someone dope ya?”

“I miss you,” Remus said again, pathetically. “I miss all of you guys. M'sorrrrry.”

Tomny turned a bit ashen. “C’mon, don’t… don’t say that.”

“Whatever I’ve done, m'sorryyyy.”

“Stop it, Lu.”

“M'sorry I lied to ev’ryone! I’ll—I'll tell the truth, all of it! *Ngh*… About my family and school and—”

“Stop!”

Remus held his tongue. Still kneeling, Tomny hung his head and then ran a hand across his face. “Look, I can’nah really do this right now,” he sighed. He stood then, biting his lip and looking at Remus like he were an injured puppy he’d picked up off the side of the road. And really, that was exactly what Remus was.

“I have to go,” Tomny said. “Don’t feel sorry, jus’… take care of yerself, Lu.”

Remus felt like crying. Maybe he already was.

“… Okay, Tom.”

Looking almost pained, Tomny raised a hand like he might pat him on the arm, but then he thought better of it. Instead he turned, and Remus had to watch his back as he crossed the courtyard and passed out of sight.

So close, and yet so far, vicious Moony said. *Tell me, did you think he would just take you back? You knew he didn’t want you.*

"No…"

Don't be sad, darling, said Hope. *Shall Mummy sing to you? Oh, where have you been…*

Remus covered his ears. "Noooo…"

Who would want you back? said Tomny. *You're a liar. You loved my girlfriend, you didn't love me.*

"It ain't true…"

No, he's right, you even lie to yourself, said Sirius. *I mean really, Remus Dean? Yeah right. You don't know* ***how*** *to be honest. You're bad, Moony. Bad to your core.*

"Please… Please just stop…"

You want everything, said Lily. *You have everything and you still want more. You're selfish.*

Where do you belong, Moony? said Peter. *Do you belong anywhere? Anywhere at all?*

"Stop it…"

'Stop it, stop it'—just listen to him whine, said Marlene. *It's so hard when we refuse to get better. Why can't you just get better, Remus?!*

It's 'cause he'd rather run from it, said James. *Are you fast enough, Moony? Better run—RUN!*

"Stop it!"

He won't run. He's a quitter, said Lyall. *He's nameless. He's a child. He* ***doesn't care.***

And where have you been, my darling young one?

"STOP IT!"

"MOONY!"

Remus opened his eyes. Sirius was before him, kneeling in the same spot that Tomny had been. He was wet, with his dark hair curling around his forehead. He had both of Remus' wrists in his hands, a look of concern stamped across his features.

“Moony, what’s goin' on? What's a’matter?”

Remus’ mouth opened, but no sound came out. *I saw Tomny,* he wanted to say. *Tomny was here, and now he’s gone.*

Sirius moved his hands—first to Remus’ cheeks, then his forehead. “Blimey, you’re soaked. Is this all sweat? Here, lie down.” Slowly, he manoeuvred Remus back onto the deck chair. Remus wanted to ask how he was so coherent, but the blinking stars were back with a vengeance, and it hurt just to keep his eyes open.

“I–I think m’havin’ a b-bad trip, Siri… uss...”

“O-Okay…” Sirius managed; “You jus' stay right here then. M'gonna go find Simeon.”

Sirius left him, racing off into the dark, and it occurred to Remus that Simeon might be rather tied up at the moment. *Our little secret.*

Remus had a secret. *Secret–sss.* Oh lord, did he have secrets.

“Sirius…” he moaned. “Sirius…”

He wished they’d never left the estate. He wished they’d run off just like Sirius had wanted; found a flat and played music for pennies. He wished he’d never seen Tomny. He wished he could see him again. *He wished, he wished, he wished…*

But wishes were for children, and Remus hadn’t been a child for a long time.

* * *

It was official.

Remus Lupin was lost.

He’d really only meant to go a short ways, just enough to punish his father. He’d thought that running away from the car when Lyall had stepped out for a quick meeting and Giles had been distracted by the paper would be a great idea. Maybe then his father would pay attention. Maybe then he’d yell at him, instead of just pretending he wasn’t there.

But now he was lost. He didn’t recognise any of the streets, and people gave him weird stares when he passed. A woman had even tried to talk to him,

but she'd been wearing dirty clothes and had pigeons all over her, so Remus had fled in the other direction. That had gotten him even more lost, and he'd ended up wandering until he found a park with a play area. At least, Remus thought *it was a play area. All of the bars were rusted or missing completely, and the metal slide had a hole in its middle as if it'd been melted right though. Only one swing remained and when Remus sat on it, tired from walking, he grasped the chain link and pinched the skin between his thumb and palm so badly that it immediately turned purple.*

Cradling his hand to his chest, Remus felt like crying. He wished now that he hadn't run. He wished Giles would just show up to take him home in the car, even if it earned him a week's worth of punishments. He wished his father would come looking. He wished there was someone else left to miss him.

"Are you cryin'?"

Remus whipped his head up. A boy had appeared, obviously older than him, with a mop of shaggy blonde hair and an open cut on his top lip. He was wearing a dirty white shirt and jeans with a hole in each knee, and he was smoking. Remus was amazed. He'd never seen a kid smoke so openly before. At school, the other boys who were always smuggling their parents cigarettes in with them had to sneak around the back gym so they wouldn't get caught by any of the teachers or nuns. They'd offered him one once, but the smoke had stung his eyes and made him cough terribly. Not this boy though, he wasn't coughing. He took a drag on the cigarette and exhaled, like he'd been doing it all his life.

"Well?" He said again. "Are you cryin' or not?"

"No!" Remus replied, embarrassed. He wiped his face. "M'not crying…"

"Are you lost?"

"No."

"You look lost."

Remus clutched the swing's chains, ignoring the sting in his palm. "I'm not!"

"Orright, so you're not lost. What you doin' 'ere then?"

"I… I went for a walk!" Not a total lie.

"Bad place for a walk," the boy said, bringing the cigarette to his lips

again. " 'specially lookin' like you. Kids like you get picked up round 'ere. Big bad men come and take 'em away and they never see their mummies and daddies again!"

"I don't have a mummy," Remus said, because he thought it might make him sound brave. "She died."

"Mine too."

"… Really?"

"Nah, I lied," the boy said, smiling inexplicably. "Sorta wish she'd died though."

Remus' eyes widened. He'd never *met such a boy.*

"How old are you?"

"Almost twelve," Remus answered. "How old are you?"

"Almos' sixteen."

Wow, a teenager. *Remus didn't know any teenagers, that was unless you were counting that pair of nasty brothers, Jacob and Henry, which he didn't. Remus hated those brothers. They only came over when their father organised meetings with Lyall and they always took his things, or made fun of his teeth, or called him names like 'beanstalk' and 'nancy boy'. Last time they'd even held Remus down and marked up his copy of* Magical Mystery Tour *with a pocketknife. Giles had bought him a new one straight away, but Remus still hated them.*

"What's yer name?" The teenager asked.

"Remus."

He snorted rudely. "What sorta name is that?"

Remus bristled. He hated *when people made fun of his name. Especially mannerless boys like this one. "It's* my *name," he said. "What's yours?"*

"Tomny."

"Tomny? And what sort of name is that?"

Tomny smiled, then he answered; "You're posh."

"Am not!"

“Sure are.”

Remus stood up from his swing. He wished he could hit Tomny. He’d done it once before—two months ago when Sidney Donahue had called him pitiful for only having one parent at home and using his driver like a second mum. It’d hurt his hand at the time, and Sidney had cried, but Remus had felt better.

“Are you gonna hit me, Remus?” Tomny asked, as if he could read his mind. “If yer gonna hit me, best be ready tah get hit back.”

“If I did, you’d deserve it. Now I want you to leave,” Remus said, thinking it was best to at least give the other boy a way out.

Tomny rubbed at his eye indifferently. “Nah, don’t think I will.”

“I was here first!”

“No, ye weren’t. I’ve been sittin’ ‘ere all this time, you jus’ didn’t notice me. Easy for people like you, always overlookin' people like us.”

Remus didn’t like what the boy was implying. That they were somehow different, that Remus was bad.

“Leave!” He barked.

“No.”

“I said leave!”

Tomny leaned in very close. “And I said—no.”

Remus couldn’t help it; all of his anger toward his father and his desperation over being lost bubbled to the surface at once. He brought up his fist, clipping Tomny on the edge of his jaw. Only, where Sidney had gone down immediately, Tomny simply glanced sideways, absorbing the punch. Then he lifted his own hand—the one without the cigarette—and hit Remus square in the cheek.

Remus went down onto his backside like a sack of bricks, shocked and bruised. Now he really *wanted to cry.*

“Yer lucky, that was my left,” Tomny said, rubbing his knuckles. Then he did something even more unexpected than the punch, he offered Remus his hand.

Remus stared at it, at the faint scars on his knuckles, the fingernails with

dirt beneath them. He wondered if anyone had ever made Tomny wash his hands before he ate.

“Well, m'on then,” Tomny said, “don’t ‘ave all day.”

Shocked at himself, Remus slowly peeled his hand away from his swollen cheek and took Tomny’s. It was warm, and Tomny immediately pulled him to his feet, even helping to dust off Remus’ trousers.

“There, now the li'tel master’s all spick 'n span.” Smiling, Tomny bent down and picked up his cigarette, which he’d dropped. It was little more than a stub, but he re-lit it anyway using a cheap plastic lighter he pulled from his pocket. Then offered the cigarette to Remus too.

“Wanna try?”

Remus stared at it. Tomny had already socked him one, he didn’t want him to think he was frightened by a little smoking too, that would be lame. Readying himself, he took the cigarette and pinched it between two fingers, sucking in very sharply. The effect was an immediate burning sensation in his throat and chest. He began to hack and cough as Tomny plucked the cigarette from his fingers and finished it off.

“That was my las' one,” Tomny said, flicking the butt away as Remus continued to splutter. “Wanna go get sum more?”

When he could finally breathe again, Remus wiped the corner of his eyes. “You mean… with you?”

“Yeah! … Unless yer not finished with your walk, that is.”

Embarrassed again, Remus looked around. He was still lost, and certainly didn’t want to remain at the poor excuse for a play park.

“Okay,” he said.

Grinning, and revealing two deep-set dimples, Tomny turned and ushered him on. “You can call me Tom,” he said. “You got a nickname?”

Following, Remus shook his head.

“That’s rubbish, everyone’s got a nickname.”

“Not me.”

“Well, ya can’t go round 'ere callin’ yerself ‘Remus’, no one’ll take ya seriously. You need a tough name, one that says ‘don’t mess wiff me’.”

Tomny began to stroke his chin. “Hmm… m’not really a fan of ‘Rem’. You?”

Remus shook his head. “Not ‘Rem’.”

“Orright. How ‘bout somethin' different then? I once knew a guy who called ‘imself ‘Bones’. You like that?”

Remus shook his head again. Tomny frowned. He probably thought Bones sounded very cool.

“Got a surname then?”

“Lupin.”

“Heh. Funny name.” Tomny snapped his fingers. “Oh, I know! M’gonna call you ‘Lu’, okay?”

‘Lu’. Loo… Wow.

“You like that?”

He nodded.

“Champ! Now lets getta move on,” Tomny called, already five paces ahead. “Find ourselves somethin' cool to do. Ever shoot bottle rockets at cars? It’s wicked fun.”

Remus didn’t know what a bottle rocket was, or where they might find such a thing, but his heart felt lighter somehow. He didn’t even care that Tomny had made fun of his name again. Tomny was nice, and not fake nice like everyone that visited the estate. Tomny was real. Remus hoped it made him real too.

“C’mon, Lu, this way!”

Remus glanced back at the dilapidated park. Suddenly it didn’t look so bad. His cheek no longer ached, and he didn’t even feel like crying anymore.

“… I’m coming! Wait for me, Tom!”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from the Scottish idiom "If wishes were horses, beggars might ride..." just in case you weren't sad enough already :^) Also, apologies to any Welsh readers for the sheep

comment, lol.

'Hoover' is a vacuum.
'The Beeb' is slang for the BBC or 'British Broadcasting Corporation'.
'Offie' is slang for 'off license' or liquor store.
Calling 'bagsy' is same thing as calling shot-gun.
Woolworths was a supermarket chain.
'Cost a bomb' is an idiom for expensive.
'Molly' is slang for ecstasy and 'barbs' is slang for barbiturates.
'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' is a ref to the Beatles song.
'Skaghead' is a derogatory term for anyone who abuses drugs; typically heroin though. 'Zombie' is the same.

I took inspo for the 'queer book' Remus reads from a real academic article published in a journal of psychology in 1975. It was very grim, but a strong window in on the societal thoughts of the past. I'm proud of how far we've come since. Let me know if you want the article's citation.

I realise the topics within this chapter may be triggering for some so in case you were looking for support, here is link to the Stonewall's list of international LGBT+ resources. Please reach out if you need it. https://www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/international/international-resources

See you next chapter! (Final part of summer 1977.)

Chapter 71: The Boys at the End

Chapter Summary

> End of summer, 1977. Remus leaves behind the Potters, among a few other things. Hawkings welcomes him back with an unexpected surprise.

Chapter Notes

> C/W: Brief reference to self-harm (but NO actual self-harm, just a misunderstanding), and [unnamed] methods of conversion therapy. Also drug-use and subsequent withdrawal from it, homophobic language, and knives.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Though I know I'll never lose affection,
For people and things that went before;
I know I'll often stop and think about them,
In my life, I love you more…

- "In My Life" The Beatles, 1965

Waking up always sucked more when you couldn't remember falling asleep, except in Remus' case, he couldn't even remember getting back to the Potters'. He learnt later that Sirius had in fact found Simeon—innocently drinking among a group of friends—and that Simeon had hailed them a cab. Only the two of them had left first; Peter had still been whacked off his arse and there was no way they could've taken him back home to his parents in such a state. He and James hung back with Simeon and followed later, but it'd been Sirius who'd dragged Remus across the Potters' threshold, complaining of too much to drink, and then hauled him up to the bathroom where he'd promptly puked his guts out.

"You're mental," Sirius had said while Remus hugged the toilet bowl. "My mental Moony." Then Remus could've sworn he'd heard the words, *love you.*

It could've been part of the dreams. Or the drugs. Or both, really. Getting high was the only way that the dreams would ever come out; the nights were colourless, while days remained all too exhaustive. It

was like he was backwards. Wrong in all the right places.

When he could prise his eyes open, he found that the curtains in his room were still drawn, but Mrs. Potter had left his breakfast on his side table. Along with the tray was a note from Giles that said to call him the moment Remus was feeling human again so he could come retrieve him in time for school.

Ugh, school…

Remus supposed he had to be grateful. Neither Mr. or Mrs. Potter had mentioned what had transpired during the phone call with Sirius' parents, but it was clear they weren't going to allow Sirius not to return to Hawkings. Sirius wasn't about to complain either; it wasn't like he didn't want to go back to school, he just wanted someone to care whether he did or not.

Unable to stomach the thought of eating, Remus drank greedily from the class of water Effie had left and turned back over in bed. He was alone for a while longer, gaze lost on the intricately carved wardrobe of peacock feathers. He'd expected Sirius to come knocking eventually but surprisingly, it was James who came to him first.

"Moony?" Peeking his head in, James knocked gently on the open door. "You feeling alright, mate?"

Remus grunted at him. His mouth tasted vile and his breath was probably worse, but he didn't feel hungover in a sick sort of way, just drained mentally. LSD did that to you, left you feeling fleshly and benign, like a conscious tumour. There was a reason people lost themselves in it, even Remus felt tempted at times. But the trip had been bad, he knew that now. At least most of the energy and jitters from the night before had melted away, and the hallucinations had stopped. Thankfully.

"Not hungry?" James asked, coming in and surveying his untouched breakfast.

Remus sat up, holding his head. "No… feel like shit. You?"

James shrugged. "Feels sorta weird, like I'm still moving in slow motion, but Mum and Dad haven't really noticed. I did wake up absolutely famished though." Sitting down on the edge of the bed, James illustrated this by picking up a piece of cold bacon from Remus' plate and gobbling it down. "Di'h yooh read yer no'h?" He asked over a full mouth.

Remus nodded, plucking the note from the bedside and ripping it into little pieces to keep his hands busy. “How mad was Giles?”

“Duh'no.” James swallowed. “But Mum said he was perfectly pleasant. Guess we’ll see when he comes to get you. If I were you, I’d give him the bell soon though.”

“Right.” That meant a stern lecture was in the cards, at minimum.

“Sirius said you got pretty out of it last night,” James said, speaking carefully like Remus was an eggshell he was trying not to crack. “What happened?”

“Bad trip, I'll wager.”

“What'd it feel like?" James asked, not unkindly, just more curious than anything. "Did you see things?”

Yes. And I heard them. Heard you—all of you.

“Well, it *was* acid, Prongs.”

James just laughed. “For me it was dancing zebras. They were everywhere. Then I met a wizard with this long white beard, and he offered me three wishes.”

“Isn’t that a genie?”

“Oi, it was my acid trip!”

Remus smiled. “What'd you wish for?”

“First, that Arsenal win the next Cup, then I think it was socks with my face on it—”

“You want to wear socks with your own face on it?”

“They were gonna be for you guys, obviously. Don’t really remember the third wish, but I think it involved less zebras.”

“Wish I’d met a wizard. I’d love to abracadabra some ‘a my problems away,” Remus sighed, then; “Is Sirius alright? He… hasn’t come to see me.”

“Only just got up, I think. Said he was gonna take a shower. You probably should too, by the way. There’s vomit on your shirt.”

Remus looked down at himself. “Ugh. Right…”

Nicking Remus’ second piece of bacon for good measure, James stood up from the bed and wiped his mouth. “I’ll leave a fresh shirt outside your door. Come down whenever you want.”

After his friend left him to clean himself up, Remus peeled off his dirty clothes and shoved them into the bottom of his bag. He didn’t want any more reminders of last night. Not the drugs, not what happened with Simeon (had it been Guy or Hugh? … Dammit.) and *especially* not of Tomny.

I can’t do this right now, Tomny had said. At the time it’d felt heartbreaking, but now Remus had the good and bitter sense to be angry. Why did Tomny always get the last word? Why did he always get to decide what was best? Remus might’ve been stoned out of his gourd, but he was still a person! He deserved to be heard… and now he almost regretted not forcing Tomny to listen.

Nudging open the bedroom door, Remus trudged down the hallway to the guest bathroom in just his trousers. He couldn’t hear the shower when he approached, but when he tried the door handle he found it locked.

“Sirius, are you in there?” He knocked. “Just need my toothbrush.”

There was a short clatter, followed by a hissed bout of cursing.

Remus raised a brow. “Sirius, you good?”

“Y-Yeah!” Sirius answered. “One sec…”

He waited, but the bathroom had fallen steadily quiet, and after several seconds Remus pressed his ear to the door.

“… Shit…”

“Sirius!” He called again. “Sirius, open up.”

No answer.

Swallowing, Remus forced the panic down and knocked twice; *I’m okay,* but again there was no answer. He knocked again; silence.

“Sirius,” he ordered in a stern voice, “if you don’t respond I’m going to have to knock the door down and bury you in white roses. Now I don’t care if you’re in the middle of pissing—open up.”

There was some shuffling and after a long, reluctant moment Sirius unlocked the door, peering out through the crack. He was dressed, with his leather jacket on and everything. “Red roses,” he murmured.

“Huh?”

“Bury me in red roses. I’m a traditionalist.”

Remus scoffed. “Bury yourself, ya bastard. Now what’s going on, you weren't really taking a leak, were you?”

“Moony, you’re indecent,” Sirius said, changing the subject. He reached one hand out to poke Remus in the centre of the chest, and Remus batted him away.

“Buzz off. My shirt was…” Remus tailed off. He’d glanced over Sirius’ shoulder and managed to catch sight of a green bag with a white cross on it sitting on the edge of the sink. “What’s that? Did you hurt yourself?”

Sirius whipped his hand back, squeezing the door shut even more. “It’s just a little cut, don’t worry about it.”

“Let me see.”

“No."

"Don't be a tosser, *let me see."*

Sirius scowled lightly. "I thought Prongs was supposed to be the mother hen?”

Remus ignored him; “Are you gonna let me in, or do I actually have to knock the door down?”

Looking reluctant, Sirius finally opened the door and allowed him inside. The guest bath was tinier than the others, painted sky-blue with a tiled ceiling and bearing a beach theme. A small basket of sea-shell shaped soaps sat on top of the toilet and a framed photo of the Potters’ beach house in Devon hung on the wall. The wallpaper had sailboats on it, and the shower curtain matched. It all felt so mundane, so expectedly homely. There was no way Lyall Lupin would’ve permitted such a room in his house. Sirius’ parents neither, Remus suspected.

“Okay, show me,” Remus said, eyeing the first aid kit. There were

gauze pads in the sink, stained faintly with blood. Not enough to be alarming, but still not good. He faced Sirius, who'd shut the door and was leaning up against it with a grumpy frown.

"It's not that big 'a deal," Sirius pouted.

"Why'd you let me inside then? Why'd you hide it?"

"Because you're *impossible."*

"Good. Anything to get you to listen. Now where's this 'no big deal' of a cut?"

Grumbling a bit, Sirius sloughed off his jacket, revealing a red David Bowie t-shirt (a gift from the Potters) and a large bandage wrapped haphazardly around his arm. It stretched almost the entire length of his forearm and was wound so tightly that the skin on either side was pinched white.

"Jesus," Remus swore, taking Sirius' arm in his hand.

"It's not that bad," Sirius assured him, "I just suck at this stuff. Must've nicked myself last night, but I can't really remember. Woke up with it."

"You swear?"

Sirius gave him a funny look. "Well, I didn't do it to myself, now did I?"

They just looked at each other, and Sirius' expression changed.

"I didn't," he promised. "Swears."

Remus licked his lips. "Okay," he said. "Here, sit."

Sirius did as he was bid, dropping down onto the toilet seat as Remus crouched in front of him and got to unwinding the bandage from his arm. Sirius exhaled as he did, and Remus shook his head.

"You are shite at this," he taunted. He let the wrap flutter to the floor, before gently peeling back the layer of gauze beneath. Sirius had been right, the cut wasn't too nasty, mostly a surface graze, but it ran from the tip of his elbow to his wrist and had obviously dried messily overnight. When Remus prodded the skin around it, Sirius winced.

"Reckon it was that gate," he said. "The metal one, on our way out.

Probably caught it when I was guiding you out."

Remus bit his lip. "Thanks for that, by the way..."

"Don't need to thank me, you just had a bad trip, that's all," Sirius said softly. "I mean, what else are friends for besides picking each other up when we're tossed as a salad?"

I love you, Remus thought intrusively. It wasn't a 'friendly' thought, it was something else. Sirius had saved him, in more ways than one, and Remus loved him for it. He wished he could tell him just how much.

“Doesn’t look like it’ll need stitches, but you should've cleaned it better. It could get infected," Remus chastised, scooping up the extra gauze and throwing it in the bin. "You can show Mrs. Potter later if it still hurts, just keep pressure on it for now.” Popping up to wash his hands, he quickly dried them on a towel embroidered with smiling starfish, and began rifling around through the first aid kit.

"School in a few days..." Sirius said, like he couldn't think of anything else to talk about.

"Yup..."

"Going back to your place today then?"

"Mhm. Gonna call Giles after this."

Sirius nodded silently, and Remus knelt back down before him. Using an alcohol swab, he began cleaning the area while Sirius squirmed on the toilet seat, hissing through his teeth.

“Ugh, burns *so* good.”

“Don’t make it weird.”

“It’s not weird. You’re tending to my wounds like some soldier fresh from battle, it’s sexy.”

Remus glanced up, ripping into a fresh pack of gauze with his teeth. “Shuddup.”

“Knew you thought so too,” Sirius smirked.

Pressing the gauze to the newly-cleaned wound, Remus began wrapping the bandage around Sirius’ arm once more. “You’re an idiot, Sirius Black.”

“I love hearing you say my name.”

“You would.”

“Not like *that,”* Sirius scoffed. “It’s different with you. It’s like… you say it and it sounds completely different. No one says my name like you.”

Their eyes met again and Sirius held the gaze for a moment, before his eyes widened and he seemed to realise what he’d just said. “So,” he cleared his throat; “since when did you know so much about tending wounds of the flesh anyway?”

“I don’t, really,” Remus surmised, tucking the end of the bandage in by Sirius' wrist; “But I used to know this kid… Flacky. He was always getting himself into one mess or another. Even put his foot through a window this one time. I just cleaned him up a few times, s’all.”

“And who cleaned your wounds?”

Hm… Remus looked down.

“Aw shit,” Sirius sighed. “I… ignore me.”

Just tell him, Remus thought. *Tell him so it doesn’t become another fucking secret.*

“I saw Tomny yesterday.”

Sirius’ mouth dropped open, then he closed it. “Nah, now you're having me on.”

“I’m not. I saw him.”

“Actually?! Where—At the football game?”

“No, at the party. He was there.”

“What? What would he be doing there?”

“ … Selling drugs.”

Sirius raised both eyebrows, and Remus immediately regretted telling the truth. How could he not get the wrong idea about Tomny now? Then again, what even was the right idea? They both seemed so different now, Tomny and him.

“You know, you got down pretty bad yesterday,” Sirius said quietly. “You were rambling a lot. Are you sure you’re remembering things right?”

Remus didn’t miss his meaning. “Reckon it was drugs, do ya? That he wasn’t really there at all, and I just dreamed the whole thing up?”

“No! S’just…” Biting his lip, Sirius leaned in. “M-Maybe you didn’t actually see him, maybe you just thought you did. There was a lot of people around after all, and we were all pretty fucked up, right?”

“I didn’t *imagine* him,” Remus replied sharply. “He was there. Right there in front of me. I talked to him—he… He was *there,* Sirius.”

“Alright, I believe you." Sirius picked at his bandage sorely. "But what are you gonna do about it?”

Remus sat back, stretching out until his back met the bathroom wall. “Nothing, I guess. It wasn’t like he suddenly wanted me back. Didn’t even know I was gonna be there so…”

Sirius moved on from the bandage and began rubbing his fingers together, in that fidgeting way of his that meant something was wrong. “Well… perhaps it’s a good thing? Like maybe now you can put it all behind you. Focus on the good things—the stuff that matters!”

He’s saying you’re a shit friend, the vicious Moony suggested, none-too-kindly; *Imagine if he was always going on about Miles, would that not smart some, Mooooooony?*

“Yeah,” Remus mumbled; “You’re right… probably time to put it to rest anyway.”

Sirius nodded eagerly, coming down from the toilet to join Remus on the bathroom floor. “Yeah! And then maybe that way we could…” He trailed off, looking uncomfortable. “Aw fuck, I can’t do this anymore… I’m sorry, Moony.”

“For what?” Remus felt his heart quicken. It was too like Tomny. Too similar to what he’d said. Was Sirius about to break up with him? Could you even break up if you weren't dating in the first place?

“I messed up,” Sirius said solemnly. “You asked me to do something and I bungled it all and… I’m just really bloody sorry.”

“I don’t understand.”

Looking straight pained now, Sirius reached for his jacket, drawing it into his lap. “I never really did tell you everything about that school in Belgium.”

Suddenly, Remus’ stomach plummeted.

“It wasn’t exactly a normal school,” Sirius said grimly. “They called it ‘therapy’. You see, before they sent me there, Mum and I had this huge fight. She’d gone through my room, and she found some stuff. Mostly cigarettes, a few records… and uh…” Sirius licked his lips; “a dirty magazine or two.”

“Bet she loved that,” Remus replied, humourlessly.

“Yeah well, I'll wager she might’ve actually preferred it if it were only tits and snatch.”

“You mean it was…” Realisation dawned upon Remus. “Oh.”

“The magazines were old as dust anyway,” Sirius scoffed half-heartedly. “I found ‘em when I was a kid, in one of the maid’s rooms, and I dunno… I guess I just kept them. I wasn't all stupid though, knew enough to know that looking at guys like that was generally frowned upon by society, so I hid ‘em under a loose floorboard in the corner of my room. It was the only hiding place she’d never found, but this time I forgot to put the board back all the way. Rookie fucking mistake. She’s got a nose like one of your dad’s hounds, right, so of course she found it. She demanded the truth and I… Fuck, I dunno—I told her? ... I think I just wanted to shock her. But hey, it worked. She smacked me, which meant I got what I wanted, and then there I was—off to that fucking school a few days later…Just one and done…”

“What was it like?” Remus asked after a long moment. "If you... want to talk about it, that is." A part of him was afraid of the answer, but he had to know, and Sirius deserved to let it out if he wanted to.

Looking indifferent, Sirius busied himself by picking at a crack in his jacket’s leather sleeve. “Well, apparently Belgium’s supposed to be pretty progressive, but I suppose there’s always gonna be a few cracks in the system. The school was run by some Evangelical from Merseyside anyway. He preached for hours about how ‘God still loves us’ and ‘we’re not broken, we’re just lost on the path to righteousness’. I mean fuck, it was like talking to Father Minsin if he was secretly a bloody poof. I figure most priests are, like you’d have to be, to be that

horny for Jesus, but still."

Remus suddenly felt like he were splintering inside. He couldn't even imagine how Sirius felt. "Are you okay?" He asked, another stupid question.

"I'm fine," Sirius replied. "Honestly, I think I got off easy. This other kid I met there, Jeremy, he'd been to three different places before that one. Said they beat you and starve you elsewhere, until you so gone and mental that you're writing bible verses on the wall—total mind-fuck stuff. This place just made us go to church all hours and locked us in our rooms like little kiddies if we were bad." He rubbed his nose. "I thought it might be harder once I broke out, but you came and I was… I was alright again. Really, I was. I just wish I'd run earlier, so that none of it would've happened."

Remus shook his head. "Don't think like that. It wasn't your fault."

Sirius shrugged. "This wasn't my first time running away, ya know."

"You mean when you came to the Potters'."

"Yeah, got a real beating for that one, but that wasn't even the first either. Once when I was twelve I got as far as Chippenham, but I had no idea what I was doing. I'd run away after some dinner where Mum had yelled at me in front of the whole family—didn't even bring a bag. Eventually I just turned around… stupid… And then when I was fourteen I stowed away on this lorry all the way to Newbury, right? Well, the guy found me when he stopped at a petrol station and made me call my parents from the payphone. I didn't even fight him, I just did it. Sucks now… but you know, every time it happened I sorta thought to myself, 'this is it, I'm finally gonna get out' and then things would start to feel real again and I always went back. Hard not to think that if I'd been braver maybe I could've actually changed some of it."

"No," Remus said firmly; "Just because you turned around doesn't mean you weren't brave. If anything, I think going back took more bravery than leaving."

"How is it you always know just the right thing to say?" Sirius asked sadly.

"I don't," he confessed. "I'm only trying the best I can, just like everyone else."

Leaning towards him, Sirius pressed a gentle kiss against Remus' lips and pulled back, stroking his cheek. "You should put that into a song," he said.

"I'm sure somebody already has."

"No." Sirius shook his head. "Not the way you'd write it. I want to hear Remus Lupin's songs."

Remus kissed him back. "Only if I get to hear yours too."

Sirius cracked a smile, before his eyes dropped and he pulled away. "There's... There is something else, Moony." Slowly, Sirius slowly began palming his jacket again, turning it over in his lap. "I really am sorry," he whispered, reaching into the inner pocket. A moment later he withdrew a rumpled piece of paper, the same one James had found in his jean pocket the day before. Up close, Remus could see that not only was it worn and tattered, but also been charred on one end, like someone had tossed it into a bonfire and thought to save it at the last second.

"I'd hid it under the floorboard," Sirius blubbered, more emotional than ever. "I thought I'd hidden everything well enough a'course, but she still found it and she—she threw it into… Oh god, I'm so sorry."

Looking into his face, Remus then realised what exactly it was. Instantly numb all over, he reached out and slowly took from Sirius the blackened remains of Tonya's letter. Unfolding it carefully, he saw that the top half was completely ruined, charred and unreadable.

"I almost told you that day on the roof," Sirius said, "and I… I *knew* I should've given it back to you or even James before we left school! But I was worried he'd read it and misunderstand or—or that you'd make yourself sick obsessing over it all the time, so I thought it best to… but I was wrong. It was the only thing I managed to smuggle with me to Belgium—I'd never give it to *her*—but it got even more ruined and I'm… I'm so sorry."

Trying his best to stave off the despair suddenly clouding every thought, Remus clutched the letter. The top may be gone, but he could just make out the end. Smoothing out the paper's rumpled edges, he read it over.

Don't let Tomny stay angry, it read; *I love him too. I loved him enough to*

stay but I love him even enough to leave. And I'm sorry I couldn't give him anything. It's just just not how we work. He'll understand what I mean.

I have to go now, sweet love. Be safe, be healthy, and please be happy, whatever that means. And don't ever anyone—ever—tell you what that means.

Love forever,
Tonya.

Remus lowered the letter.

"Now that's… just bad luck."

"Fuck, Moony!" Sirius moaned. "Don't *do* that! Don't be so good! Yell at me—hit me—do something!"

"I'm not going to hit you, Sirius," Remus replied sadly.

"Why not?" He demanded. "You trusted me with this one thing—*one thing*—and I let it get ruined! It was your last bit of her and I wasn't even man enough to tell you when you came and saved my sorry arse, so why won't you do anything?"

"Because I'm sad. And because I'm sorry too."

"Moony—"

"—I'm sorry that I never told you how much I love you."

The barest breath of a gasp left Sirius' lips. Again, Remus felt like throwing up. Baring your soul was so hard, but…

"You make me so happy, Sirius," he said. "You have a light inside you that makes everything sing. Your family may not see it, but I do—so do the Potters. It's like... if James is colour, then you're sound. And I want to listen to you forever. Every soul-crushing pun or joke at my own bloody expense. All of them. You see, this—" he held up the ruined letter; "This is a memory. It's not me. *You're* me—you are. No one has ever made me feel like you do. Not Tonya… not even Tomny. And god… I like you so much."

Sirius was looking at him with a wet, glassy stare. A bit of his newly-sheared fringe fell across his eyes and he sniffed as he pushed it away. "Dammit, Moony…"

“I can’t promise that I’m not gonna absolutely bollix everything up, because I probably will—I *have* been,” Remus said; “but I had to let you know. Had to. It's the truth, and the rest of it is this: I’m not good, Sirius, not good by half, but you make me better. And I want to be with you, I do. Even if I'm a coward who can't tell anyone, I want you. Can you forgive me for that?”

“Oh god,” Sirius groaned again. “What the fuck... You can’t just say stuff like that!”

“You deserved to know. I'm sorry.”

"No," Sirius said, smiling through whatever sadness. “Don't say you're sorry—*say it again."*

"Say..." Remus opened his mouth, and then closed it again. "That I'm in love with you?"

Sirius smacked him in the arm. "Don't make it a question this time around, you shithead! I mean, really—I’m *sound?* What the fuck, you romantic bastard, how am I supposed to follow that?!”

As he continued swearing like a sailor, Remus caught Sirius by the arm, pulling him in for a desperate kiss. “Tell me whatever you want,” he murmured against his lips. “Tell me the truth.”

“The truth?” Sirius pulled away, wiping under his eyes. “The truth is that I don’t half bloody like you, Moons... I love you.”

Please be happy, Tonya had written. *And don’t ever anyone—ever—tell you what that means.*

Okay, Ton, Remus thought; *I’m happy. Hope you are too.*

And because he was happy, Remus took a breath, then another. Then he balled up Tonya’s letter, reached across the bathroom, threw it into the toilet, and flushed it away.

“MOONS!” Sirius barked, scrambling to reach the toilet bowl. “What are you doing?!”

Inexplicably, Remus laughed. “Unless you’re going to throw-up, stop hugging the bog. That’s nasty.”

Still horrified, Sirius spun round and smacked him in the arm, this time much more forcefully.

“OW!” Remus winced. “What happened to loving me?”

“How could you do that? It was your letter! She—She was—!”

“It’s only a letter,” Remus sighed, slouching back against the wall. “Just because it’s gone, doesn’t mean I’m going to suddenly forget what it meant to me. If things were that easy, I would’ve burned every record I’ve ever owned by now.”

Sirius came away, and joined Remus with his back to the wall. “You won’t regret it?” He asked.

“Maybe one day,” he shrugged, “but right now I think I feel just fine.”

Sirius leaned his head against Remus' shoulder. "This is crazy, you know that? Us liking each other... Absolutely mental."

"You know me, 'Mental Moony'."

A dry chuckle; “I just mean, are you sure this is such a good idea? Like, I’ve got a lot of baggage.”

“And you’re talkin’ to the *king* of baggage.”

“Oh? Allow me to help lighten the load then.” Cheekily, Sirius slid his hand beneath Remus’ interlocking their fingers. Remus, unable to help himself, lifted his arm up and kissed the back of Sirius’ knuckles. Sirius watched him, and Remus let himself believe it was real yearning in his eyes.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Sirius said quietly.

Remus stroked the back of his hand with his thumb. “Won’t be for long. Three days. You guys follow on the first.”

“Yes, ‘you *guys’* being the operative words.”

“Oh.” *Guys,* as in—more than one. The dorm would be just as much James and Peter’s as theirs, which meant no more laze-about days in bed, snogging through breakfast. They’d be lucky to get away with holding hands under the table.

“Things are gonna be such shit at school,” Sirius grumbled.

“… Maybe.”

“Can’t hide in the toilet forever.”

“Nope.”

“And I suppose it wouldn’t be smart to tell people.”

Remus looked away, too guilty to meet his lover's eye. He knew it wasn't what Sirius truly wanted—the hiding—but but he couldn't bring himself to say that everything would just be okay. He wasn't sure he'd be able to handle it; the extra voices in his head that would tell him all of the nasty things people would be thinking should they know the truth. He just... couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Sirius."

"Don't be." Sirius shook his head, instinctively tucking a piece of hair behind his ear. It was too short now though, and just flopped back into his face. “I'll take whatever you can give me, Moons. Besides, I don’t think I could ever say anything,” he started boldly; “I mean, fucking ‘therapy’ be damned, they’d still look at us differently, wouldn’t they?”

Right! Right, right, right...

“Exactly,” Remus said, relieved that the two of them were finally on the same page.

“This’ll be just for us then,” Sirius said, echoing their words from so many weeks ago. “At school we’ll be normal. Anywhere else we can be… well, whatever we want.”

Remus nodded. “Yes.” *Yes, oh yes.* He couldn’t help it. He thought of the man in the bookshop, and the way he'd looked at him. Then he thought of their friends, their classmates, their teachers. He wasn’t sure he could handle them looking at him like that. Even if they weren’t looks of hatred or revulsion, there would still be looks. It would always be there, in the front of their minds. If he said those words he’d be different forever, no matter how good they were to him. He and Sirius may have loved each other like anyone else, but they would always be… *other.* And after a lifetime of looking for a place to fit in, Remus wasn’t sure he could take it. Not just yet.

“Right then, school's off-limits. Nothing in public,” Sirius said again. “I suppose that’s that.”

Remus got a bad feeling. He stifled it. “Well, you know… we’re not at school yet.”

Sirius looked up. “Right…” Then he licked his lips.

Emboldened by their newfound confessions, Remus snaked an arm around Sirius’ waist and drew them close together under the soft morning light of the bathroom. He kissed him deeply, and Sirius responded in kind, opening his mouth into Remus like it was the only thing left to do. Their kiss was a needy one, but not like any they’d had in the beginning, when they were so desperate to have one another. This kiss was delicate because it might as well have been the last. Alone they could be whatever *this* was, but in front of others, they would be Remus and Sirius. Two parts of a single whole. Yes… that was exactly it. As far as anyone else was concerned, they were best friends, simple as that. And come the following morning, no one would ever know about what had happened during their summer together.

For now though, all Remus wanted was to feel Sirius against him and to commit every curve and line of his body to memory. Commit it to life. Make it real.

One more, he told himself, as Sirius traced his hands over his bare chest and pulled at his own clothes.

One more.

* * *

It was late afternoon by the time Giles had arrived to fetch him. As the old man hung back in the driveway to admire Mr. Potter’s Aston Martin and talk cars, Remus let himself be seen off by Mrs. Potter and her two—*loving*—sons.

“Now don’t you worry, Remus,” she told him kindly, “we’ll take good care of Sirius, just as you have been.”

“Oi, I took care of him too,” Sirius interjected, before shooting Remus a suggestive look. “If this tosser had it his way he’d eat beans on toast for every meal.”

“Explains the height,” James teased, shoving Sirius fondly; “All that protein.”

“Have a good train ride to school, and we’ll see you at Christmas, just like we talked about,” Effie said.

Remus nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Potter.”

She hugged him, because that’s what mothers do, and Remus accepted it without any fuss. Afterwards he turned to his friends and offered James a hand.

“C’mon, none ‘a that!” James scoffed, before pulling him into a hug even tighter than his mother’s had been.

“You’re just the worst sometimes,” Remus grunted.

“The best-worst!” James added, pulling away.

Remus smiled softly and then it was time to turn to Sirius. He almost hugged him—raised his arms and everything—but Sirius just smacked his palm and grinned.

“Try not to enjoy your night alone in the dorm too much!” He said.

“Right…” Remus forced his smile to go wider. “Well, see you at school.”

As the others waved him off, Remus ignored the heavy feeling in his gut as he trudged down the driveway.

“Ready to go then?” Giles asked, ducking out of the front seat of the Aston.

“Mhm,” Remus answered blithely.

“Really is a handsome beast you’ve got there, Monty,” Giles said, shaking Mr. Potter’s hand in congratulations.

“You flatter me, Giles!” Mr. Potter turned on Remus and held out his hand. “Remus.”

He took it, and was immediately enveloped in another hug.

“Be well, son,” Mr. Potter told him.

Remus peeled himself away from his friend’s father, feeling the last of his patience chip away. “You too, sir.”

He tried to avoid looking back as the car pulled away from the drive, but in the end he couldn’t help himself. Just before Giles set off down the road, Remus turned around in his seat to find the small family of four standing on their stoop, Mr. and Mrs. Potter still waving goodbye.

They were too far for him to make out their exact expressions, but Remus suspected Sirius' was just as conflicted as his own.

"See you at school…" he murmured to no one.

"So," Giles asked later, as they made their way back through the city toward home; "How was your stay?"

"Good."

"Nice people, them Potters."

"Yeah. Real nice."

"You don't seem very chatty today. What, still hungover?"

"M'fine."

"Hmph. Would'a thought you'd be happier leaving your friend's place. Hope it's not school that's got you in such a mood."

Remus began fiddling with his thumb nail. "Gil…"

"Mm?"

He took a breath, not really believing that he was about to ask such a thing. It'd been years since she'd gone from the world, and he'd never cared before. Remus wondered if it made him a bad son, erring so vastly on the side of caution. But really, who wanted to know that their own mother was crazy?

"You remember how my mum was before she died?" He started; "How she would sometimes hear or... or see things that weren't there?"

Remus didn't look up, but he could sense Giles watching him in the rearview. "Whatchu mean, lad?"

"Well, I know she was sick, but… aren't there different kinds of sick?"

Appearing reluctant to answer, Giles cleared his throat. "You see, Remus, your mum, she…"

"She had a lot of doctors," Remus cut in. "Not just cancer doctors, either. I know what they said about her, I would read their notes."

"You were ten," Giles replied sharply. "What were you doing reading such things?"

"She was my mum. She was what I had."

The driver's shoulders slackened in the front seat. "Oh boy," Giles muttered. Then he sighed; "Alright, so you have questions. I dunno how knowledgable I'd be, it's really something you ought to talk to your father about, but don't you mistake none either, your mum was a good woman. She had a lot going on near the end, what with her sickness and all those stints in the cancer ward. Things like that can really take a toll on a person—on everyone. Change is expected, and she… Well, she always tried her best, didn't she? Some days were better than others, but your father never blamed her none for it. In fact he took care of her, right 'til the end."

"And before I was born? Was she normal then?"

"Pfft. What's normal? Nothin' I know. We're just people, lad, each trying to find our own way."

"I don't need you to comfort me," Remus said; "I just want to know if I should be worried."

"Why would you need to be worried?"

Remus looked out the window. "Never mind."

Giles hummed a bit like he wanted to say something else, but thought better of it. "Hey," he called instead, "why don't stop somewhere? Pick up lunch, whatever you'd like."

"No thanks, not really that hungry."

Giles frowned, but then perked up again. "I know, how 'bout we turn on the radio? This car could use some good tunes." Reaching for the dial, Giles flipped it into the first station and has the music filled the car, he flashed Remus a thumbs-up in the mirror. "See! Much better!"

Remus couldn't quite agree.

'Ooh, I feel love, I feel love,
I feel love, I feel love,
I feel love…'

The irony, he thought, as he dropped his head against the window.

“Augh, dammit,” Giles grumbled later, as the road ahead of them turned up closed for construction and traffic began to pack in behind them like dominoes. “Always gotta be doing something new, this bloody city. Them bloody ringways can’t be ready fast enough. Hold on, gonna take the route through Westminster,” he said.

In the back seat, Remus was only half listening as he flipped through a book of mediaeval poetry Mrs. Potter had given him. James and Sirius had thought it horribly swot-like, but Remus still needed a topic for his summer essay and was hoping he could finish the entire thing on the train. Sirius, naturally, hadn’t bothered with his.

The sun, the sister of the moon, from the south, the translation read; *Her right hand cast over heaven’s rim; No knowledge she had of where her home should be, The moon knew not what might was his, The stars knew not where their stations were.*

Remus hadn’t the faintest idea what it really meant, but as he read, the words stuck with him. He was already several pages along when he flipped back to them, reading them over and over again. Sirius would like this, he decided, if he just gave it a chance. But Tonya—she would’ve loved it. She’d have read it and understood every word straight away, and yet if you’d have asked her what it meant, her answer would undoubtedly be her own. Remus could almost hear it now; *And the sun's the roaming heart who's lost her lover. She's clearly begging the stars to bring her love back to her, but they're lost to eternity too. It's a story of two soul-bound lovers doomed never to meet, and the bleeding hearts who watch from far away.*

She was a storyteller, that Tonya, or she had been. Sort of like Sirius. Remus wasn’t a storyteller, he was merely a listener, and if Tonya had told him that she was the sun and he was the moon, he would’ve believed her. So would have Tomny, he suspected. Once.

Remus shut his book.

He did not miss Tonya’s letter, but maybe if he’d kept it, he’d have an excuse for what he was about to do.

“Gil, can you stop the car?” Remus pleaded suddenly, leaning forward in his seat.

"You feeling peckish now?"

“No, but there’s something I gotta do. If you'd just let me out here, I can meet you back at the house later. Won't even take long.”

In the rearview, Giles gave him an incredulous look. “Let you out—pardon me?! Absolutely not, I only just got you back. Nah, we’re gonna go home, and then you’re gonna get yourself sorted so you can actually make your train on time this year.”

“Please, I swear I’ll—”

“You can stop your whinging now, I ain’t letting you step foot outta this car until we’re back on Lupin property. Now you best just sit back and enjoy the ride ‘cause that’s my final word on the matter.”

Remus slumped back into his seat feeling frustrated. Outside, the city flew by, illustrated by all its hustling and bustling. In a few minutes they’d be over the River Thames and his best chance will have slipped away. He knew he shouldn’t want to push his luck, it’d already been sliced so thinly, and he had real responsibilities now, to both his friends and school. But he couldn’t leave without trying one more time. *One more.*

“So tell me,” Giles started, as the car rolled to a stop before a red light; “What’s your schedule this term look like?”

Wrenching off his seatbelt, Remus threw the door open. “SORRY, GIL!” He hollered, as he leapt out onto the road and swung the Roll's door shut after himself. He only just caught the tip of Giles’ flabbergasted sputter, but before he could be stopped, Remus was streaking down the middle of the street. Slipping past cars filled with surprised passengers, he finally scooted round the pavement, dodging pedestrians as he ran. Giles wouldn’t chase him, but he’d surely box his ears when he returned. It was a consequence he’d deal with later—for now he needed to find the nearest tube station.

After hopping the gates, he took the circle line toward Aldgate, and from there he walked. Being there, in that old neighbourhood he’d gotten himself lost in all those years ago, brought back a rush of memories, some more painful than others. He passed the shops where he and Tonya would buy bread daily the summer before and remembered her dancing in the street. Most days they didn’t even have the money to buy anything, it was just about finding something to do, and Tonya had had a knack for making even the most mundane things magical. After passing the shop, he happened upon the all-hours corner shop where they’d buy their fags whenever they ran out in the middle of the night. He could remember the time he and Tomny and Doss had made the trip over, only to be mugged not five feet from the shop doors. It'd been a bitter memory for a long time, but

eventually they'd laughed about it. Remus might've stopped in to pick up a carton of cigarettes as a peace offering, except that he'd left everything behind in the Rolls, including his wallet.

Jump me then, he told his ironic fate. *Rob me, beat me. I've nothing to give you.*

But no one bothered him, and he carried on. The streets he knew like the back of his hand, but even more so, he knew that entertaining the idea of some miraculous return was stupid. Tomny had told him himself not to come, he'd been crystal clear, but Remus was too busy feeling sorry for himself to care. As he shuffled up the familiar streets he made a solemn promise that if Tomny could tell him in person that they were done, he'd leave and never come back. He just needed to see his face when he said it.

The building that housed Tomny's flat looked the exact same when he finally stopped outside its rusted front gate. Most of the apartments had their windows open—desperate for some relief from the heat—but the window to Tomny's place still had the air-con from last summer fitted in place. To anyone else it was an old aluminium box. To Remus it was a memory.

Pushing open the squeaky gate, he started up the pavement, stepping over the weeds that had burst through the cracks in the cement. A kid, maybe eleven or twelve, was sitting on the front steps, fanning himself with one hand and smoking a cigarette with the other. They eyed each other but Remus just approached the door buzzer and hit the flat's number. There was no accompanying buzz which meant the ringer was broken again. Sighing, he turned to the kid and jutted his chin out.

"You live here?"

The boy took a stubborn drag on his cigarette, which was longer than any of his fingers. "Who wants tah know?"

"Right. Tomny still live 'ere?"

"Who wants tah know??"

Remus set his jaw. It unsettled him that this child might know Tomny —that he might've been recruited into the group like anyone else or picked up because he was pitiful. It'd been easier to excuse a lesser age when they were all small, but they were grown now.

“Lupin. Tell him Lupin’s come to see him.”

The kid looked away. “Tell ‘im yerself. He’s out.”

“Gee, thanks,” Remus scoffed, turning away and dropping down the steps. While trying to decide what to do next—did he really have the time to sit and wait while just hoping that Tomny would show up?—he noticed a single flower that had broken through the cement with the other weeds, its pure white petals shining in the sun. Feeling the urge to reach out and pick it, Remus stopped before the weed and stared at it until another voice called out. It was not with kindness.

“What you doin' ‘ere?!”

When he looked up, Remus found Lee standing next to the gate. His brown mop of curls were gone, shaved nearly to the skin and giving him a more gaunt, skull-like appearance. Despite the heat, he was wearing jeans and heavy leather boots. His shirt was missing both sleeves and torn over the left side of his chest, though it was just as likely to be for aesthetic purposes than anything unfortunate.

“H-Hey, Lee…” Remus felt a surge of happiness rise in his chest; “Hey!”

“Don’t ‘hey’ me,” Lee scowled; “I asked what you were doin’ ‘ere!”

Before Remus could even begin to answer Lee had looked past him, practically spitting as he yelled;

“Darry! Get yer sorry arse inside before I crack ya a new one. And stop stealin' those fags!”

Instantly the boy was on his feet, abandoning his half-smoked cigarette as he opened the building’s front door and scuttled inside.

Looking anything but satisfied, Lee rubbed a hand across his face.

“So? Don’t tell me you’ve gone mute.”

“Uh…” Remus swallowed. “I—I came to see you guys. You know, for the summer…”

Lee checked an imaginary watch, the only hint of the boy he once was that Remus had witnessed so far. “I’d say you’re pretty late then.”

“Heh, yeah… my bad, I guess. Is—uhm… Is Tomny around?”

Eyes tightening, Lee pushed open the gate slowly and the metal screamed in protest. “What you want wiff Tom?”

“I’ve just got some things to ask him.”

“What sort 'a things?”

Remus felt his jaw begin to tremble. *Stop being such a namby,* he told himself; *This is Lee for Christ’s sake!*

“Look Lee, I don’t know what you’ve heard but—”

Lee started up the path, stopping with barely a foot of space between them. “And what would I have heard?” He demanded sharply. “Oh, c’mon now—don’t tell me we're still keepin’ secrets? All this time and all that bullshit and we’re *still* not fessin’ up to one another, Lu?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Fucking hell—jus’ cut the bullshit!" Lee barked. "I know everything! Yeah, that’s right. How long did ya think Tomny could stand keepin' it a secret? Always covering for you and your scrawny arse. You know, it made a lot more sense when he finally told all of us. Everything from Christmas and the bleedin’ summers before that—all the favouritism! All the coddling! And then you up and betray us. Did you sell us out, Lu? *Did ya?!”*

Remus scrambled for a response, but it was as though his brain had short-circuited. He had no idea what Lee was talking about, but if he was this angry then perhaps it was just best to roll over and admit to all of it.

“Lee, I’m tellin’ you," he pleaded; "I never meant to fuck anyone over. All that stuff with Tonya, it was just—”

Lee’s eyes shot wide very suddenly, appearing almost cynical. “Woah, ‘Tonya’—haven’t heard from that bitch in a while," he sneered. "Most of us thought she’d up 'n run off wiff you. But that couldn’t be true because well, yer you and she’s just bottom of the barrel scum like the rest of us.”

Remus was stupefied; “Wha—”

“Must be so hard lovin’ the town bike. Did you take her for a ride, Lu? How’d that cunt taste? Was it rich enough for you—or was her flavour of whore too much for your precious palate?”

The suddenness of Remus' rage nearly choked him. He grabbed Lee by the front of the shirt and yanked him forward; *"DON'T—!"* He snarled; "T-Talk about her like that again and I'll—"

Lee met his anger with the flick of a knife. He whipped it out of his pocket in one smooth move, and the next thing Remus knew he had a switchblade pressed to the centre of his cheek.

"You'll *what?!"*

Oh god. Remus released his hold of Lee's shirt immediately and tried backing away, but the other boy only got closer, reaching around the back of his neck to fist the hair there and pin Remus in place against his blade.

"You gonna kick my ass, Lu?! Gonna put me in my rightful place? Don't you know who's neighbourhood you're in, *ya fucking fairy?!"*

Remus squirmed, but the knife was pressing a groove into his cheek, seconds from breaking skin. Any closer and Lee'd take his eye.

"Get off me!" He cried, attempting a push. Lee barely shifted his weight, and bore down on Remus even more, squeezing his neck tight enough to draw a cry from his lips. Lee laughed then, like a rabid animal pushed to the brink.

"Should I give you a scar to match the one Benny's boys gave you?" He seethed through his teeth. "Send you home to Daddy with one eye? See how well-received you are then?! Or I know, how 'bout we real dig deep—see if you fuckin' bleed blue? Couldn't blend in with us mongrels then, could ya? Nah—we bleed *red."*

"Lee, please! It's bloody me!"

Lee shook him, and Remus felt the sting of the knife's cut. "That's the problem, don't you see?!" Lee barked. "You're a betrayer, Lu, and you know what happens to betrayers in the East End… That's right..."

Remus felt something trickle down his cheek. *Please.*

"You should'a never come back here, Remus Lupin."

He took a breath; he held it. Lee's eyes were pin pricks; his mouth twitched feverishly. Then he bared his teeth, like he might rip Remus' throat with them. Unable to do anything else, Remus closed his eyes. He wished he were somewhere else, anywhere else.

Shall I sing to you, darling?

Save me, Remus pleaded. *Someone save me.*

“Don't be a fucking pansy, open your eyes! Look at me!"

He thought of Sirius, of how they’d confessed their love for one another just that morning. Was this the price? To gain his love he had to lose another’s?

"LOOK AT ME, LU!"

You’re the whole bloody sky, Sirius had said that to him once. Had he loved him then? ... Remus hoped so. He wondered if this was how it’d felt for Sirius to face down his mother. To face someone who ought to love you, and to have no means of satiating them. To be utterly alone.

“Open your fucking eyes, you fucking prick!"

Save me, Sirius, he begged. *Save me.*

"Last warning... You better open your goddamn eyes or I swear I’ll take this knife and pluck 'em out myself—!”

“LEE!”

For a moment Remus thought his prayers had been answered. That Sirius had somehow followed him all the way from Finchley, and had appeared in his defence like a knight with a sword. But Sirius didn’t know the End, and Sirius didn’t know Lee.

“Fucking let go of him!” Tomny snarled, jumping the gate entirely and rushing toward them. He faltered slightly when he saw the knife, and presumably the blood cascading down Remus’ cheek, but not enough to back down. “Lee, that’s enough!” He ordered. “Put down the knife.”

“No!” Lee wailed breathlessly, wrenching Remus’ head back further. “He’s a liar, Tom. H-He—ones like hims are the ones who—”

“You’re strung out, Lee,” Tomny said firmly. “You don’t know what you’re saying. That’s Lu, your friend.”

“No!” Lee hissed again, each breath like a laboured shudder. “He’s a rat—*a f-f-fake!”*

“He’s a kid. Now let ‘im go… before I beat your fuckin' arse into the

dirt."

Like a predator turned prey, Lee ripped the knife away from Remus' cheek, pointing it straight at Tomny's chest. "STAY AWAY!" He shrilled, but Tomny wasn't fazed. The moment the blade had left Remus' cheek he stepped up to them and grabbed Lee by the wrist. He wrenched it terribly, until Remus was sure the bone would snap, but Lee only gave a yelp and dropped the switchblade onto the pavement with a clatter.

"No!" Lee screeched, diving for the knife and taking Remus with him. He'd almost gotten it too, until Tomny used his boot to punt it across the lawn. With his entire body, he grabbed Lee around the middle and for a moment they wrestled, Remus still caught between them.

"Let 'him—*go!"* Tomny grunted, before delivering a sharp punch into Lee's stomach. The other boy immediately folded around his fist, finally releasing Remus, and Tomny caught Lee as he fell. Remus, with no strength left in his legs, plummeted back onto his arse in the yellowed grass, shaking all over.

"There, go on then," Tomny sighed, as Lee doubled-over on the ground and threw up. He was crying—whimpering really, and after his stomach was empty, Lee turned to Tomny's legs and held them, sobbing into the frayed hems of his trousers like a wretched child.

"I'mm'sorryyyyy," he slurred. *"I'mmmm'ssssoooorrryyyyyy…"*

Remus could only watch. He thought he might be crying, but when he touched his cheek he found it was blood. He wasn't even shocked, there was so room for it. Seeing Lee, who was normally full of such light and happiness, reduced to such a state; it was like a nightmare made real.

"I know," Tomny muttered, rubbing Lee's back roughly. "I know, mate."

Nothing happened for a long time. Remus simply sat there, frozen, and Tomny comforted Lee the only way he knew how. He did not look at Remus, and when Lee's cries had finally filtered off into little more than pitiful moans, he straightened up.

"Darry!" He called. "I know you're there. Come on out."

Remus wrenched his head around. The boy from before reappeared in the building doorway, looking weary-eyed and guilty. Tomny

beckoned him over, and Darry quickly scuttled down onto the path, moving around Remus like he was afraid he might reach out and bite him.

“Take Lee inside,” Tomny told him, hauling his friend to his feet. “Make sure he stays there, right? Lock ‘im in the bedroom if ya have to, at least until he’s over the roughest bits.”

Darry nodded and meekly let Lee drape an arm around his small shoulders for support. It took some time for the pair to hobble to the end of the front path, and more still to get up the stairs, but eventually Lee and Darry made it through the front door, and it shut behind them with a creak. Remus stared after them for a long while, clutching the front of his shirt and trying to slow his out of control heartbeat. Then suddenly, a body blocked the sun from his face and Remus turned back to find Tomny offering him a hand.

“Stand up,” he said gravely.

Tentatively, Remus reached a shaky hand up and Tomny grabbed him. His hand was as warm and strong as he remembered, but the moment Remus was on his feet again he let go and stuck both in his pockets.

“What are you doing ‘ere, Lu?” Tomny asked. He sounded tired, which was somehow worse than if he'd sounded angry.

“I… Lee, he—”

“Lee didn’t call you 'ere,” Tomny cut-in, mercilessly. “Lee’s too strung-out on oxys to do much of anything these days.”

“When?” Remus asked, heart breaking. *“Why?”*

“You mean when did it happen? Or why did he start wanting to mark you up like an old tire? He wouldn’t have, if you hadn’t ‘a come.”

Remus felt a lump form in his throat. “I’m sorry,” he said sadly. “But I couldn’t just leave.”

“Why not?”

“ ‘Cause I made a promise…" He half-whispered. "I couldn't let you stay angry.”

Tomny let out a long breath, almost softening. “ ‘ere,” he said, before drawing a plaid handkerchief out of his pocket and passing it over.

“For your… cheek.”

Remus let Tomny stuff the fabric into his hands. He balled it up at first, embarrassed somehow, before pressing it to his cheek. It smarted against the cut, but when he winced he was rewarded by Tomny closing the distance between them.

“Doesn’t look too deep,” he mumbled, tilting Remus’ face up by his chin. He withdrew quickly enough, and when Remus was sure he’d wiped most of the blood from his face, he passed the handkerchief back.

“For you to remember me by,” he said snarkily.

Impossibly, the corner of Tomny’s mouth lifted into a smile. It was gone a second later.

“I knew you would come,” he said. “Seeing you last night, I jus' knew it.”

“I don’t really remember what I said,” Remus told him after, “but I knew that I saw you. And I couldn’t go back without saying my piece.”

“And what’s that?”

“That I’m sorry. I *am,* Tom. You gotta believe me.”

Glancing around, Tomny scratched the side of his head. For a moment Remus thought he might rebuff him again, but then he was nodding. It was solemn, but it was something.

“Orright,” Tomny muttered, “let’s just get ya out of 'ere then.”

Giving a little grunt that meant ‘follow me’, Tomny turned and started down the pavement, straight out the gate. After a final glance at the flat, Remus had no choice but to follow.

Lee's right, I made a mistake coming back, he thought as he trailed behind his friend. Tomny hadn’t said a single thing to him since the flat and suddenly Remus was worried that he’d never get to tell him the things he’d come to say. More than anything he wanted Tomny to know how sorry he was; sorry if anything he did or didn’t do lead to Tonya’s departure and sorrier still that the only letter she’d left was for him rather than the man she was supposed to be in love with.

Seeing Lee so angry had changed something else within Remus too. He'd expected anger from Tomny, but not the others. As they walked he wracked his brain for meaning of what Lee had said, and when the realisation finally hit him, it hit like a train. Lee knew he'd been lying about everything; where he'd grown up, his family, where he went to school, how much money he had. He knew—and Tomny had been the one to tell them.

Does this make you the betrayer, or the betrayed? Vicious Moony asked. *You should be angrier, should you not? Is it not your turn? Have we not been dealt enough injustices?*

Remus ignored it. There was absolutely no *'we'*.

Ahead of him, Tomny stopped walking and cleared his throat. " 'ere."

Looking up, Remus found that they'd made it to a caff. The words 'Workman's Cafe' were written across the front window in chipped paint and a neon sign hung over the door, though most of the bulbs were busted as though someone had taken a bat to it ages ago.

"What are we…?"

"Well?" Tomny said, holding the door open for him impatiently. "You want to eat off the road or off a plate?"

Eyeing his friend *(friend?)* Remus slipped past him and walked inside. There was only a few other patrons inside, sitting amongst the cracked leather booths and checkerboard flooring while they sipped their coffees or read the paper. A radio was humming quietly in the background and everyone was keeping to themselves for the most part, not bothering to give them a second glance as they strolled in to the sound of a door chime. They took a seat in a corner booth and not long after a man wearing a grease-stained apron around his rather thick middle came out from the kitchen and leaned over the counter.

"Whatchu want?" He grunted across the cafe.

Tomny glanced at Remus briefly before answering; "Two chocolate shakes and a round 'a chips."

"Oh no, I don't have any money," Remus said.

Tomny arched a single brow. Then he turned back to the cook. "Yeah, that'll be two shakes and the chips."

Leaning back into his seat sheepishly, Remus kept quiet as the cook shuffled back into the kitchen. “Tom, what are we doing here?” He asked finally.

Plucking a toothpick from the tin at the end of the table, Tomny set it between his teeth and crossed his arms. “Figured ya wouldn’t show up on my doorstep after all this time if ya didn’t want to talk. So I brought us 'ere—now talk. Why’d you come back, Lu?”

It still hurt to hear Tomny speak so coldly, but Remus was done playing meek.

“I came to make things right,” he said firmly. “I’m tired of everything being so wrong.”

“What things? What’s wrong?”

“Everything’s wrong!" He exclaimed, before wincing and lowering his voice; "We’re all so messed up—I mean Lee just held a knife on me, what the fuck was that about?”

Tomny looked away, absent-mindedly chewing on his toothpick. “Some stuff’s happened, innit.”

“What stuff?”

“What’s it matter?”

Remus took a deep breath. “Look Tom, I know you didn’t want me to come back and I’m sorry about Tonya, I am—but I’m really tryin’ here. If you could just tell me something—*anything*—then maybe I could understand. And if after we’ve talked, you still don’t want me here, well… Well then I’ll leave and you’ll never have to see me again. I swear it.”

Tomny gave him a hard look. “I told everyone about you,” he confessed suddenly. “Where you come from, how you tried to hide it… I told them.”

Betrayed, the voice seethed. *Betrayed—betrayed—betrayed!*

Remus forced it down. He was hurt, but being hurt had never helped him solve anything.

“I… I already know that, Tom," he said quietly. "Lee, he—he said some stuff…”

“So what, yer not mad?”

“Would it change anything if I was? If I said I wasn’t mad would you forgive me for Tonya?”

Tomny reached up and pulled the toothpick from his mouth before rubbing his face and giving a low moan. “Ahhh, Lu… for Christ's sake, I’m not mad at you for Tonya.”

“Then why’d you tell me to stay away?" He demanded. "Why’d you say you didn’t want me around?!”

“ ‘Cause I didn’t know what else to do.” Withdrawing his hands, Tomny sniffled a bit and shook his head. “Orright, so I admit it. I was mad in the beginning—angry that she would leave an explanation for you—someone she should've barely known—and not me. *Me!* All I got was a bloody note pinned to the fridge asking me to post it to you and I was fucking pissed off! Not even ashamed to say that I almost burned it, but then fate had a good laugh. I hadn’t paid the gas bill 'n couldn’t find a fucking lighter in the entire flat. Tonya had started hiding ‘em.”

Remus almost laughed himself. He almost felt like telling him that the letter had been burned anyway. “It’s okay.”

“No, it's not,” Tomny said grimly. “I *was* jealous—jealous of your connection with her. Jealous I could never give her what she wanted while you just made it look so easy. Didn't really think I was before, but… yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” Remus said again, because what else was there to say when your friend was hurting so? “But you have to know Tom—she was your girlfriend! You loved each other and I—I might’ve liked her but I would never—”

Tomny put a hand up to silence him. A moment later the cook shambled over with their milkshakes and a basket of chips and left them on the table. He'd eaten nothing all day and still Remus wasn’t the least bit hungry.

“I know nothing happened between you,” Tomny said finally; “I know. I wasn’t jealous ‘cause of that. I sort of… fuck. I dunno, I'd gotten it into my head that she’d said something or told you something she wouldn't tell me! I thought that maybe you knew she was gonna leave and you didn’t bother saying anything.”

“I didn’t know,” Remus swore. "If I had, I would've done anything to

make her stay."

“Yeah, I know." Tomny pulled the toothpick from his lips again, flicking it away. "But you were gone and I couldn’t be sure. It was coward’s shit—but then when I thought of how it would feel to see your face and think of her, I… I told you to stay away because I was a coward, and I’m sorry too. But I think it was probably for the best now anyway.”

Remus sat back in the booth. He knew what Tomny meant.

“What happened with Lee, Tom?”

Tomny began stirring his milkshake with his straw, but didn’t drink any of it. “Ian died,” he said stiffly. “Last May. It was an accident—or it should’ve been. Lee’s been pretty fucked up over it since.”

“How’d he die?” Remus asked, the skin of his arms turning to gooseflesh.

“Got jumped in an alley. Basic shite, really.” Tomny smiled sardonically, but it become a deep frown a moment later. He looked out the window, eyes glassy. “You remember when I told you he got someone a few months ago? He didn’t mean it, but that someone must’ve been important to someone else, who knew someone else and…” Tomny took a breath. “These things tend to snowball around ‘ere. It’s always an eye for an eye, tit for tat. The papers and those fucks in government like to make it sound like it’s one great free-for-all with everyone killing each other all the time, but there’s rules! You can’t just take someone out and not expect retaliation—even if it was just a stupid fuckin’ mistake. You don’t start flingin’ bullets unless you have the muscle to back it up, and Ian—he was just another dumb kid. I thought it would be better to get ‘im out of the city, but he didn’t want to go without Lee and Lee kept insisting that we could protect him until everything blew over.”

“Lee asked you to hide him?”

“S’not an unfair thing to ask, innit? Not from someone you supposedly take orders from.”

Tomny leaned his forehead on one hand, looking haggard. Remus looked away. Someone had carved out a smiley face on the surface of the table. “So Lee blames you…”

“… ‘e blames himself mostly, but yeah, me too. Lee was there when

Ian was killed. He had to hold him while he bled out. I guess when he died something just… switched in him. It was like the whole world had become his enemy. It took *everything—"* Tomny smacked the table's surface; "to keep him from going after the guys who got Ian, but if he had it would've jus' started up another fuckin' endless cycle until everyone was just—just fuckin' dead. Throwing 'imself into work wasn't enough, he needed someone else to be mad at—something to distract him—so I… I told him about you."

Though those that are betray'd, do feel the treason sharply, yet the traitor stands in worse case of woe.

It wasn't the voice this time, but a memory. The quote was Shakespeare, one of the plays in his First Folio. Remus had read it in his classics class last term. It'd originally struck a chord with him because of Regulus, but he'd never brought it up out of fear of upsetting Sirius further. Hearing that your betrayer being in the worse situation is not something one wants to think about when they've been betrayed, but Tomny wouldn't have understood it anyway, so again Remus kept quiet.

"I'm sorry, Lu," Tomny said, after Remus had been quiet for some time. "I did wrong by you. I promised I'd look after you, and I failed."

Despite himself and all of his anger, Remus shook his head. "Can't look after everyone, Tom."

"Hard lesson."

Remus ached. Ached for Lee, and the brother he'd lost. Also for Tomny, who'd clearly lost some part of himself that he couldn't place. He ached for Sirius, who deserved better than him, and then he ached for himself, for Remus Lupin, the nameless queer, not queer enough boy that had everything and nothing all at once.

"How are the others?" Remus asked stonily.

"Seesaw and Vint are fine. They're still kickin' around."

"Yeah, saw them in Camden."

"They were probably on a job."

Remus bit his lip. Jobs, stabbings, deaths, he knew nothing about any of it.

“And Doss?”

“Doss got out. Moved to Cardiff with that girlfriend of his. ‘er family runs a sheep farm there.”

“He’s a farmer now?”

“Guess so. I think it suits him some though, don’t you?”

Remus smiled meekly and finally pulled his milkshake toward him. It was more milk than shake but it was cool when he sipped it and the chocolate was comforting.

“I’m sorry I betrayed you, Remus,” Tomny said. “I’m sorry I took the easy way out and told everyone your secret and I’m sorry I took everything out on you before that.”

Swallowing, Remus looked up at him—at the man he’d loved and admired for so long. “You know, Tom, people keep telling me they’re sorry. So many sorries. So fucking many that I’m getting real sick ‘n tired of hearing it. I’d rather we just be friends again.”

“I think I’d like that too,” Tomny said softly, then; “I really missed you, Lu.”

“I missed you too.”

Tomny smiled and picked up a chip, popping it into his mouth. Then he wiped his hands and pushed the entire basket aside. “What d'ya say we get outta 'ere? Do something fun—for ol’ time’s sake?”

Remus took one final gulp of his milkshake before doing the same. “Definitely.”

Grinning, Tomny threw a few quid on the table and they got up, and just like that they were practically chasing one another out of the caff. Remus had forgotten how easy it was to go from strangers to brothers in the End. It was almost refreshing.

At first they just roamed, picking off the memories one by one until they just felt like moments again. The corner shop, the closed down bowling alley three streets over that'd been busted into so many times it was practically public property now, the mattress store with bars over its windows and a cut out of a half-naked lady laying on every bed to entise potenial customers into coming inside. It was enough for Remus just to walk, but eventually Tomny was leading him into an

alley where he dipped behind an old skip bin and came back with a milk crate full of spraypaint.

“You just keep these here for emergencies?” Remus ragged, already sorting through the old and dented cans.

“They’re Lee’s from a bygone era. He hid ‘em ‘ere after the city kept painting over that mural he’d done over on Quaker Street. Not sure how much is left in ‘em, but figure we could do at least a bit ‘a damage.”

Remus shook one of the cans, hearing its metallic rattling. “What we waiting for then?”

They found themselves an empty brick wall in between the alley and a street of row houses and got to work. Only a few of the cans had any paint in them and most of the nozzles were clogged after months of sitting out in the elements, but Remus wasn’t an artist anyway. Using a bright piss-yellow, he painted the words ‘Mercury is God’ over the brick’s rough surface. Tomny opted for a more traditional approach, tagging the wall with a great big ‘T’ and the words ‘Rent is piracy’.

“Pink Floyd said that their ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ album was partly inspired by graffiti,” Remus said as they worked.

“Hm. Graffiti is kind of like music, innit?” Tomny said, pausing to admire the ‘Townshend wuz here’ Remus was finishing on his end. “Sort of like another language—like a secret code for the beatniks and the underdogs.”

“What do you mean?”

Tomny pointed across from them, to a wall on the other side of the alley that had already been tagged with layers and layers of paint. Everything from handprints to warped cartoons to peace signs inside the Star of David. ‘Free your mind’ the wall said, and ‘Wall Street is here if you say it so’. There was also a badly drawn portrait of John Lennon with ‘Lenin’ written beneath, and a large portion of the wall's centre was dedicated to the words ‘Realise’, ‘Real Eyes’, and ‘Real Lives’.

“When you see stuff like that, what does it make you think?” Tomny asked.

“That… whoever painted it did a lot of acid?”

“Ha, yer being funny, but I know you see deeper than that. That’s the kind’a shit those dickheads in government think when they see it. They don’t see the history there—history of people who can’t afford their fuckin’ rent or aren’t qualified for the jobs they say they’re creating. These people—they’re the ones dyin’ in their factories and going hungry jus’ so their kids can eat.”

Remus concentrated on a tag that read ‘limbo’. Above it was a single dove with an olive branch in its beak. Below it, a body falling into a black hole.

“I don’t mean to sound preachy,” Tomny said, turning back to his wall. “I don’t think you’re like that—no matter where ya grew up.”

“I get it now though,” Remus said, raising his paint can. As he drew he thought of all the friends he’d earned and lost over the last couple years. None of them were all that different really, even if others would’ve looked between them and said they were as separate as the light and dark sides of the moon. Each of them smiled when they were happy and cried when sad, and in between both, they all experienced the same myriad of emotions; pride, cheerfulness, irritation, rage, *love.* It was all there. He’d seen it.

Busy humming a tune under his breath, Tomny walked up behind him. “ ‘Marauders’,” he read; “What’s it mean?”

“Just some band. They’re pretty small so I doubt you’d know ‘em,” Remus smiled, finishing the tag beneath it.

“Mhm,” Tomny chuckled knowingly, “and how ‘bout that one—‘The Boys of the End’. That another band?”

“Nope, but maybe one day it’ll be a song.”

“Well, I at least hope it’s a good song.”

“Me too."

Suddenly a police siren looped behind them and a single officer got out of his car, barking at them; “Hey, you! Kids—vandals! Stop right there!”

Tomny whistled in smug amusement. “Oi, Bobby Blue, where were you when I nearly got jumped last week!” He shouted, throwing his spray can and hitting the front of the police car with a clang.

“Tom!” Remus gasped. “You can’t just throw cans at the cops!”

“Sure I can,” Tomny shrugged, pointing with his thumb, “jus’ did it.”

“ALRIGHT, AGAINST THE WALL!” The officer barked, but Tomny just snatched Remus’ can and threw that as well before taking his hand and pulling him into the alley.

“C’mon, Lu—run!” He wailed in glee. The siren whooped behind them, but Remus just held onto Tomny, pumping his other arm as they emerged out the alley’s side onto a dingy neighbourhood street. At the very end was a churchyard surrounded by huge hedges. They threw themselves over its low wrought-iron gate and sped off across the lawn until they were convinced they’d put enough distance between them and the cop, and were able to tumble gleefully against the soft grass.

“Reckoned we outpaced him by a mile, Lu!” Tomny howled, rolling around on his back. Wiping tears of laughter from the corners of his eye, Remus leaned up against a large oak tree, admiring the leaves Tomny had succeeded in getting stuck in his hair.

“It’s what we get for picking a place right out in the open,” he chuffed.

“Ah, well at least we left our mark.” Sighing contentedly, Tomny stared up at the tree branches hanging over them. He’d stopped right next to him on his back, his head nearly touching Remus’ thigh. “Man, I forgot how fun jus’ causin’ chaos was.”

“You should come back to school with me,” Remus teased, “there’s plenty of chaos to go around.”

Tomny slapped him on the thigh; “Ah, but before you know it you’ll be done and causin' chaos right back 'ere again, won'tcha?”

“That’s the plan.”

“And just when do you leave for this poncy school of yers?”

“Thirty-first. Few days from now.”

“I see. And when ya return you’ll be headed to university, I expect?”

Remus pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek. “Dunno actually. My friends and I, we’re sorta thinking that we could give music a try.”

“Really?” Tomny raised his eyebrows.

“Well, we’ve mostly just been playing at the idea—and we don’t actually have any full songs yet, but what we do have it’s—uhm—well yeah, it’s pretty good.”

“I believe it,” Tomny told him, “but Lu, will you do me a favour?”

“Hm?”

“Remember me when you’re looking down from the top.”

Tomny winked, and maybe it was the thrill of running from the cops for the first time in ages, or the fact that the sun was peeking through the leaves just enough to light up the gold in his dishwater blonde hair, or that Remus had just come to terms with leaving this part of himself in the dark—*in the closet*. Whatever it was, it had him absolutely ruined. Without a second thought, Remus leaned over and pressed his mouth to that little scar on Tomny’s upper lip.

For a second, Tomny’s lips parted, and he could've almost believed that they were kissing, but then he felt a hand on his chest.

Pushing him away.

Remus came to his senses all at once. He bolted upright, horrified by himself—horrified by the entire world. Tomny didn’t say anything, which was worse than yelling, and as he sat up on the grass, Remus prepared himself for the reality that he’d just ruined everything they’d only just begun to patch up.

But when Tomny turned around, he didn’t look mad or repulsed. Instead he scooted back up against the tree until they were shoulder to shoulder against its trunk, both looking down at their laps.

“I love ya, Lu,” he said softly, “but not like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Remus breathed. Terrified. "I-I..."

Reaching out, Tomny took his hand and gave it a squeeze. “Hey, s’nothing to be sorry for.”

Tomny held his hand until he’d stopped shaking. It was cool in the shade of the garden and not even the typical honking of nearby London traffic could be heard among the hedges. It was as though they were the only two people in the entire world.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Remus whimpered. "I'm not… but there's Sirius, and oh god—I just kissed you!"

"Worried about the posh boy, eh? I'm sure he won't mind."

"You haven't met Sirius."

Tomny chuckled. He was still holding Remus' hand and gave it a little squeeze. "No, but I have a feeling he'll understand."

Pulling his hand away, Remus covered his face. *Fuck. Shit—Fuck!*

“Remus," Tomny said fondly, "I also wouldn’t worry much if I were you.”

Reluctantly, he peeled his hands away. “… Worry about what?”

Tomny grinned at him, showing off both dimples. “Even if you're not my type, you’re still totally going to rake in a ton of ass when you become a sexy musician.”

Snorting embarrassingly, Remus dropped his head back against the trunk of the old oak. He thought he might cry out of relief, and then he realised he already was.

“In that case,” he wept, “you’re going to regret not kissing me back, ya fucking prick.”

Next to him, Tomny raised both hands up behind his head, smirking casually up at the sky.

“You’re probably right.”

* * *

31st August 1977 – Two days later…

The morning he was supposed to leave for school, Remus got a letter in the post. The return address was of number 38 Burtonhole Lane, London, home of Potter Cottage, and it was written in Sirius’ beautiful scrawl. The letter was everything Remus had hoped.

Dear Moony,

(or alternatively, a one Mr. Dean)

THERE! I'm finally writing you back now so take that, ya dickhead! Also, I cannot BELIEVE how fast post travels in London. I asked Prongs how long he figured it would take to post something to you and he said two days—TWO DAYS?!?! Pure insanity. Next thing you know we'll be sending them in tubes through the air. Prongs thinks it's a bit daft that I'm writing to you instead of calling now that I can do that too, but this is a goodbye letter, so it should be formal. And yes, you heard me right, this is last one. No point in sending post if I'm always around to regale you guys with my beautiful voice in person, right? Yessiree, September 1st marks our last year at school, Moons, and then you're in for it. No more holidays apart for us. Just the rest of our lives, baby!

I know you already know this because you were there, but I feel like I have to tell somebody or I'll explode. Effie and Monty have been good to me—far better than I deserve. They've offered to pay for my tuition and I've accepted. And because Prongs is tired of hearing it, I need you to know that I'm going to pay them back every penny the minute I get Alphard's inheritance. They say I don't have to, but you and I both know that I do. On the upside, Prongs makes a pretty good roommate, but you already knew that too. He called me his brother the other day and I think he really meant it. It just felt different this time. Don't tell the handsome twat, but I might've cried. Oh and you were both right about Wormtail, he's really gotten good on the drums. He can actually carry a beat now!

Speaking of music, did you hear that Elvis died? Like actually DIED—on the toilet, no less! Guess it happened while I was at yours—really, how could we have missed it??? (I'm only kidding—I know we were pretty busy.) But Elvis! Who's next? Mick Jagger? Marc Bolan? I fucking hope not. All I'm saying is that when we're rich and famous, the toilet is not the way I want to go. Put me on a rocket and blast my bones out into space. Now that's rock and roll.

I'm glad we talked the other day. Put some real perspective on all of this. You're still my best friend, Moons, and I don't want anything to change that. You're too important to me, and after all, I still need a bassist if I'm to start my world-wide musical take-over. Loving you just might be an extra perk, one that's just for us. (Never said I wasn't a romantic.)

Don't get too lonely in the dorm without us. Or do, just means you'll be thinking about me. I'll see you soon, and tell all those perky-prefects hello from yours truly. They don't have any idea what they're in for, letting a double-agent into their ranks.

Yours in unequivocal adoration,
Padfoot.

There was something about the letter that felt slightly foreboding, but no matter how many times he read it over, Remus couldn't quite put his finger on what it was—Mick Jagger's death maybe? *Whatever,* Remus told himself. *Be thankful, the two of you finally understand one another.* And Sirius had given him hope. *Just for us,* he'd written. It was an aspiration for whatever their relationship was going to be. Maybe they could do this after all. Perhaps it was as easy as just saying yes.

When Giles put the Rolls into park outside the station, Remus tucked Sirius' letter away into his pocket. He'd probably read it again later, but for now he had a train to catch.

"You're sure you have everything?" Giles asked, fixing the shoulder strap on Remus' bag himself. He was probably just relieved they'd made it on time at all; Giles hadn't even given Remus a real punishment when he'd returned from Tomny's that day. All he'd done was shake his head at the cut on his cheek and mutter that his uniforms had arrived. Remus was definitely going to miss him.

"Yes," he answered. "Just like I had everything the last twenty times you asked."

Giles chuckled as the train's whistle sounded behind them from down the platform. "Who would'a thought though," he gushed, "our Remus going back to finish his A-Levels—and as a school prefect to boot! It's enough to make a man start choking up."

"Shall I find you a tissue?"

"I just want you to know how proud of you I am." Giles took him by the shoulders. "And that your mum would be very proud of the man you've become too."

"Thanks, Gil," Remus said lightly.

Humming over a smile, Giles released him and took a step back. "Okay, remember what I told you the first time we did this—be good, and if you can't be good…?"

"Be smart."

“Ah, but you already got that covered, my little genius!” Rubbing the top of his head with several thick knuckles, Giles laughed while Remus batted him away. “Alright then, time for me to be off. I’ll see you at Christmas.”

“Bye, Gil. Miss ya already.”

“Miss you already too, cheeky blighter.” Still grinning, Giles tipped his hat and began walking away, waving over his shoulder as he did. Remus watched him go, silently thankful, before grabbing his trunk and turning back to the train.

“Don’t I get a sappy goodbye too?”

Remus just about jumped ten feet. Straight ahead of him, Tomny had appeared in the middle of the platform, looking cheekier than Remus had ever seen him with his same battered jeans, faded t-shirt, and a smile.

“TOM!” The disbelief was clear on Remus’ face. The two of them had already said goodbye that day in the End, and he hadn’t been expecting to see him again so soon. “What are you doing here?”

“Seeing ya off, a’course,” Tomny said, raising his arms. “S’yer last year after all, never gonna get the chance again.”

Unable to deny him, Remus rushed his friend, enveloping Tomny’s broad chest in a greedy hug. Tomny hugged him back of course, patting Remus on the back one with one hand all the while.

“How’d you know I’d be at this station though?” Remus asked as he pulled away.

“Lucky guess,” Tomny shrugged. “You did say you left on the thirty-first. Where’re yer friends at?”

“Oh, they’re not leaving for school until tomorrow. I—er… I have to go a day early.”

Tomny squinted. “Why's that?”

“Because I’m a—er… I’m a… *nghschoolprefectmmnnhnn…”*

“A what now?”

“I'm a school prefect!”

“Wow! That’s, er…” Tomny started to laugh; “Im-pres-sive, heh!”

“Shut up!” Remus cried, punching him in the arm; “I didn’t ask for it!”

“Oh yeah, sure, whatever you say, m’good sir.”

“You’re the worst.”

Tomny winked. “Yeah well, try not to miss me too much.”

Remus smiled. Never a day of rest with his friends. “I'm glad you came.”

“Me too. Feels a bit special knowin’ I get tah be the las’ one to see you off. Also, I may have picked up somefin’ for yeh.” From under one arm, Tomny pulled out a brand-new album, the Clash’s self-titled. “I asked around at the record store after you told me about that punk show you and yer friend went to. Bloke there said these guys were promisin’.”

“Thanks,” Remus said, admiring the cover; “Can’t wait to listen to it.”

“I know, and these are for when you do.” Slyly, Tomny held up a pack of cigarettes and tucked them into Remus’ shirt pocket. Glancing down at them, Remus suddenly felt very overwhelmed. Before he could start crying, he threw his arms around his friend again, making Tomny gasp and then laugh in response.

“Ah, Lu,” he hummed, patting him on the back, “m’gonna miss ya.”

“You keep saying that,” Remus said into his shoulder, “but I won’t be gone forever. I’ll be back, Tom.”

Tomny pulled away; “And I’ll be here,” he tsked, before picking up the handle of one of Remus’ trunks and wheeling it toward the train. “C’mon, let’s get you on board then.”

After lifting the trunks up into the train, Remus paused and looked back. He couldn’t leave without saying it. “Tom, about what happened the other day in that church yard. I need you to know that—”

“No you don’t,” Tomny said first. “ ‘Cause I understand. Maybe you surprised me a bit, sure, but you’ll always be my Lu, wont’cha? Nuffin’s gonna change that.”

Remus sighed. “Yeah,” he said, while Tomny pulled his hands from his

pockets. He took Remus by the head and kissed his forehead fondly, before ruffling his hair.

“Go on then,” he told him. “Go kick that poncy school’s arse.”

With nothing else to do, Remus boarded the train. He dragged his trunks down to the first empty compartment and found Tomny already waiting outside the window. He rapped his knuckles to the glass to get his attention and Remus rushed to open the small window at the top, just to hear him again.

“Almost forgot—for luck!” Tomny said, before stretching up and passing a small object through the opening. Remus took it, and as he turned it over in his palm he realised that it was a lighter. Just as crappy and dented as the first one Tomny had given him.

Smiling, Remus broke open his pack of cigarettes and lit one up like a small victory. Tomny remained outside the window, looking like a nobody with his hands in his pockets, until the final whistle blew signalling the train’s departure. No one else knew just how important they were to each other, but when the train car began to move, Tomny proved it by kicking up into a jog, which quickly turned into a run as he tried to keep up alongside the locomotive.

“I love you!” Tomny barked through the glass, pointing furiously at Remus. *“I love you! Kick its ass! Kick its ass!”*

Remus slapped his palm to the window, like he could reach through it and touch his friend. “I love you too, Tom!” He cried back. “I love you!”

And then, as the platform neared its inevitable end and the train sped up to take Remus back to school, Thonas Armstrong fell out of sight.

* * *

Saying goodbye to Tomny at the station had left Remus’ heart feeling full for the entire, lonely ride back to Scotland. Unused to the quiet of an empty compartment, he read and napped and pigged out on snacks he’d bought off the trolley, and even found it in him to finish the rest of his summer homework. When the train finally pulled into the Highland station and he boarded the bus that would take him to Hawkings, Remus was more than a little travel weary. He knew from the prefect’s itinerary McGonagall had sent that he’d be expected to

attend a meeting in preparation for the other students' arrival the following day, but at least he'd have Lily to complain to and eat dinner with afterwards. It bummed him out that he hadn't seen her on the train, but she could've just taken the other line from Liverpool. It was on him for forgetting to call first and check.

After he'd lugged his trunks all the way to Godric and dumped them in the empty 4A dorm room, Remus made his way up to Rowena and stuck his head in, catching another girl as she came down the staircase.

"Have you seen Lily Evans around?"

She glanced about in consideration. "I hav'nae, sorry," she replied in a thick Scottish accent. "Are ye heading tae the prefect's meeting?"

"Yup."

"Cool, so am I." She held out her hand; "I'm Patricia, year twelve, but ye can call me Trish."

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Remus, year twel—or I mean thirteen, I guess." He shook her hand sheepishly. "Are you sure you didn't see Lily upstairs?"

"Na, don't think so. But a group o'girls have already left for the hall. Maybe she was with 'em. We can walk over together if you'd like."

"Sure, why not."

Smiling kindly, Trish let the dorm's front door fall shut behind her and came down the rest of the stairs to join him. At her side, Remus spent the entire walk to the Great Hall glancing around himself at the campus. It felt like ages since he'd been there last and the breeze in Scotland was much cooler than it had been in London. Trish was friendly but she didn't talk at a million miles an hour at least, which he appreciated. When they finally were filing in, another student had them sign their names on an attendance sheet and Remus stopped to scan the list for Lily's name, only to realise that there was no 'Lily Evans' in attendance.

"Does Lily not have to sign this?" He asked the prefect, who shrugged in response.

Passing the clipboard along to Trish, Remus shuffled into the room and looked around for a glimpse of fiery red-hair. After turning up

with nothing once more, he began to feel a seed of doubt bloom in the back of his mind, which he had to squash immediately.

Relax, Lily would never miss a prefect meeting. She'll be here.

As he went back to scanning the rest of the prefects' faces for any sign of his friend, Remus ended up locked eyes with not Lily, but Regulus Black, who was glaring at him from the other side of the room.

"Don't think that's a look o'admiration," Trish said, appearing at his elbow.

"What? Oh, you… know Regulus?"

"Sure, he's in my year, after 'ah."

"Right…"

Quickly breaking eye-contact, Remus turned away and shuffled toward another corner where he knew he'd have better luck avoiding the youngest Black brother. If he were being honest, Regulus had possessed very few of his thoughts throughout the summer. He'd wondered only with a small twinge of anger if Regulus knew what had actually happened to Sirius, but now that they were face to face, he could hardly blame him for the scowl. Not after what they'd done at the end of last year.

"I hope this doesn't go on ah'evening," Trish said, raising her arms over her head with a yawn. Remus agreed, only slightly bewildered as to why she'd stuck around, and thankfully Professor McGonagall appeared at the top of the stage of the Great Hall, clearing her throat to address all of them.

"Hello prefects, so happy to have you back with us for another year here at Hawkings School," she said. "First of all, I wanted to thank you personally for your continued dedication to the school and upholding its rules and regulations. I know it's been a long day of travel for all of you, but you'll have plenty of time to gather your wits before your fellow students arrive tomorrow. In a moment I'm going to start listing off your perfect partners for the term and then afterwards you may mingle amongst yourselves and get to know one another in preparation for student arrival tomorrow. You're going to be working together after all, might as well get used to it."

"Remus!" A voice trilled quietly.

Lily! Finally…

Remus spun around, only to have his entire face fall when he found Jillian Stewart pushing through other students instead. “Sorry,” she said to Trish, before pointedly side-stepping her and getting between them.

“Dinna fash yerself,” Trish mumbled, before casting a questionable look at Remus, which he ignored out of pure embarrassment.

“It’s so nice to see you!” Jillian gushed. “You never told me you were going to be a prefect!”

“Oh, you neither, heh…”

"Jesus," Jillian swore suddenly. "What happened to your cheek?"

Remus touched the butterfly stitches Giles had outfitted over his cut. It'd be healed soon enough, without a scar most likely.

"Oh, you know... took a tumble."

Jillian's eyes flashed greedily. *Dangerous*, they seemed to say, like she were delighted.

“Well, I missed you over summer. It was so nice to get your letters.” She took his arm and held it so tightly to her chest that he could almost feel the outline of her bra through her school shirt.

“Man, people really gotta stop missing me,” Remus winced.

As Professor McGonagall began reading names of her list, Jillian continued to beam up at him. “Psst, Remus. Notice anything different?”

He looked around in question. “Er…”

“About me, silly! Look—I got my braces off.” She smiled again and Remus nodded slowly.

“Oh yeah, looks great, Jill.”

“Don’t they? It’s such a relief to have them off. Snogging is going to be so much easier now.”

Next to them, Remus heard Trish snort and he just about caved in himself. Where the fuck was Lily?

“I’m so glad you’re a prefect this year,” Jillian said, seemingly unruffled. “I always thought being stuck with one partner all year was terribly dreary, but wouldn’t it be so great if we got to be partners?”

Please god, no, Remus pleaded, *anyone but you.*

“Er—Jillian, have you seen Lily at all?” He asked nervously.

“Hm? You mean Lily Evans?" She chuckled faintly. "Why would I have seen her?”

“Because she’s supposed to be here. I didn’t catch her on the bus or at her dorm but—”

“Silly Remus, Lily’s not a prefect this year!”

Remus’ jaw dropped open. “What?”

“Yeah! She told everyone at the end-of-the-year party that she was switching her classes around and didn’t have the extra space in her timetable.” Jillian blinked happily. “Didn’t she tell you that?”

“No…” he half-wheezed, “no, she *didn’t.”*

“Oh, well that’s okay. Suppose she can always tell you herself tomorrow.”

“Miss Stewart,” Professor McGonagall called sternly from up on her dais; “Is there something you would like to share with the room?”

“Sorry, professor!” Jillian squeaked, clutching tighter to Remus’ arm as though he could save her from the Headmistress’s wrath.

Clearing her throat again, McGonagall went back to her list; “Stewart, Jillian,” she read, looking unsurprised.

Turning on him, Jillian held up two fingers. “Finger’s crossed!”

Silently, Remus began to pray.

Please! Please! Please! Not me! ANYONE BUT JILLIAN!

“—and MacDuff, Patricia.”

“Bugger!” Jillian frowned. “We’re not partners, Remus… *tch.”* She shook her head bitterly. “At least we’re guaranteed to run in the same circle as prefects, right?”

Remus just nodded, busy having his own celebration inside his head. Next to them, Trish looked as though she'd just swallowed a lemon. Remus could hardly blame her. Trish was a year younger, he doubted Jillian even knew her name.

"Remus, are you doing anything tonight?" Jillian asked, as McGonagall continued down her list of partners. "We're supposed to be meeting again, but we could always sneak—"

"Lupin, Remus!"

Jillian fell silent immediately. Remus wasn't thick—she was probably just trying to figure out who her competition was going to be, but if he wasn't to have Lily, then Remus just hoped that his partner ended up being even moderately tolerable. He glanced quickly around the room. The options weren't horrible, there was always—

"—and Black, Regulus!"

Immediately, a dull roar of whispers broke out amongst the other prefects.

"Lupin and Black?"

"Wrong Black, looks like."

"No shit! Lupin better watch out, Regulus is out for blood."

"Regulus?" Jillian echoed sceptically. "That's Sirius' brother, isn't it?"

She looked to him as though it was some grand revelation, but Remus couldn't even hear her anymore. All around them, kids who remembered the horrible prank from the term before were craning their heads to get an eyeful, and when Remus finally spared a glance Regulus' way, he found a look of pure venom waiting for him.

Be ready, it said; *because I'm going to kill you.*

Remus felt like the Titanic as it sank to the ocean floor. That ill-tempered fate had dealt him a foul hand yet again, it seemed, and left him sure of only two things:

1. He was going to throttle Lily, and;
2. He was so bloody fucked.

Chapter End Notes

'Bog' means toilet.
'Lorry' means truck.
Giles' meaning of 'ringways' refers to the ringway roads around London, precursors to the M25 motorway.
The poem Remus reads is called ‘Völuspá’. It is the most well-known poem from the ‘Poetic Etta’. It tells the story of the end of the world and its subsequent rebirth in Norse mythology.
A 'caff' is a small, inexpensive restaurant or coffeehouse; cafe.
Trish uses 'dinna fash' as in Scottish slang for 'don't worry about it'.

A/N: My next update won't be for a few weeks. I'm behind in my editing, and the quality of year 13 really isn't up to par with what I'd like to give you. I'm very busy with general life/school/work right now, so I'm going to take some time to work on it.
Next update: March 4/5 2022 (depending on timezone). I realise this is three weeks from now, but I believe that's what I need to get back on track. Hope you understand <3

See you then!

Chapter 72: Eight Days a Week

Chapter Summary

The beginnings of the lads' final year at school, and things are... complicated.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter picks up almost straight after the end of the last. Maybe re-read the final scene if it'll help you remember where we're at.

C/W: 'F' slur used in a smoking context.

Note for future of this fic: As the first chapter of year 13, I felt the need to inform you that this year goes heavily into Remus' experiences not just as a queer person but as someone who struggles with mental health. I hope it'll come across clearly, but in a thoughtful way, that Remus is bipolar and experiences symptoms of BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder). I don't really expect this to come as a shock, considering how I've built him/his experiences/his reactions until this point, but maybe it is if you're not as familiar with the signs and symptoms of either disorder. Going forward (and in the past) it'll become obvious that Remus experiences a lot of the same symptoms of Bipolar II disorder (though type 1 & 2 were not differentiated until the 90s). As a seventeen year-old who uses substances as a vice, it's not uncommon for Remus' mental health to take a turn during this point in his life. For anyone wary, I am taking this seriously, but please do not expect this to be an over-consuming part of the storyline. It is a part of Remus, it is not him entirely. There is no one "right way" to have a mental illness, and all experiences are valid.

Honestly I feel a little nervous putting this out there, since I don't want anyone to think I just 'threw it in for the drama'. Remus has been, and always will be this character, so please don't hesitate to send me any messages or ask questions in the comments. I look forward to the open discussion should there be one. Cheers, and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh! Darling, if you leave me,
I'll never make it alone;
Believe me when I tell you,
I'll never do you no harm;
Believe me darling…

- "Oh! Darling" The Beatles, 1969

Things literally couldn't have been worse.

Initially, Remus had thought that his final year at school would be a quiet one. He'd certainly thrown a spanner into the works by kissing Tomny, but he'd yet to decide whether that really counted as cheating. He and Sirius hadn't exactly 'defined the relationship', but they'd confessed. Was it emotional cheating then? Was that even a thing? He could've asked one of the girls, except that would entail an explanation, and he certainly didn't have one of those. Remus tried reasoning with himself that the kiss with Tomny hadn't meant anything—not really. It was more like a pile-up of emotions, like when you filled your teacup too full and a little spilled over the edge as you went to add the milk. It was a stupid analogy, but it was about all he could come up with, what with everything else going on.

First and foremost, there was Jillian. She'd insisted on sticking around, and with her came a gaggle of other prefects Remus had otherwise had very little interaction with beforehand. It turned out that, awkward wire braces or no, Jillian was the sort of popular that occurred in those kind of tight-knit, academically-driven circles. She seemed to have both a personal vendetta and admiration for Lily, for her academic skill and ability to corral even the worst botched jobs. Remus had already heard word of her success in subduing the likes of 'James Potter and those other messers' pittering through the other prefects, though news of this tended to grow quieter whenever they realised he was within ear-shot. Now this year, without Lily around, Jillian was free to take on full authority of the prefects. She stepped in like McGonagall had actually crowned her Head Girl, and no one seemed interested in fighting her on it, aside from Remus' own prefect partner, that was.

"You don't get to just switch the schedules around," Regulus told her, after Jillian had tried to trade Remus' timetable with another twelfth year so they'd be together during library duties.

“It’s not like it’s that big of a deal,” Jillian retorted. “You and Remus will just take the library rounds every other month, with me and Trish.”

“Professor McGonagall didn’t give you leave to do that,” Regulus scowled, snatching back the schedule and shoving it into Remus’ hands. Jillian appeared upset, but as she turned to complain of the younger boy’s rudeness to her friends, Remus made to catch up with him.

“Hey, thanks for that. Dunno what I’d do if I got stuck—”

“Don’t talk to me,” Regulus snapped, stomping off and bringing the conversation to an abrupt end.

That evening, as the prefects all gathered around the dining hall tables for supper, Remus reluctantly took up a spot at Jillian’s table. There was apparently some dull tradition about spending the first night getting to know your new partner, but he doubted he and Regulus were about to break away from the group to shoot the shit over a friendly game of cribbage. Or whatever Regulus did in his spare time. He had no idea.

“I feel for you, Remus, I really do,” Jillian said from her seat at his side. “He’s just so rude. I would’ve thought at least one Black brother would make it out with some manners.”

“Sirius has manners,” another prefect named Tracey said. “And he’s funny... handsome too.”

“Ooh, Trace, does this mean you’re really interested?”

Tracey blushed terribly. “I’m not! Besides, Sirius probably already has someone...”

“No way. He never dates anyone over the summers, right, Remus?”

"Hm."

“I’m sure Remus could give us the scoop," Jillian continued. "I mean, it’s not like Sirius is all that hard to come by, right? Nothing like his little brother. I’m not even sure Regulus had ever spoken to a girl—nicely, that is.”

Tracey giggled, but it was Trish who answered.

“I think yer being a bit quick to judge, meself,” she said, picking her teeth with a toothpick. “Regulus isnae that bad.”

A part of Remus was almost thankful for her support. It wasn’t like he wanted to comfort Regulus, but he couldn’t bring himself to participate in Jillian’s subterfuge, lest she begin to think he was interested in anything else she had to offer.

“Does that mean you’re interested in Regulus too, Trishy?” Jillian teased.

“Nah, I just ken when yer being a bitch.”

The look on Jillian’s face was priceless, and Remus almost broke, but as Trish began innocently sifting around in her pockets he managed to swallow his laughter with a bite of roasted ham. As he did, he glanced back at Regulus’ table. The other boy wasn’t looking at him, but Remus figured that if he had been, he’d just as readily draw a thumb across his neck in threat.

“Either o’ ye have a lighter?” Trish asked.

“No,” Jillian replied, scathingly.

“You, Looper?”

It took Remus a few seconds to realise she was talking to him. “Me?” He flubbed.

“Aye, you.”

“Uh…?”

“Do–you–have–a–lighter, my dear gowk?” Trish said again.

“Oh.” Reaching into his pocket, Remus passed the zippo over without a second thought. It wasn’t until Trish saluted him and left the table that he realised it was his good lighter, the engraved one Sirius and James had gifted him for his birthday. Hoping she could be trusted to return it, he pat his other pocket and was relieved to find that he still had the one Tomny had given him that morning for luck. Not that it’d been much help so far.

“Bit rude herself, that one is,” Tracey said.

Jillian huffed. “Don’t even try complaining. At least you don’t have to be her partner for the rest of the year.”

Trish's balls of steel aside, Remus was almost jealous. He would've let Trish call him 'gowk' or 'bawbag' or whatever other Scottish jargon she wanted if it had meant that he could just switch partners. So far he'd yet to try anything so drastic, but as fate would have it, Professor McGonagall came strolling out of the kitchens, busy talking with one of the head cooks.

"Reckon we'll get any new professors this year?" Tracey was saying. "I keep hoping Binns'll finally retire. I can *not* sit through another year of his droning."

"It's Dr. Becker for me," Jillian said. "He's just so creepy. Darcy *swore* she caught him looking down her shirt once." Sniggering, she tilted her head so she was back in Remus' view. "Remus, you're coming back to Byron after supper, yeah? We prefects always head there first night to catch up. We've got some booze too—Suzie nicked some of her dad's sherry."

"And Dustin's even got some weed," Tracey added, the picture of scandal.

Remus stood up from the table. "Be right back," he muttered, before taking off after the Headmistress. He managed to catch up to her and the cook in the hallway, a large knot of dread forming in his stomach.

"Professor! Professor, I'm sorry, can I talk to you for a moment?"

Pausing to finish her conversation with the cook, Professor McGonagall then turned around and raised her head to him. "Hello, Mr. Lupin. What can I do for you?"

"It's about our assignments," Remus said, trying his best not to sound ungrateful. "I just think that it might be better if we—"

"Switched partners?" She interrupted, surreptitiously.

Since she was so clearly keen on the subject, Remus cut straight to the chase; "Regulus hates me," he said. "In fact, I think he'd rather it be anyone other than me."

"Mr. Lupin," the Headmistress started, "what would you say if I told you that Mr. Black had already come to me confirming your suspicions?"

"You mean he actually admitted to hating me?"

McGonagall gave him a knowing smile. “I think this will be a valuable lesson for you both. Far too often, students at this school simply complain and get their way, but the two of you…” She tilted her head down to gaze at him over her spectacles; “I have real hope for.”

Remus felt like telling the Headmistress how seldom it was that he actually got his way, but he wasn’t quite at the level of grovelling just yet.

“So you’re not going to let us switch partners?”

McGonagall straightened up. “No, I don’t think I will. Now is there anything else?”

Remus ground his teeth together, and through them managed; “No… thank you, Professor.”

Because he couldn’t bring himself to walk back into the dining hall and face Jillian and Tracey, Remus made his way outside. He was hoping to find Trish and retrieve his lighter, but as he made his way out onto the pavement he found her long gone. Probably the smart thing too; Remus had already decided that the prefects were a bit too cliquey for his taste. So with nothing else to do, he walked. Doing so aimlessly brought back memories of his first year at Hawkings, when he’d walked and walked just to avoid having to return to his own dorm room. Remus imagined that if he’d gone back in time and told himself that he’d one day be in love with that stupid roommate of his, that his fifteen year-old self would’ve said to fuck right off. How could he be in love with such an intolerable bastard? Someone who played music at full-volume all hours and insisted on calling him names like ‘wolf-boy’ and ‘Moony’. But that was the reality of it; the Remus from back then and the Remus that was now were just separate enough to want different things.

And what is it you want now? Vicious Moony asked.

Sirius. Only Sirius.

But you kissed Tomny.

Remus stopped walking. He’d made it all the way to the library. It was going to be daylight for some time still, but he almost wished it were night. Night made confessions easier somehow.

I’m going to tell him, he decided, as he pulled open the library’s doors and slipped inside.

And if he hates you for it?

He won't, was Remus' first inclination, but really, who could know for sure?

The Hawkings library was quiet on an average day, thanks to its loyal librarian's continued effort to oppose any and all tom-foolery within its sacred halls, but without any students mulling around, the hall was as silent as a grave. Ms. Pince was perhaps the only person the Marauders were actually afraid to cross. Her library had been unofficially declared off-limits ever since a seventh-year James and Sirius had thought it hilarious to release several jars of crickets into the romance section. They were lucky that McGonagall didn't allow for corporal punishment, or Pince might've force-fed the tiny insects back to them.

"Made prefect this year, did you Mr. Lupin?" The librarian observed, after spotting him on his way in. Remus nodded, and after he declined her offer to help him find a book, Pince waved her hand in the direction of a cart of unshelved books. "Might as well make yourself useful then. Those are the new books purchased for this term. Put them away for me and I might just let you take one out a day early."

He wasn't all that tempted by the offer, but with nothing better to do and no desire to attend Jillian's prefect party, Remus took the cart and began wheeling it off. Most of new texts and didn't interest him, but he did come across a few feminist manifestos that Lily or Marlene might've found interesting. He was actually enjoying the mindless work, the up-and-down pacing of the aisles, until he'd neared the end and reached for the cart's bottom shelf. Bending down, he retrieved what he assumed to be another mundane text full of haphazard facts and citations, but when he turned the book over, the words *The History of Sexuality* stared back at him.

Remus fumbled the book. It landed face down on the library floor with a *thump* and for several long seconds he couldn't even move. It was like he was back in that bookstore in Fitzrovia, holding a queer book with a queer look on his face and being stared at by a man who knew nothing about him, and yet decided to judge anyway.

Fuck you, Remus wished he'd said. *You don't know me, fuck you!*

Suddenly angry, Remus scooped up the book and shoved it onto a random shelf, spine facing in. He never wanted to see it again, never wanted to think about *effeminate tendencies,* or *issues with temperament,*

or *familial despondency* ever again. Wasn't it enough to just like someone? To make it through everything life threw at you and still be whole enough to love? It should be.

Pushing his cart away, Remus paused at the end of the aisle to collect himself. He could hear shuffling a row over and the last thing he needed was Ms. Pince to think that he'd been crying in the reference section. When he was suitably calm again, he rounded the corner and cleared his throat.

"I've finished with the—"

"JESUS F. CHOP—!" Sheila threw her arms up, scattering several books about the aisle. *"Remus,"* she wheezed, one hand pressed to her heart; "You nearly scared the daylights out of me!"

"Sorry," he croaked, just as surprised to find her there. "Thought you were Ms. Pince."

"You too," she nodded. "I'm avoiding her actually, I've had these books out since May and she's likely to have me drawn and quartered if I don't return them before term starts. Her wrath is not just reserved for students, you know."

Almost smiling, Remus picked up one of the books that had slid toward his feet, *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz,* and passed it over. The rest of the novels she carried were much the same; *Living with Bach, Chopin's Letters, Conversations with Camille Saint-Saëns.*

"You're in the wrong section," he told her. "This is philosophy. Memoirs and biographies would be two rows over."

"Explains so much. Couldn't find 'Vivaldi' anywhere," Sheila sighed. "I managed to swipe their record cards, but this bloody Dewey Decimal System still confounds me. Will you show me?"

He nodded and began backing up the aisle, leading the way.

"Did you have a good summer?" Sheila asked as they walked.

"Yeah," Remus said, "I did. Got to spend it with Sirius, actually."

"Ah, yes. I hear he's living with the Potters now, right?"

Remus nodded. "His parents, well—uhm… I guess I'll let him tell you, if he wants."

“That’s probably best,” Sheila smiled.

“Was your summer good?”

“Yes, actually. It was very nice. Colin and I got away to the sea for a bit. It’s the only place that seems to make him feel better.”

“Is he sick...?”

Sheila nodded slowly, dark eyes scanning the shelves of books. “Quite so. He has something called Huntington’s disease. Have you ever heard of it?”

Remus shook his head, suddenly regretting that he’d asked.

“It attacks the nerves in the brain. In Colin’s case, he has to use a wheelchair, and it’s hard for him to… remember certain things. He was diagnosed several years ago, when you would’ve been very small. I used to take care of him myself, but this job offered the best benefits and insurance and Professor McGonagall allows me to visit him often. The hospice takes good care of him too, of course.”

“That’s, uh… good? *I mean—”*

Sheila chuckled, stopping alongside him at the end of the proper aisle. “No, no, Remus, I apologise. It must sound terribly dreary, but you should know that this is entirely normal for me. A disease like this, well, you just find a way to live with it. That’s what love is after all.”

Remus licked his lips. *Right…*

No one bothered them as they busied themselves with re-shelving the books. Sheila hadn’t mentioned the paper stitches on his cheek, though he could tell she’d noticed, and he had no trouble reaching the highest shelves. When all the books were returned to their rightful places, Sheila dusted her hands on a pair of daisy-embroidered dungarees. “You were very helpful today, Mr. Prefect,” she declared. “If there’s anything I can do to repay you, you need only ask.”

It was a jest, but Remus’ mind automatically shifted to his most recent problem.

“Actually…”

To her credit, Sheila did listen intently. After leaving the library behind, Remus ended up following her back toward the Bellchant

building, ranting the entire way about the unfortunate circumstance of having Regulus Black for a partner.

“I’m telling you, it has to be a mistake! *Some*—Some sort of sick joke!”

“I’m not so sure Professor McGonagall makes mistakes,” Sheila hummed. “Now sick jokes, on the other hand…”

Remus frowned deeply. He hoped he looked pitiful, at least that way she might feel more inclined to sympathy and get him out of this mess.

“But why *Regulus?”*

Sheila smiled like she knew something he didn’t. “Why not?”

Teachers! He thought; *Devils! All of them!*

“I would’ve thought that you and Regulus would have plenty in common,” Sheila said, admiring the sun as it got ready to set over the horizon. “You’re both very talented musically, you both like to read, and of course there’s a one Mr. Black… is that not enough to simply remain cordial?”

Remus squeezed his eyes shut. How could he explain to his teacher that Sirius was exactly the reason they *couldn’t* be cordial?

“I’m sorry, Remus,” she said as they neared the music building, “but if you’ve already talked to Professor McGonagall and she’s said no, then I’m not sure I’d be of much help.”

He suppressed an eye-roll. “Yeah… I figured.”

“If I were you, I’d try focusing less on the things you *can’t* do, and more on those you *can.* If Regulus needs a partner, then be that partner. If he needs someone to ignore, be that too. And if he just needs a friend… well, I assume you know where I’m going with this.”

“And what if Regulus doesn’t need me at all?”

“Everyone needs someone,” Sheila replied. “As Schumann once said, ‘to send light into the darkness of men’s hearts, such is the duty of the artist’. Is there no one who inspires you?”

Remus looked away, defeated and comforted all at once. It was startling how she was able to do that, more startling still when he remembered how much he’d missed it.

“Wait right here,” Sheila told him, “I think I’ve just the thing to lift your spirits.”

Slipping a jangle of keys from her pocket, she disappeared into a back door of the music building, leaving Remus to kick the toe of his trainer against the pavement while he waited. When she returned, just as bright and smiley as before, she presented him with a large leather case, and the accompanying ‘64 Fender Jazz Bass it carried.

“Call it an early gift for the school year,” Sheila said, as Remus practically whooped at the sight of it. Taking the leather case from her, he set it down immediately and flipped the top, running his hands over the lovely sunburst pattern of it. The entire thing was just the right weight, the strings just the right thickness. Oh how he’d missed this.

“Thank you,” Remus said, honestly.

“Don’t waste it,” Sheila smiled, before shutting the door. As Remus locked the case and turned for home, it occurred to him that perhaps she wasn’t talking about the bass guitar.

* * *

Thursday 1 st September 1977

“Regulus, do you have that list of names N to S?”

“…”

“Regulus, did you hear me? I need the list.”

Remus turned around, in search of his partner, but Regulus just strode further away, white-knuckling his clipboard with fervent displeasure.

Glaring after him, Remus apologised to the tiny seventh year girl before stomping across the lawn in pursuit. “Look, I know you don’t like this any more than I do, but we’re supposed to be doing a job,” he lashed, weaving between kids as they filed off their buses and flew into the arms of friends they hadn’t seen for nine weeks. “Regulus!” He shouted again, easily catching up with him through the crowd. “We can try fighting McGonagall over the pairing again later, but for right now we just have to—”

“Piss off,” Regulus hissed.

Remus scoffed; “Now that’s not very eloquent. Sirius would’ve told me to go suck an egg or something.”

It was the wrong thing to say, but he wanted to say it anyway and he got the reaction he’d anticipated when Regulus spun around and snarled at him.

“Get *fucked.”*

Remus almost laughed. Maybe he and Sirius were related after all.

“At least give me the bloody list!” He barked, as Regulus scowled and stomped off again. Sighing, Remus reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose. Starting off term with a headache of such magnitude had really set the tone, but it was nothing compared to how it felt to hear Lily Evans shout his name from across the berm.

“Remus!” She called happily; “Hey, Remus!”

He spun about-face just in time to spot Lily and Marlene as they rushed towards him, trunks bungling along against their shins. Seeing his friend again looking so eager and spritely only served to ignite his past answer.

“Lily!” He cried, making her entire face light up. “LILY, HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?!”

Both girls hit the brakes only a few feet from him, but Remus was not deterred. He surged forward, leaning in until he and Lily were nearly nose-to-nose. *“WHY?”* He wailed. “WHY DO YOU HATE ME SO MUCH?!”

Her face split into a puzzled smile, which only drove Remus crazier. “What are you talking about?” She snorted. “And what happened to your f—”

“YOU’RE NOT A PREFECT!”

Lily blinked and sudden realisation came over her face. “Oh, Remus…”

“Don’t you ‘oh, Remus’ me!” He pulled back with another dramatic wail, his temples thumping along to his vicious headache like some sort of vile drum solo. “You set me up.”

“I, what?!”

“I don’t know how you knew this would happen, but you absolutely did and it’s all your fault!”

“Alright, I know it's first day, but how ‘bout we try making some sense here?” Marlene suggested.

Remus ignored her. “Never—!” He swore; “Never in my life have I met such a *cruel* and *wicked* girl!”

Lily, who appeared confused and wounded all at the same time, shook her head desperately. “Remus, I told you I wasn’t going to be a prefect this year.”

“No, you didn’t,” he hissed, pointing a vicious finger at her. “You said nothing of the sort.”

“But I—there was no room in my timetable after I switched my courses around.”

“So you’d leave me to the *dogs?”*

She squashed a guilty smile. “You… like dogs?”

“You—! Absolute wicked WITCH!”

As Remus continued his fit and Lily reached up a pointless hand to try and console him, Marlene let out a great guffaw of laughter from behind. It was the same Marlene McKinnon laugh he remembered, but it was clear that her summer away in Morocco had left its mark. She was tanner, and her long blonde hair had been chopped shorter than a boy’s, leaving her to look like a more wind-blown version of Twiggy. She was still wearing her uniform, but she’d forwent the usual black stockings beneath her skirt, and her shirt had been left unbuttoned, revealing only a thin chemise underneath, no tie. A year ago Marlene might’ve called the outfit immodest, and yet there she was, laughing away like nothing had changed. Remus knew better; *everything had changed.*

“You really didn’t tell him, Lils?” Marlene asked through her snickering.

“I thought I did.” Lily whirled on him, poking him hard in the shoulder. “If he were only better at picking up the phone.”

“I am not the betrayer here,” Remus snapped. “All it would’ve taken was a single ‘hey Remus, I’m not gonna be a prefect this year, just so you know’!”

Lily winced. “I thought I had.”

“Well, you *didn’t!* And now I’m stuck working alongside Regulus as a bloody prefect—which I didn’t even want in the first place—all while dodging Jillian and the sure attempts Regulus is about to make on my life.”

Marlene’s eyes bulged. “You got partnered up with Regulus?”

“Yes! And he hates me, of course. I doubt I’m gonna make it through the first week—actually scratch that, I’m not gonna make it through the first day, because I’m totally quitting.”

“You can’t just quit, Remus,” Lily said.

“Watch me.”

“You made a commitment to Professor McGonagall.”

“Only because I thought you’d be doing it with me!”

“Think of the upsides,” she said reasonably; “This way you can give Potter and Black detention whenever they piss you off.”

“Or interrupt your homework,” Marlene offered. “Imagine it, you’re trying to study for A-Levels or one of Bilshin’s shit pop quizzes—they burst in and *wham!* Instant detention. You wouldn’t have to lift a finger.”

Lily and Marlene began to giggle at one another, while Remus fumed.

“Oh my fuck—you girls think you’re *sooooo* funny, but you’re not.”

“That sounds blatantly sexist,” Lily lectured.

“Auughh!”

Remus’ dramatics were interrupted very suddenly by a sharp toot of a whistle and they all turned just in time for Jillian to skip up to them, clutching her own clipboard and beaming.

“Hey guys,” she trilled, dropping her prefect’s whistle from her lips. “Remus, we’re about to regroup to lead our tours for the new seventh

years. Regulus is already over there so I thought I'd come and collect you." She turned to Lily and Marlene. "That is, as long as I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Why would you be?" Remus replied blandly. "Lily's not a prefect anymore."

Lily sighed at him. "Remus, you know I didn't actually set you up, right?"

"Liar!" He scowled, as Jillian took his arm and began leading him away.

He wasn't satisfied by the tongue lashing—not by half—but it'd at least given Jillian something to snigger about. Remus supposed to anyone else it would seem quite funny, but he didn't feel much like laughing. After leading the tour, for which Regulus was mostly silent and made him do all the talking, Remus was finally free to retire to his own dorm, exhausted from the day's events and the effort it took just to coax a few measly curse words out of his partner. As he made his way back to Godric House, his prefect schedule crumpled tightly in his fist, Remus couldn't help but mutter to himself.

"Bloody Regulus… Bloody McGonagall… straight up planned this, didn't she… Some big fucking set up… *ughhh* —it's all Lily's fault…"

It wasn't really, but blaming Lily did make him feel slightly better. If there was an award for pettiness, Remus would win hands down, but in a competition of striking, well-proportioned people dripping in good looks, he knew exactly who would take gold.

It was almost frustrating how Sirius Black insisted on starting every year looking more bloody handsome than the last. Already he'd heard the whispers of Sirius' 'new look' flying amongst the other prefect girls, but unlike the September before, when simply seeing Sirius for the first time had stolen the very air from his lungs, Remus was able to contain himself some as he crossed their dorm room threshold and found the rest of his friends busy unpacking their trunks. Initially Sirius had been nervous over the haircut, but all it'd done was highlight the real finery of his features. Those dark eyes, a jawline that could cut glass. Yes, Remus was lucky. He'd seen more of Sirius than literally anyone, he knew what he looked like when he was dreaming, which he did constantly—awake or asleep, and also when he was at his most undone. *Yes, maybe he was lucky.*

"There he is!" James cried right away, standing up from the hutch at

the foot of his bed with a football boot in each hand. “Been waiting on y—damn, what happened to your face?”

Tucked halfway behind his and James’ wardrobes with a tangle of stereo wires around his feet, Sirius straightened up immediately. “Don’t tell me my brother did that,” he called.

“Football accident,” Remus answered vexingly, shutting the door.

“Yeah, as if we’d believe that a second time,” Peter snorted, busy sticking his Cream poster to the wall with blu-tack. His drumsticks sat on his bed covers next to him. Peter was hardly without them these days. “So, how was the first day on the job, Moony?

“Shit.”

“We already heard why,” Sirius said. “Did ol’ Minnie really set you up with my brother?”

“Don’t look so smug,” Remus drawled. “If Reg kills me then it’ll be your fault.”

Sirius shrugged innocently. “Nice shiny new pin, plucky,” he sneered, before disappearing back behind the wardrobes. Looking down at himself, Remus bitterly ripped the golden prefect pin from the front of his shirt and shoved it in his pocket.

“Is there no way to change partners?” James asked.

“Already tried,” he moped, drifting over to his bed and sitting down. “McGonagall’s not budging, and ‘sides, everyone else is already paired up. Jillian did offer to be my partner, but I’m not sure I’m that desperate yet.”

“Jillian Stewart? You mean she’s still got the hots for you?”

The was bang, then a curse, as though Sirius had hit his head. “Not just the hots.” He called. “Pretty sure the crazy bird wants to have his babies.”

“That’s enough outta you,” Remus clipped, in no mood for Sirius’ favourite brand of teasing.

In answer, Sirius popped up from behind the wardrobe, turning to James and Peter. “Well, it’s the truth. She bloody wrote you every day of the summer. Left little lipstick kisses and perfumed the paper and

everything."

"It wasn't *every* day, you arsehole."

"You're right, she took Sundays and bank holidays off."

As his friends laughed, Remus briefly considered chucking a shoe at each of them. "Yeah, yeah, yack it up."

"It wasn't all bad though," Sirius said, abandoning the stereo to light up a cigarette. "Some of those letters were worth framing."

While Remus shot Sirius the bird, James hauled a large haversack out from one of his trunks with a loud rattle of clinking bottles. "Wish I'd gotten to see. You're lucky, staying at Moony's. He never let us come over."

"It's nothing special," Remus said, eyeing Sirius warily. Sirius returned the look, but just kept smoking.

"Right," James declared, flipping the haversack's top. Each pocket was stuffed to the brim with bottles, all of them alcoholic. "I think we've got enough to last until the first Craigtyre trip, at least."

"At least," Peter agreed, pulling a large baggy of loose hash (courtesy of Simeon) from his own luggage.

Right, Remus thought. He'd almost forgotten. As upper-sixth students they'd have free-reign of the tiny Scottish village on select weekends throughout the term. He'd only ever been the one time, when they'd all snuck out to visit the pub, but he'd been dating Marlene then, and Sirius had been with Chastity. Now that they were both decidedly without female attachment, Remus imagined how it might feel to go about the cobbled streets with just himself and Sirius. They wouldn't be able to do things like hold hands or snog each other out in the open, but they could explore and… And there was a corner shop! No more breaking his fingers on dodgy handrolls. Bliss, truly.

"When's the first village trip again?" Remus asked.

"Seventeenth," James answered, busy sorting his bottles. "Hey, Pete, do you have that bottle of—"

Suddenly a knock sounded from the door, making them all jump.

"Surprise inspection!"

“Shit!” James hissed, ; “It’s McGonagall!”

“Since when?! I thought inspections were your job now!” Peter cried, rushing to shove the weed beneath his pillow.

Sirius, who’d been smoking quietly up until that point, began to cough as he struggled to get the window open. Unfortunately the wood always swelled some after several months without use, and as the door flew open he was forced to suck back his hacking as he quickly squashed the cigarette on the windowsill.

“Jokes!” Mary announced, as she and Lily flounced inside. “It’s only us.”

“F-F-Fuck, Macdonald,” Sirius sputtered, releasing several smoke-filled coughs across the bedroom.

Lily waved her hand in front of his nose. “I see you’re still busy unpacking.”

“We’re christening the room,” James said, pulling out a bottle of whisky and holding it out to her. “Care to join us?”

“We’re supposed to be in a meeting right now, actually,” Lily told him. “Thought I’d drop in and get you.”

James lowered the bottle. “Meeting for what?”

“Lily’s the new Rowena dorm monitor,” Mary said keenly. “Liz Hopkins backed out last second, so she stepped up.”

“No shit, that’s great!” James came around the side of his bed, collecting Lily in a tight embrace.

“Did you really forget your own meeting?” She sighed against his shoulder.

“No,” James lied, “I was just on my way over, as matter ‘a fact. My sixth sense told me to wait for something good to happen, and here you are. Something good, dropped right in my lap.”

He tapped his forehead keenly and Lily rolled her eyes, but she was smiling which meant she was obviously pleased.

“Oh?” Remus sneered, as they turned to leave. “So you have time to play babysitter every night at curfew but not for a prefect meeting every other week. Makes sense, sure…”

Lily turned to him. “Remus, you know it isn’t the same thing.”

“Hmph… yeah, whatever.”

“Ooh, Evans—getting the cold shoulder from Moony? That’s tough nuts, that is,” Sirius ragged, still fighting with the window.

“I’m going to make it up to him,” Lily reasoned. “Remus, how about I tutor you in biology for the rest of the term?”

“Not taking biology this year,” Remus answered haughtily, then; “Didn’t you say that the two of you have a meeting to get to? Really, don’t mind us, wouldn’t want to make you *late.”*

“Vicious,” Mary laughed, before passing an envelope along to Sirius. “Here, Black. I got that photo you asked for.”

“Photo?” James and Lily echoed, at the same time as Sirius cried; *“Yes!”*

Coming around from the wardrobe hutch, he ripped into the envelope eagerly. “Pete, can I borrow some ‘a that blu-tack?”

Peter tossed him the pack, and all of them watched as Sirius bounded up onto James’ unmade bed, sticking something to the roof of his four-poster. “There! To replace good ol’ Farrah. You can thank me later, Prongsie.”

“Oh no,” James moaned, while the rest of them gathered around to find Lily’s portrait from the year before tacked up over his pillow.

“What in God’s name…” Lily squinted. “Wait, who’s Farrah?”

“She's his very beautiful lover from France,” Remus replied dully. “He keeps her photo up over his bed to wank to. She’s got top marks on all of her A-Levels and passed the bar exam at sixteen. Also she gives great hand-jobs.”

“MOONS!” James wailed, as Lily’s mouth dropped open.

As Sirius and Mary began killing themselves with laughter, James quickly guided his girlfriend from the room, already doing damage control as they retreated down the hallway.

“No, Daisy, he’s just being an idiot. There is NO Farrah…”

“I like mean Remus, he’s frisky,” Mary said, still ambling around the

room. She stopped before a pair of white underpants, which had been left on the floor between James and Peter's beds. "Please tell me that none of you actually enjoy wearing tighty-whities."

"Thank you, Mary! That's enough now!" Peter shrieked, scooping the underpants up from the floor with a face like a tomato.

"Alright, *je vais faire ma sortie,"* Mary sighed. "I've a date anyway."

"That was quick," Sirius snorted.

"A summer away *always* brings the boys out to play," she mused. "And don't think I haven't noticed your own exploits. Word on the street says that Pepper Doyle's already got her eye on you."

"Pepper's alright, sure, but she's a girl," Sirius smirked. "I'm a man. I have manly needs."

Peter made a retching noise, and Mary wagged her finger in Sirius' direction. "You best get this heart-breaker image of yours under control, Black, or no girl's going to want anything to do with you this year. Then you'll be sorry *and* lonesome. Now *too-da-loo."*

Waving a goodbye, Mary made a graceful exit, and after stuffing his underpants away in a drawer Peter announced he was off to see Moira. This left Remus and Sirius alone in the room. Finally.

" 'Manly needs'?" Remus echoed. "Really?"

"Well, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" Sirius winked.

Remus didn't waste a second.

He was across the room in two long strides, pressing Sirius against the window with his hands at his shirt collar and his lips on his mouth. The desperation with which he kissed him would've made anyone think that it'd been three years since they'd touched each other, not just three days, but Remus mourned each of them. He hoped there wouldn't come another day—*ever*—that he was not kissing Sirius Black.

It felt a bit different to touch each other in the dorm; the motions were the same, but the feel of the sheets against their skin, the sound of the creaking bed and distant noises of life further down in the dorm were all new and predictably jarring. More than once the sound of an opening door had Remus pulling away, but there were four dorms to a

floor in Godric, and even as other boys came and went, theirs remained snuggly locked.

Afterwards they dressed quickly and Remus helped Sirius finish wiring up the stereo. Sirius even let him choose the first album, and with the Beatles playing in the background, they cracked James' whisky and christened the room all over again. It almost felt natural; being back in their dorm, listening to music while friends came and went, all of them anticipating the lessons that would start up again in the morning.

'Hold me, love me,
Hold me, love me,
I ain't got nothin' but love, girl—'

Sirius tipped his head back; *"EIGHT DAYS A WEEK!"*

"You're ridiculous," Remus laughed.

"Ah, I know," Sirius sighed wistfully, as they sat tucked up against one another. He wiggled a bit and Remus moved away to give him more room.

"You uncomfortable at all?"

"Nah," Sirius answered, pulling Remus back by his shirt. "Bed's just a bit small, s'all."

"We could always try the floor?"

"And fuck up my back? No thanks. You're just going to have to find a new favourite position."

Remus smiled. The light was coming in through the window just right, hitting Sirius' grey-blue eyes and turning them to glass. They were so close he could almost see his own reflection in them.

" 'Hold me, love me'," Sirius hummed, *" 'hold me'—"*

"Love you," Remus whispered softly.

The corners of Sirius' mouth perked up. He blinked and Remus' reflection vanished. "Love you too."

Blissfully, Remus kissed him again. As he did, Sirius slipped him his

tongue and he was reminded of exactly why they started all of this in the first place. Sirius was sound, but he was also taste, and touch, and everything Remus needed to function. He could've breathed in Sirius like smoke. He was addicted.

"Are you gonna tell me how you actually got this now?" Sirius asked. He was sliding his thumb gently along the cut on his cheek, and Remus sheepishly reached up to cover his hand with his own.

"Mm… s'almost healed."

Sirius gave him a look. It could've been *the* look, for all intents and purposes.

Remus sighed.

"I went to see Tomny… and uh… Something happened."

"You mean he did this to you?"

"No!" He kissed Sirius' knuckles hastily. "No, it was Lee. And he was high—not himself. Tomny stopped him. He… He took me back, Sirius."

Sirius softened, but there was a glaze to his eyes, not quite a reflection, more like he'd been expecting something else. "Oh. That's… That's great, Moons."

"Yeah, we forgave each other, everything's good now."

"So you're gonna go back to see him?"

Remus considered his words. "Things are a bit more complicated than that, I think, but he said I could call him."

"Well, that's a win then." Sirius shifted next to him, fingers rubbing circles along the side of Remus' neck. "As long as you're safe."

Tell him. God, tell him now. He deserves to know what you did.

"I am."

"Good." Sirius kissed him again, and again, and Remus fell into it like rain through a cloud. Soon he'd tell Sirius the truth— *soon*— he just wanted to enjoy this for a little while.

Another rattling set of keys came from behind them, and Remus broke

away sharply. It turned out to be the neighbour across the hall, but still he stared at the door; watched it. Sirius caught the look, and nudged him.

“Oi, pass me my fags?”

* * *

Tuesday 13 th September 1977 – Two Weeks Later...

Remus was *trying.* He really was, but being partners with Regulus Black was like being partners with a brick wall. A brick wall that hated your guts, that was. The two of them had had their first real on-duty session as prefects just barely two weeks into term, and while they’d been given the job of organising and shredding all of the student records from the previous year’s outgoing alumni, Remus had been confined to a single corner of the room, where he was not permitted to touch so much as a stapler.

“I can help,” he said to Regulus.

“Piss off,” Regulus told him.

And so the hours passed, and by the time he was making his way back across campus for supper, Remus had gnawed his nails down to the quick out of boredom. Because that wasn’t enough, on his way into the dining hall he was pulled aside by a small group of prefect girls. Not Jillian, thankfully, but three eleventh years with hopefully looks on their faces.

“Do you know if Sirius has invited anyone to the village?” The mousy one in front asked.

Dear fucking lord, could he not catch a break for five minutes?!

“Sirius isn’t looking to date right now,” he told the girls, before leaving them distraught and bleary-eyed by the front doors.

Already annoyed and not all that interested in playing nice, Remus tried sitting diagonally from Lily at their usual dining table, budging in next to a very bewildered-looking Peter. Lily made a face when she noticed, which he ignored, and after calling his name—which he also ignored—she finally got up with her tray and moved directly across

from him, forcing James out of his seat and onto Peter's other side.

"Oi, enough with the musical chairs, some of us are trying to eat," Peter complained.

"Blame Remus," Lily huffed. "I can't believe you're still mad at me."

"Of course I'm still mad at you," Remus replied.

"Well, what can I do to make it up to you?"

"Have you got a time machine?"

Lily frowned deeply. "I'd do it with you if I could, you know I would! But I've got an extra seminar three days a week and I'm still taking Advanced Maths."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"You're really making Evans feel the burn today, aren't you, Moons?" Sirius snarked from his seat beside him.

"Yeah," James cooed; "Can't you see how sorry she is?"

"Butt out," he told them.

"I understand why you're upset," Lily said; "This is on me! I didn't realise I hadn't told you my plans. End of term felt so crazy last year, but if there's anything I can do…?"

Giving her nothing, Remus went back to shredding his chicken piccata to bits. He understood better than anyone just how mental the last few weeks of school had been, but in between pranking and kissing his best friend, he'd still managed to let everyone know his plans for the following term. Surely Lily Evans deserved some punishment.

Before Lily could begin to whine some more, Jillian appeared at the end of their table, showing off her new lack of braces with a bright smile. "Remus," she said, poking him, "are you almost ready to walk back to the dorms together?"

Remus dropped his fork, and both Peter and James made this sort of garbled noise of surprise as they chewed. The question was so bold, and she'd asked in front of an entire audience.

"Walk... together?" He squeaked. "Like the two of us?"

“Mhm! You said it’d be a great idea this morning.”

Remus wracked his brain. It was true—he had spoken to Jillian the morning, but she’d waylaid him during his free period, just as he was on his way to meet Sirius. He would’ve probably said yes to her hand in marriage if it’d gotten her to go away.

“I’m so sorry, Jill,” Lily cut-in, graciously, “but Remus agreed to help quiz me after supper, so I’m going to have to borrow him tonight. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh… No, not at all.” Jillian gave her a tight smile. “Next time then.”

Trying not to look too disappointed, she flashed all of them a small wave and quickly scuttled away.

“You’re welcome,” Lily said smugly.

“Don’t think this means you’re off the hook,” Remus said, flicking a potato at her. “This is still your fault.”

“Evans isn’t the one who said yes to walking home together, is she?” Sirius added, before popping a piece of chicken into his mouth.

“I didn’t!” Remus whispered back.

“Uh-huh, sure. Next you’re gonna be dodging proposals.”

Remus groaned inwardly, hoping that this was just Sirius being Sirius and that he wasn’t actually mad. Before he could say anything else though, Sirius got up from the table with his dinner tray, muttering something about the loo.

“You’ve got to tell her you’re not interested,” Peter said, when he’d gone. “And soon, we’ve got the village trip this weekend.”

“You don’t think I’ve tried that?”

Lily leaned in. “Saying things like ‘maybe later, Jill’ and ‘I’m really busy right now, Jill’ is not the same as telling her that you’re not interested.”

“I haven’t just been doing that!” Remus reasoned. “Yesterday I told her I wasn’t keen on dating anyone and that she’d be better off looking elsewhere. Pretty sure she just took it as a challenge.”

James pointed his fork at him, mouth still full. “I ‘ffink ‘oo should try

beatin' 'er at 'er own game," he suggested, before swallowing; "Like, you could start quoting your dusty old novels at all hours and only talk about the shows and songs you like—heck, just fucking shout the lyrics in public. Maybe then she'd be too embarrassed to stick around!"

"Or at least finally grasp that you have nothing in common," Peter added.

"I keep hoping that she'll just get bored," Remus said pathetically. "Realise that I have no idea what she's talking about half the time and move on."

"Then you're a fool," Lily added, helpfully. "Jillian's persistent, I'll give you that, but this is a problem of your own making. If you didn't want the attention you should've shut it down last year so she could move on straight away, but instead you left her to pine over you all summer. For someone so stubborn you really can't say no to anyone."

"Me—stubborn? God, the rest of you should really look in the mirror some time."

"Don't tell Black that," she smirked, glancing around for Sirius. "The last thing we need is him looking in the mirror more often."

"Daisy's right," James grinned. "Tosser might just propose to himself, and then where would we be?"

"Well, Remus would still have an admirer in Jillian," Peter added helpfully.

"Oh, fuck off."

Lily giggled. "You know, Remus, you have this funny way of turning the smallest problems into such world-ending events."

"He does!" James agreed. "But then when he's met with a real issue, he just shrugs his pretty little shoulders and acts like it's nothing. It's crazy—you're crazy Moons."

Aside from being decidedly crazy, Remus could've told them how wrong they were; that he was an idiot and Sirius Black was a catastrophic hornet's nest of a problem that he still had no idea what to do with, but instead Remus just kept quiet.

Wiping her mouth on a napkin, Lily cleared her throat. "You can't let

it go on, Remus," she said. "Maybe it would just be best to tell Jill that — *THAT'S IT!"*

Her shout made the rest of them flinch so badly that Peter spilt his tea and James practically slipped off the end of the table bench. " *Holy*— what're you going bonkers over now?" He faffed.

"You! Or—you gave me the idea. You and Farrah, that is." Sneering at her boyfriend lightly, Lily stood up and reached across the table, clapping Remus around the shoulders. "I'm going to help you solve this!" She declared. "And afterwards, you're going to *love* me!"

Scooping up her tray, Lily immediately started across the room toward the dining hall's doors. "Daisy!" James shouted after her; "Where're you gonna do?!"

"I'M GOING TO FIX REMUS' LOVE LIFE!" She hollered. "SEE YOU TOMORROW!"

"For fuck's sakes," Remus groaned, as the several dozen kids who'd overheard her began to point in his direction as they sniggered into their supper.

"Don't know what the crazy bird's on about now!" A voice called from one table over. "I would'a thought that Loony's love life is a lost cause! Seems lonely enough!"

It was Barty Crouch of course, along with his favourite band of cronies. Remus wasn't surprised to find them tittering wickedly at his expense, only mildly shocked that they'd waited so long into the term to start making trouble. Regulus was among them, but he was pointedly turned away, unwilling to lower himself to interacting with Remus in public.

"Ha! Lost Lonely Loony!" Yaxley echoed impishly after Barty; "Try saying that five times fast!"

"Might be hard," Peter replied, "what with a tongue as thick as a toad's and a brain to match."

"Ooh, good one," James said, bumping his knuckles.

"Yeah, Pettigrew, good one!" Barty heckled. "Have you finally figured out how to do up your own fly this summer or does Mummy-Potter still do it for you?"

Remus swivelled around in his seat. “Can we fucking help you?”

“Obviously not, *lost cause."*

“Jesus, it’s like you’re magicians,” Remus replied sarcastically. “You really only appear to add misery to people’s day, but the rest of the time it’s like you don’t even exist. Do you exist? Do you have wants and wills of your own? Or are you just controlled by some evil overlord like a bunch ‘a shitty little pimple-ridden puppets?”

The boys all scowled, even Regulus. “Wouldn’t you like to know, nob-gobbler!” Travers cried.

Remus looked to Regulus. “Oi, partner, isn’t this all a little beneath you? I didn't think the great Regulus Black would associate with anyone earning marks below the national average.”

In answer, Regulus stood up with his tray and marched straight off. Barty appeared disappointed by his sudden exit, but after a few more nasty quips, got up to join him, and eventually the table had emptied.

“Did you see Regulus’ face?” Peter said to Remus. “He looked about ready to take your head off when you called him your partner.”

“Thank you for that startling revelation, Wormtail.” Sighing, Remus leaned his head on his hand. He was just glad Sirius hadn’t been around. Every day the Black brothers were forced to pass themselves in the hall, he was reminded of Sirius’ ordeal in Belgium, and how Regulus had most definitely known what was coming. It made Remus want to hate him, but there wasn’t even room, Regulus was just sort of… sad.

“Guys, what am I gonna do?”

James was wiping his hands on a napkin. “Wish I could tell you, mate. I mean look, I know what we did to Reg last year was pretty bad, but he hasn’t always been innocent.”

“Yeah, he’s started fights with Sirius too,” Peter said. “And he says way nastier shit when he’s angry.”

“Pete’s right,” James said, “Regulus has stood back and watched as Sirius took the fire from their parents just as many times as he’s stepped in, and he didn’t say anything when they kicked him out this time. Didn’t look for him, didn’t call… What we did was personal, I get that, but Reg is just as much Sirius’ brother as Sirius is his. And if

he doesn't want the title then fine, we'll take care of him, won't we?"

Remus pressed his lips into a thin line. "Yeah, you're both right."

"It's okay to be sorry," James told him, reaching to pat Remus on the shoulder, "but those two have had plenty of spats. This ain't the first and it won't be the last, just sucks that you're in the middle."

As they all gathered their trays and returned them to the rubbish bins at the back of the room, Remus' head began to throb. It hadn't even occurred to him that he *was* in the middle. Regulus had just as much reason to hate him as he did his brother, though he was hardly Remus' favourite person either. But James was right, they had to be loyal to Sirius. Regulus was never going to be their friend anyway.

"I'll wait for Sirius," Remus said, as they stopped outside the hallway toilet. The other two nodded him on, and as they left for the dorm, Remus leaned back against the wall. Peter's words from earlier were nagging at him; it would be smartest to squash the Jillian problem before the trip into Craigtyre, but more than that, Remus was lagging behind on his promise. He'd meant to tell Sirius about the Tomny kiss ages ago, but the timing had never felt right.

"I'll tell him tonight…" Remus mumbled to himself. And he would, he *promised.*

"You're in the way."

Remus looked up. Instantly he wanted to shout; first Barty and now Snape. The miserable boy was glaring scornfully at him with his arms crossed over his chest. It seemed like Snape had also grown over the summer, but included in that was his nose, which remained about two sizes too big for his face.

"Then go around me," Remus snarled, indicating to the bathroom door with a jut of his head.

"Do you make it a habit to hang out around men's toilets, Lupin?"

"Do you make it a habit of being such a twat?"

Snape started to sneer again, but before he could say anything, Remus remembered his newfound power.

"Detention," he said.

Some of the colour drained from Snape's face. "Since when—"

"Detention," Remus said again, feeling his inside jacket pocket for the little pad of pink slips, "for harassing an on-duty prefect."

"You're—You're not on duty!" Snape spluttered.

"You don't know that. Now piss off before I make it two." Whipping the pad out, Remus clicked his pen and quickly scribbled down over the top slip. As he tore it off and held it out to him, Snape flushed.

"Fuck you," he snarled, snatching the paper. "It was a mistake making you a prefect."

"Don't I know it. Now shall I give you another?"

Snape lunged forward slightly like he might try something, but Remus only raised his pen in threat and he was forced to storm around him, straight into the bathroom. Feeling smug, Remus almost relaxed, until he remembered what he was doing outside the toilet in the first place.

"HEY!" He heard Snape scream, along with a severe banging noise. "You can't smoke in here!"

"Shit," Remus grunted, streaking inside. There he found Snape hammering his fist on one of the cubicle doors.

"Who's in there?!" He demanded. "Get out here now!"

"Piss off!" The occupant called. *Sirius.*

"Dammit, Snape, why can't you just stop bloody bothering people?" Remus demanded, marching up and getting between Snape and the bathroom stall.

"Ha!" Snape scoffed, leaping away from Remus like he had some sort of disease. "Alright sure, come on over now, Lupin! Let's see you hand this crackhead idiot a pink slip!"

"Just get out!" Remus barked. "Or I'll make sure you're in detention until July!"

"You're gonna regret this."

"OUT!"

Scowling, Snape turned and retreated from the bathroom, leaving the air thick with cigarette smoke and unuttered insults. Remus let out a heavy sigh when he'd gone, and turned to gently rap his knuckles against the stall's door twice.

"I'm okay," Sirius answered, before opening the door a crack. "Just needed a break. Figures Snivelly would come knocking."

"Can I come in?"

Sirius peered at him, before opening the door the rest of the way. It was tight inside the stall with the two of them, and the light overhead was busted, leaving them in an overcast blue-toned dimness. Sirius offered him his cigarette and Remus took it, breathing in deeply.

"Love you," he said on the exhale.

In answer, Sirius arched a brow and Remus knew he was in trouble.

"You're… upset about Jillian, aren't you?"

"Wow. Am I that transparent?"

"I've tried talking to her." He handed the cigarette back. "It's the same for you, y'know. I keep having to deter girls who are losing their bloody minds over your new haircut."

Sirius swept his fringe out of his eyes pointedly. "Okay sure, but it's different with you."

"How could it be different? I've always had to watch you with girls."

"Those girls just like the idea of me. What I can give them, or how I'd make them look. Stewart and the rest—they actually *like* you."

"That's not true."

"That's love. At least that's how I see it."

"That's a horrible way to think about love," Remus frowned. "Do you think I like you like that?"

"Obviously not, since you've told exactly zero people."

Remus reached up to rub the back of his neck. "That's… probably not all true…"

Sirius pulled the cigarette away from his lips. “What? You mean you actually told one of the others?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then who?”

“I didn’t say anything about us really, but…” Remus dropped his arm. The toilet’s low lighting had made him think it’d be a good idea to say it there, but he and Sirius were nearly chest to chest. Barely enough space to breathe.

Sirius arched a single brow, impatient. “Are you waiting for an audience reaction or…?”

“I didn’t want to do this here,” Remus said, “and now you’re mad at me, so this probably isn’t the greatest idea in the first place, but yeah... I have something to tell you."

“Then stop beating around the bush and bloody tell me.”

“It—” he winced; “It might affect how you feel, y’know, about me… I wouldn’t even blame ya none if it did.”

“Spit it out, Moony, you’re making me nervous.”

Alright.

“I kissed Tomny.”

Sirius gave real pause. Then his eyebrows knit together in their centre, as though Remus were speaking a language he didn’t understand.

“What?”

“It wasn’t a real kiss,” Remus started, shaking his head so vigorously he banged it on the bathroom stall behind him. *“Augh—Fuck!* … Or I mean, it was a kiss, but it was different from how I kiss you.”

“Different kissing? How’s that?” Sirius demanded, biting anger seeping into his tone. “Do you measure it by the tongue’s depth? Or is there some richter scale for the ferocity with which you swap spit that I don’t know about?”

“It’s not like that—”

“Why wouldn’t you just tell me that you kissed him at that fucking

party?! Why make me worry that you were losing your goddamn mind when really you were just happy to get your rocks off?"

"It wasn't at the party!"

Sirius drew back, as much as he could in the tight space. "You kissed him when you went back there?"

"Yes," Remus frowned. "But *nothing* happened, I swear. Will you let me start over so I can explain myself?"

Sirius crossed his arms, unusually calm. "Fine. Go on then, spin your tale."

And so he did. He told Sirius everything, right there in that shitty student bathroom. From the trip home with Giles, to Lee and his dead brother—to Tomny in the churchyard and then all the way back to school again where he found out he'd be stuck with Regulus as a prefect partner for the foreseeable future. They were lucky supper had ended and no one was around to interrupt. Sirius never stopped him either, instead he'd clambered up onto the back of the toilet, boots perched on its seat as he leaned his chin on his hands and stared at the floor, the ceiling, the door—anywhere but at Remus.

"So it was an impulse?" He'd asked, when Remus had finally finished.

"Yeah."

"Gotta be honest, not sure if that's worse than if you'd actually meant it."

"Yeah…"

Sirius began sucking on his bottom lip. "Do you love him?"

"No, not like that."

"But you love me?"

"I do, I know I do," Remus said truthfully. "I just made a mistake. It was like I was feeling everything all at once and I… Look, Sirius, I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am."

"Sure you do, you've been doing it for the last half an hour."

"I need you to know that I mean it though," he pushed, "and I know it might not make you feel any better, but Tomny didn't kiss me back."

“You’re right, that doesn’t make me feel better at all,” Sirius replied staunchly. “I’d rather he be madly gone for you, and know that you’d still pick me in the end—that’s Shakespeare! But how do I know any of that’s the truth? How do I know that if he hadn’t refused you, that you’d still be here with me?”

Remus frowned. “Because I… I love you.”

“Right.” Sirius sniffed, then wiped his nose. “Well, I’m gonna need a little while, I think. Sort myself out and all that. I'll wager you should probably do the same.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. Time for what?”

“Christ, I mean time to think—*figure it out.* Decide what it is we want.”

“But I want you.”

The answer felt so blatantly obvious that Remus found himself surprised when Sirius didn’t automatically reply with the same thing.

“Do you not want me?” He asked, terrified.

“Didn’t say that,” Sirius mumbled. “Just said I needed some time…”

Sirius stood up then, manoeuvring past Remus and unlocking the stall door. They’d been in there for so long that the sky outside had gone dark, dimming the room enough to leave shadows on their faces.

"For how long?" He asked, following Sirius out of the stall.

"I don't know. A while."

"Sure," he nodded quickly. “A little while then, s’not a problem. I’ll sort out all of the Jillian stuff too—for real. I just… Can you tell me long you need?”

“For fuck’s sake, Moony, I don’t know! There isn’t exactly a statute of limitations for this sort of shit…” Sirius began backing away slowly. “Just give me some space to think, alright?”

“Okay.” He said in a tight voice. “Sure, take—take your space. I’ll be here. Or—not like ‘here’ here, just… you know.”

Sirius looked him up and down, like he was trying to burn the sight of him into his memory. The he turned away.

The door squeaked as it swung closed after him.

It'll be okay, Remus thought. *He just needs time. It'll be alright… It'll be just fine…*

He expected the voice to come to him, to provide some sort of jaded dialogue he could fight back against with his own feeble hope, but there was nothing. Just him and an empty bathroom.

Remus looked up at the bathroom window. The sky was still dark. He could not see the stars beyond the clouds, and as he craned his head to search for a hint of them, an insurmountable loneliness washed over him like a chill.

It'll be alright...

Right?

Alone in the bathroom, Remus Lupin hugged himself tight.

Chapter End Notes

Relationships stay messy.

I'm going to return to posting about once a week on Fridays/ Saturdays. Hopefully after my term finishes in April they will be a little more frequent, but thank you for sticking with me over this break. See you next week! <3

Chapter 73: On Dating

Chapter Summary

Stupid fucking idiots. Discoveries are afoot.

Chapter Notes

Don't lie, I know you're loving the drama ;)

CW: References to homosexuality (argument), vomit, & smoking.

Also, because I forgot last chapter: here's the Spotify playlist for Year 13. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So messed up, I want you here,
In my room, I want you here;
Now we're gonna be face-to-face,
And I'll lay right down in my favourite place;
Now I wanna be your dog…

- "I Wanna Be Your Dog" The Stooges, 1969

Friday 16th September 1977

It was official then, Sirius was angry. Maybe livid, even. Aside from the fact that he was clearly keeping Remus at an arm's length, Sirius had hardly spoken to him at all in the past few days. Remus tried telling himself that it was normal—whenever they'd fought in the past, they'd always needed space apart to find their way back together again. But as the hours turned into days and Sirius showed no inclination of returning to his side, Remus began to grow antsy.

"I hope the weather holds out for tomorrow, it'd be such a shame to get washed out during our first trip off campus," Mary said, holding a hand over her eyes as she surveyed the dark grey clouds looming outside the common room window.

"Wear a mac and some boots, you'll stay dry enough," Marlene said blithely, her legs kicked up over the arm of a Rowena-blue armchair.

Mary spun around and seized the book she was reading, only to start fanning herself with its cover. “A mac and a pair of wellies do not make for a cute date ensemble, *Marlene.”*

“Give that back! Who even says it has to be a date anyway?”

“Uh—everyone? That’s literally what these weekends off in the village are for. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if a group of parents banded together originally and commissioned them. How else are they supposed to ensure that their kiddies find themselves a fruitful match?”

“You’re insane.”

“And you’re naive. C’mon, you tell her, Remus.”

Remus looked up at the pair, only half listening. “Uh?”

“Tell Marls that one cannot look cute with their hair smashed beneath a rain bonnet.”

Remus just blinked, and Marlene reached over the back of her chair to snatch the book back. “Bring an umbrella then, you drama queen.”

As Mary primped her hair, smiling like a cat, Lily reached over and tapped Remus’ notebook with her pencil. “Remus, that one’s incorrect.”

“What? Oh.” He looked down and sighed. All afternoon he’d spent in the girls’ common room—just one of his new perks as a prefect—working on homework, and yet he’d barely made a dent in any of his assignments. But really, how could he be expected to focus on school when Sirius hated him?

He doesn’t hate you, Remus reminded himself; *He just hates what you did. Give him time.*

He’d been recounting similar thoughts ever since Tuesday, since their conversation in the bathroom. Before then he’d stupidly assumed that they were on the same wavelength, that they were both in love but acting consciously to ensure that no one ever came close to figuring it out . Now it was clear that Sirius expected more. He expected Remus to want whatever it was they had just as much as he—and Remus did! He just didn’t know how to prove it.

Am I not enough for you? He also wanted to demand of Sirius; *Is it not*

enough to just have me? Is this love not enough?

God, how Remus was starting to hate love; it was the excruciating polarity of it all. Love made everything more complicated, it made you miss people, even when they were standing right next to you. It was like an endless sea, and he was the inexperienced sailor, adrift blindly amongst its waves. He didn't have enough luck to bet on calm waters. He might've, except real luck didn't favour selfish people.

And Remus was selfish. So horribly selfish that if someone were to cut him open, his bones might've been blacked with the sin of it. He'd always known he wasn't a saint, but being with Sirius made him realise he was a worse person than he'd thought. He was selfish and greedy because he wanted all of it—he wanted the freedom to have Sirius with him, but also the secrecy of no one else knowing. He wanted that *one more* a million times over. He would've been willing to do almost anything to get it, except perhaps tell the truth.

I like you so much, but there's always a limit, ain't there?

It made him feel guilty, and the guilt made looking at Sirius hard, but it shouldn't *be* hard for normal friends to look at one another, so Remus forced himself to do that too. That left him tired and depleted, like a skipping record. James had noticed—James, the real saint—and more than once during that first week of classes, he'd leaned across a desk or table and asked Remus if he were alright. Remus always appreciated the quiet tone in which James asked, and sometimes he even imagined telling him the truth;

No, I'm not alright. I'm not alright because I'm in love with my best friend —no not you*, James—Sirius. I'm in love with Sirius Black and I can hardly bring myself to say it out loud when it's just the two of us, so how could I say it in front of anyone else?*

"I'm fine, just tired," Remus would answer instead.

Lily noticed too—effervescently stubborn Lily—though she seemed to chalk it up to his general distaste of being a prefect and therefore current distaste of her. As she leaned back from Remus' notebook, her expression read as worried. It'd been her idea to study together, and Remus had accepted because he couldn't stand another afternoon of returning to his dorm room and not speaking to Sirius—but now he was starting to regret it. Lily fretted like Mrs. Potter, and yet somehow remained twice as overbearing.

"Are you sure you're feeling alright?" She pressed, as Remus scratched

out the incorrect answer and accidentally ripped a hole in the centre of his paper.

“Fine,” he grunted.

“I hope you’re not still angry with me over the prefect thing. You're not, right? What if I were to do all of your essays until Christmas?”

“I already told you, I’m not mad anymore,” he said tiredly. “You don’t have anything to make up for, Evans.”

“Liar!” Lily practically shrieked. “You’ve been sulking ever since we got back, so just let me do your essays and then you can call me ‘Lils’ again and everything’ll be fine!”

“I like doing my essays.”

“Ooooh! You—*You’re* Satan incarnate, Remus John Lupin!”

Maybe. But he doubted even Satan was as greedy as he was.

Obviously enjoying the show, Mary strolled up from behind and leaned down over Lily to hand her a tissue. “I thought you already solved his Jillian problem?”

Still pouting, Lily swatted at the tissue, not really needing it. “I didn’t work.”

“Well, what did you do?”

“Just never you mind.”

Mary shrugged, pulling out a chair at their table and sitting down. “Whatever. Do you want my advice?”

“ ‘No’,” all three of them answered at once.

“Rude. I was only going to suggest that if Remus really wanted the girl to leave him alone, he should try actually finding himself a girlfriend. I’d do it—for a little while, that is—except I just agreed to go to Craigtyre with Petyr Tarnowski, and I'd hate to double-book myself.”

“Because Petyr’s such a great catch,” Marlene mumbled from her chair.

Mary laughed; “Ha! Bitch—love you. But really, I do know a few girls who’d be interested. None of them are as crazy as Jillian either. Just

say the word, Remus."

"No thanks, Mary."

She shrugged once more. "Suit yourself. I'm going to go find something less boring to do. Not that watching you lot do your homework isn't terribly thrilling. C'mon, Marls."

"But I'm reading."

"And I'm a leo. So glad we had this conversation. Now, chop-chop!" Forcibly hauling Marlene to her feet, Mary beamed as she laced their arms together and led her best friend from the common room. Lily turned to watch them go, before glancing at the chalky grey sky outside.

"Mary's right, I hope it doesn't storm. We deserve a nice day in the village."

Remus grunted, eyes busy boring a hole through his notebook.

"Have you given any thought to what you'd like to do tomorrow? Craigtyre's pretty nice in the daylight too, you know."

Another grunt.

"You could always come with James and me. He's been talking about Madam Puddifoot's, it's this little tea shop. Of course there's also Broomsticks. Some kids take boats out onto the local pond as well, and there's shopping and—"

A sudden rapping came on the window next to their table, and both Remus and Lily looked up to find James standing outside with a goofy grin on his face. He was wearing his running clothes, with a thick red sweatband around his forehead.

"Speak of the devil," Lily said, slipping out of her chair and unlatching the window. "Aren't you freezing? Where's your coat?"

"Nah, just about to go for a run, thought I'd check in on you two first," James said. "Alright there, Moons?"

Remus waved him off, still scribbling down his notes.

"I was just inviting Remus to the village with us," Lily professed loudly; *"Isn't that a fine idea, Potter?"*

“Oh, sure!” James trilled. “ ‘Course you should come, Moony, with you there we can make it a real party. You, me, Lily, Peter, Moira, Sirius, and Nydia.”

That got Remus to look up.

“Nydia?” Lily echoed for him.

“Yeah, you know—Nydia Burke. She runs the theatre club? Her dad owns that crazy chain of bookstores based out of London. Anyway, she asked Sirius to go to the village with her this morning, so guess she’ll be tagging along too.” James craned his head to see past her. “Ain’t that great, Moons?”

Remus could only gape at him. “I–I…”

“At least we know Sirius is finally back to normal,” James kept on; “I was starting to worry about him—what with all this shit with his parents, and how often he’s been skiving off with you. Speaking ‘a you, is there anyone you got your eye on, Moons? Or are you flying solo again?”

Remus stood up from the table. “I have to use the toilet.”

He left before either of his friends could start asking questions, abandoning his school things and taking the back door out of the dorm. The wind nipped icily at the back of his neck in just his school jumper, but Remus barely noticed it. His mind was operating at warp speed, and he was dangerously close to crashing. *Sirius said yes to Nydia? He actually agreed to a date with her? But he’s—? And we’re—!*

Remus forced himself to take a breath. Maybe he was reading too much into it… Maybe it wasn’t a date at all! James had called it a group thing—but everyone else going was dating someone, weren’t they? *No—yes? Fuck.* He needed to hear it from Sirius. Even if they hadn’t talked probably in days—he would force the truth from his very lips if he had to.

Taking the back path to Godric, Remus stumbled into the dorm, trousers wet to the kneecaps from navigating through the tall grass. The stairs he took two at a time, only slipping once, and when he reached dorm 4A he fought to free his keys from his pocket and shove them home in the door’s lock.

“Sirius?!” He cried when he was finally dashing inside.

“Nope, just me,” Peter called, as the door fell shut with a decisive *click*. He sat up on his bed, setting a comic book aside, but when he took in the state of Remus, his eyes widened slightly. “Boy, you sure look wild. What’d you do to your trousers?”

“Have you seen Sirius?” Remus demanded, still breathless from the stairs.

“No, but I expect he’ll be back soon.” Peter checked his watch. “He’s gonna meet us for dinner. You’re coming right? James says you can’t survive on cigarettes and tea, you know.”

Remus spun away, too frantic to entertain Peter’s weak wit. Fully intent to storm the rest of the school until he found Sirius or even Nydia herself, Remus reached for the door, but before his palm could meet it, it swung open on its own to reveal Sirius Black stranding in the doorway.

“Ah!” Sirius gasped, surprised to find Remus standing so close. “Fuck, what are you doing, Moony?”

“I need to talk to you,” Remus said. “Now.”

In that great big brain of his, Sirius must’ve understood. His eyes flitted to Peter and he cleared his throat. “Uh… hey, Wormy? I think Moira’s downstairs looking for you.”

“She is? What for? I just saw her.”

“I dunno, but she seemed pretty mad. Something about a forgotten anniversary? I’d get a move on if I were you.”

"What anniversary?!" Already alarmed, Peter threw himself off his bed and was out the door without even grabbing his shoes. Sirius shut it after him and then turned to Remus, looking hapless.

“That should give us a few minutes,” he said. “What do you want to talk about?”

Remus threw his arms out. “Just… Nydia?!”

Sirius’ eyes slid away. “Oh. That.” He moved around Remus then, shrugging off his jacket and tossing it across his bed. “What’d you wanna know?”

“How ‘bout—what the actual fuck?”

He heard Sirius snort. “Still Moony…”

“Don’t gimme that shit,” Remus lashed. “Turn around and tell me the truth!”

Sirius spun around in front of the stereo. “What truth?”

“I don’t know! Maybe an explanation—a bloody excuse?!”

“I don’t have any excuses,” Sirius replied, in that same cutting tone he’d used in the bathroom. “Why would I need them? S’not like you and I are dating.”

“Dating—?!” Remus stopped himself. If he exploded now there’d be no calming down. “Alright,” he managed; “Why then? Why do this—why do it *this* way? Are you trying to punish me or something?”

“It’s not always about you.”

“Do you think this is gonna make it better? You just going out and snog—”

“I haven’t snogged anyone,” Sirius seethed. *“You* did.”

"It was a kiss!" Remus cried. *"One kiss!* And I fucked up royally, I know! But it didn’t mean anything! I just needed someone, and he was there.”

“And I was there—that very fucking morning!”

“I’m sorry!”

“No, you’re not!” Sirius said. “You’re… You’re ashamed of me.”

Remus’ eyes bulged. *“What?”*

“You’re ashamed to be seen with me.”

“Sirius, I’m seen with you every day!”

“Not like that!” Sirius threw his arms out, like he wanted to hit something but nothing would satisfy. “You know what I mean, you’re just playing thick ‘cause you want to be the victim here. You’d rather hold my hand under the bleedin’ table than let anyone know that you’re even slightly different!”

The words cut deep, possibly even more so because they were true.

Remus swallowed his guilt. He was selfish, after all.

“Are you in love with her then—Nydia?”

“No, I’m not *in love* with her! But unlike you, she actually wants to be seen with me. She wants to hold my hand in public!”

“She’s a girl! She’s a girl and you said that you weren't even—”

“Oh, are you really the one to be policing *my* sexuality? Mr. ‘I like you but not like *that’?* You're such a bloody hypocrite. Since when does gender have anything to do with wanting to really be with someone anyway?”

“Since always!” Remus shouted. “Since *forever.* Since they sent Oscar fucking Wilde to the slammer for writing poetry to another man! I’m not embarrassed to be seen with you, I’m just a guy! I thought we’d agreed that that was enough? That it was what we both wanted?”

“You agreed,” Sirius retorted, “I just went along with it.”

It hurt, but Remus still fumed. How easy it was for Sirius to put all of the blame on him.

“This is so typical for you! ‘Moony, I did it for you’—‘Moony, we did it for you’!”

“Yeah well, this time I’m pretty sure you asked me for it!”

“So what now? We’re just over? You're gonna go off and date Nydia because I won't admit to being something I'm not?"

Sirius threw up an arm in exasperation, pointing at Remus viciously. “You know, that’s *exactly* what’s wrong with you! You say we, but really it's 'I'. 'I, me, mine'—Remus Lupin! It's like this every day, there never even was a ‘we’, not really! It was always 'us' and 'them'. Well, I'm fucking tired of it! I get to be 'them', as much as the next guy!"

"Who is them?!"

"Them—*everyone!* Everything you're afraid of! You can't admit what it is you really are, and now that I’ve branched out you act like you’re losing something!”

“I would say going out with someone else is a lot more than just ‘branching out’!”

“Call it what you want then, but remember, I *asked* you! I asked you if this is what you really wanted, and you said yes!”

“I said *yes* to you dating other girls?!”

“No! You said yes to keeping us a secret, and I said alright. You said we wouldn’t be boyfriends—I said alright! But I never said I’d just be okay with sitting back and being another one of your dirty little secrets! Shutting up and living blind and silent while you go crazy in your own bloody head!”

“Alright, sure,” Remus said, voice cracking slightly; “Go ahead, keep telling me everything that’s wrong with me. But remember, I also said that I loved you—and *you* said it back.”

“Yes, except you can’t even kiss me without looking over your shoulder first.”

“You want me to tell people, is that it? You want me to shout about us from the bloody rooftops?”

“I want you to *want to!”* Sirius cried, like a deep wound was opening within him. “That’s the difference, isn’t it?! I never expected you to just start coming out to everyone and their mother, but you’re ashamed of me! You’re no different from Miles!”

“Stop comparing me to him!” Remus wailed. “You do it constantly! Maybe not always out loud, but in your head—I can see it! You compare me to this guy that I don’t even know, and that you haven’t known since you were basically a fucking child! So tell me, Sirius, how can I live up to your imaginary idea of the ‘perfect man’—HOW?!”

“Don’t be a fucking coward for starters!”

Remus pressed a hand to his forehead. He was so tired, he hadn’t slept well the night before and shouting with Sirius always left him feeling like he had a gaping hole in his centre.

“Tell me you don’t want me to go out with Nydia,” Sirius said lowly. “Tell me, like you couldn’t with Kimmy. Or Stacy. Or Viv. Or Chas—”

“I’m sorry, if you could refrain from listing off all of your conquests, I actually have things to do between now and next Tuesday.”

“Fuck you,” Sirius spat. “I’m tired of you putting all your damage on

me. I've got enough of my own."

"That much is clear."

Sirius waved him off angrily, snatching his jacket up from the bed. "Fine. Whatever, be miserable—keep your fucking secrets, but do it on your own."

"Oh, I will!" Remus shouted, as Sirius marched around him toward the door. "And I hope you and Nydia have tons of fun together tomorrow!"

Sirius grabbed the door handle. *"We will!"* Then he slammed it, and Remus was alone again.

Because he couldn't think of anything else to do, Remus padded into the bathroom and slammed the door himself. For a split second he thought he might be alright, but then it was like someone had taken a shovel to his insides, impaling him and bringing it all to the surface. Stomach heaving, he bent over the open toilet and expelled everything. It was disgusting. He couldn't tell if his eyes were watering or if he were actually crying. His ears burned, his entire face felt tight, and he was gripping the toilet bowl hard enough to chip fingernails.

When it was finally over, Remus sat back and breathed. Stomach acid still burned the back of his throat, and his nose was suddenly clogged. He didn't want to come apart right there on the bathroom floor, next to a bowl of his own vomit, and so he hauled himself up to the porcelain sink, where he tipped his head beneath the faucet and chugged deeply, desperate to rid himself of the taste. Afterwards, as he huffed, he splashed water on his face and neck. It didn't soothe him, only made him wet, and as he leaned across the taps to stare at his own reflection in the mirror, Remus began to count. It was an old technique a school nurse had once advised when he'd have one of his outbursts; make a list of things that might calm him. It felt stupid but there was really nothing else to do, and his stomach was already empty.

One… Sirius Black. There would only ever be one Sirius Black.

Two… I love you's. Two I love you's whispered in the dark.

Three… moles. Three moles behind Sirius' left ear.

Four… calls. Four calls he'd ignored from Giles, worried they'd be from his father.

Five… weeks. Five weeks they'd spent at each other's side.

Six… friends. Six friends they'd been missing.

Seven… braids. Seven times he'd braided Sirius' beautiful hair.

Eight… days a week. *I ain't got nothing but love, babe…* Sirius had sung it to him days ago. Did he remember?

Nine—

Come now, is this not getting rather pathetic?

Remus slammed his fist into the mirror. It cracked along the edge. *Go away!* He told the voice. *Just fuck off!*

Now that's fine manners. You talk to your mother with that mouth?

Nearly undone, Remus glared at his reflection. "You aren't real," he gasped. "You're just inside my head. No one else can hear you."

Of course I'm inside your head, but why should that mean I'm not real? Remus Lupin, Remus Dean, Moony, we're all real. In fact, it's getting a bit crowded in here… Might want to empty some of us out soon…

Remus splashed water over himself again. It did not help. He was tired, and wet, and he didn't want to think of Sirius or Nydia or anyone else anymore... but it was impossible. The longer he stayed in that room, the worse the thoughts seemed to get.

And so he walked.

Aimlessly.

People called out to him, asked him where he was going. Remus didn't have an answer. He only wanted to be angry. Angry at Sirius whom he loved, at Nydia who did nothing, at Tomny for being so far away, at Lyall for marrying someone else—*at his father for not knowing him!* … And his mother who knew both and had left them all.

Remus Lupin was angry at the world. He had been for a long time. He hadn't been raised like James, to know anger and also forgiveness, or Sirius who felt anger and knew to demand retribution. He knew only how to be angry, and anger made for stupid lovers. Jealous, bitter lovers. And that was entirely the reason why he called out to her from across the berm.

“Hey, Jill… do you have a moment?”

* * *

Saturday 17th September 1977

It felt a bit like being back on acid. He was drifting, physically there but mentally somewhere else. He imagined he was back at the estate. It was early August, James and Peter were still away on holiday and Giles had taken Lyall and Sandra out on some day trip. The staff had the day off. It was Sunday. Their day. Remus was burning the eggs, Sirius was flicking through the radio. It was Sunday.

“You could’ve come inside, you’re a prefect now,” Jillian said to him, as she appeared out of the front door of Bronte House in a pretty blue peacoat.

“Oh. Forgot.”

She took his arm. “Don’t worry. Now you’ll know for next time.”

Remus swallowed. Somehow *next time* wasn’t as appealing as *one more*.

They started up the lane together, following a train of other upper-sixths, all on their way to make the buses that would carry them down to the village. It was cold—a storm was bound to be rolling in, but none of their classmates had been deterred anyway. A pair of Rowena girls whipped past, jostling Remus accidentally and stopped just long enough to apologise before giggling and moving on.

“Will we be seeing your friends today?” Jillian asked, once they’d made it to Castle Hall, where a string of yellow buses were lining the curb.

Remus shook his head. They’d asked him to join them, of course, but he’d declined on precedent. He already refused to be within ten feet of Sirius within their own dorm, no way he was going to share a table with him at some stupid teashop. It was Saturday.

“No, they’re… doing their own thing.”

“Oh, too bad.”

If he'd been paying attention, Remus might've noticed the look of satisfaction on Jillian's face, but the crowd had him distracted. Professor McGonagall was at the head of it all, checking names, while younger prefects mulled about, trying desperately to keep the excited bunch of sixth formers in order. Skirting the edges of it all was a very gleeful-looking Mr. Filch, who'd already apprehended Barty Crouch and Aaron Travers for trying to stowaway on one of the buses. As Filch dragged the moaning boys away by the ear, Jillian tapped him on the shoulder.

"I'm gonna chat up Tracey for just a sec, can you check us in?"

He nodded and she pressed up on her toes—simultaneously yanking Remus down by the shoulder—to kiss him on the cheek.

"Be right back," she cooed.

As Jillian slipped away, Remus cursed himself. It'd been an impulse to ask her to the village—one he should've ignored. After all, since when had his impulses ever panned out the way he'd wanted?

"Lupin and Stewart," Remus grunted, after fighting his way to the front of the mob surrounding the nearest prefect with a clipboard. At his words, she turned around and he realised then that it was Trish.

"You're off yer head, Remington," she exclaimed. "Dinnae tell me you actually asked Jillian out?"

Remus scowled. "Why don't you say it louder, don't think she heard you."

"Tis your funeral," she sniggered, checking their names off the list. "Bus three. Now who's next?"

As other kids shoved forward to get their names down, Remus went back around to the correct bus. He was glancing around for his date when Peter appeared with Moira, and that quickly multiplied into the two of them plus James and Lily.

"Moony, you're coming after all!" Peter said.

"Uh, yeah," Remus said awkwardly. "Thought I'd give it a go."

"That's great, I can't wait to see everything," Lily smiled, grabbing his coat sleeve. "C'mon! Our bus is this way, you can ride with us."

He followed her obediently, and was fine with the situation until James and Lily took it upon themselves to link their arms through his.

“So, Moony… are you and Black fighting again?” James asked.

“Yeah, he’s been weird all morning,” Peter called.

Lily scoffed; “What those two are *trying* to say is, are you alright? You and Sirius aren’t talking, and we’ve sort of noticed.”

"*Definitely* noticed," Peter added.

“It’s fine,” Remus insisted, pulling away from all of them. “We’ve just had a little spat.”

“You mean a big spat?” James echoed.

“No! Just—ugh… Just let me deal with it, alright?”

“Okay,” Lily said, taking his hand again. “But if you need a lawyer, don’t call Potter. He’s failing criminal court already and it’s only week two.”

“That is a grievous falsehood, Evans. I could sue you for slander.”

“You’d have to be able to understand the paperwork first,” she teased.

“Moony!” James rounded on him. “Who’d you rather have defending you? Me or Lily?”

“Of course he’d pick Lily,” Moria said, making Peter snort. “Any sane person would.”

“Moira, you wound me so,” James moaned. “I’ll have you lot know that I am planning to ace our next test in—”

Just then Jillian reappeared, stepping between Remus and Lily and taking his arm fondly. “Thanks for checking us in,” she said sweetly, then; “Hey, guys.”

Lily snatched her hand back. The last time Remus had seen that look on her face was when Sirius had showed up with Chastity on their way to the village the very first time.

“Oh. Hi, Jill,” she chirped. “Are you two… together?”

Remus *hated* how Lily had asked the question, but Jillian only seemed

to glow. “Yes, Remus asked me to go to the village with him.”

James reached across his girlfriend, gently knocking a fist against Remus’ shoulder as a friendly rapport. “Way to go, man,” he said. "Knew you had it in you."

“Are you two coming on our bus?” Moira asked, absentmindedly picking a stray pine needle from Peter’s hair. Though Peter had insisted hand over fist that he’d grown over the summer, Remus suspected it was only a half inch at most. Conversely, Moira *had* grown. She was still sporting her same straight-across fringe, but she’d gained at least an inch and a half on her boyfriend in the last year, maybe two. If Peter had noticed, he’d made no mention of it to his friends.

“No!” Remus answered quickly. “Or—What bus are you guys taking?”

“Three,” Lily replied.

“We’re four.”

Peter glanced around. “But there’s only three buses.”

“—I meant two!”

“Shame,” James said. “I’m sure we could squeeze you in.”

“No… we—”

“POTTER!”

They all turned. Sirius was waving his arms from outside the doors of the very last bus, trying hard to get their attention. Next to him stood Nydia Burke, looking very pretty with her hair arranged neatly over one shoulder. She wore a white wool overcoat that seemed to make her brown skin glow, and was standing very close to Sirius, as if leaving too much room would prevent people from understanding that she was the lucky winner of his undivided attention for the day.

“Impatient, that one,” James chuckled, waving back and already steering Lily and the others towards him. “See you in the village, Lupin?”

“Yup,” Remus answered, as Jillian took his arm and did the same.

“I could tell you were lying,” she said, as they neared the front doors of the bus. “You don’t want to be around your friends.”

“It’s not like that…”

“No, it’s okay! I get it. It’s sort of sweet—how you want us to be all alone. I never would have pegged you as such a romantic, Remus.”

Resisting the urge to correct her, Remus glanced back over his shoulder. Through the small crowd he could just make out a head of midnight-black hair. It occurred to him that he didn’t *want* to want Sirius to turn around, but perhaps if he thought hard enough…

Come back… Turn around. Come back.

But Sirius Black did not turn around. Rather, he stepped back the gentlemen he was to allow Nydia to board the bus ahead of him, and then he climbed its steps, and Remus could stare no longer.

Jillian was nudging him. “Remus? Remus, are you listening?”

“Uh, sorry, what were you saying?”

“I was asking you what you’d like to do today.”

“Oh. Well, Lily mentioned there was a bookshop.”

“Bookshop it is,” she agreed. “And afterwards we can get a spot of lunch. It’ll be fabulous.”

Yeah… fabulous…

So the day went on. And on. And as tumultuous as Remus felt inside, it was admittedly not entirely terrible. Lily had been right, Craigtyre was charming in the daytime. Its roads were cobbled and windy, boarded on either side by rows and rows of look-alike cottages. Every yard had a garden and every garden had a fence, though most were made of stone and covered in soft cushions of moss. Street lamps lined the busier roads, all of them leading into the centre of town like a bead of rain running across a spider’s web. The heart of the village held most of the shops and much of the comings and goings were centred around there, along with the main road in and out, where the buses had dropped them.

As baffling as Jillian was most moments, Remus found himself grateful for her unwavering ability to chatter on. She literally never ran out of things to say, but never complained when Remus’ attention wandered or when he thought to distract himself with a fag or otherwise. *And* she didn’t insist on having tea in that ridiculous Madam Puddifoot’s,

an immense relief. They'd walked past the shop earlier in the day and the sight of all those tacky frills along with the overpowering smell of potpourri was enough to turn Remus' stomach for the second day in a row.

"That girl, Lily Evans?" Jillian said, as though she didn't already have every facet of Lily's life recorded to memory; "She tried telling me the most egregious story about you the other day."

Remus pulled his cigarette from his lips. "She did?"

"Yes! She said that… Well, it's hardly worth repeating, it was so silly. I think you might need to check in with your James friend though, she might have a crush on you. Wouldn't want that now, would we?"

She hugged his arm again, which was really starting to wear out its welcome. Remus thought he might have bruises around his elbow by the end of the day.

"Look, Remus, I've found your bookshop."

Jillian kindly pointed across the street, to a small line of shops all brightly decorated. Remus lit up when he saw it. There was indeed a bookshop, but that wasn't what had caught his attention. The building that adjoined the bookshop on the left-hand side was painted all over in rich colours of navy and plum. It had a sign that bore the words *Dervish and Bangers! Records & Tapes* and its windows were plastered with posters advertising the latest album releases. He could hardly believe it—a record shop, right there in Craigtyre! It was positively mouth-watering.

"Blimey! I didn't know they had a music shop here!" Remus gasped, already dashing across the street. Jillian came with, only because she'd refused to release his arm, though the noise she made as they stumbled across the street was less than impressed.

"Appears it's new," Jillian said when they'd reached the front windows. She pointed at a flyer taped to the glass, advertising the shop's grand opening, and as they stared the door opened towards them and a small group of their classmates shuffled out, each clutching different LPs to their chests and chattering excitedly.

"Hey Jill!" A few of the girls trilled, sizing Remus up as they passed by. He barely noticed, itching to get inside.

"You coming?"

“I’ll be right there,” Jillian said, waving at the giggling girls. “I’m just gonna catch up with Donna and Sandy first.”

Not about to complain over the sudden offer of privacy, Remus pulled away from her and slipped into the shop. It was small inside, but warm enough, with each wall painted a different neon colour and decorated with posters and thin shelves displaying various albums. On the floor in-between were rows and rows of vinyl records and tapes, each of them stacked together and just waiting to be sifted through. Music was playing, naturally, and apart from a few other browsers, the only other person inside was a young guy busy organising a milk crate of dingy LPs behind the shop counter. It reminded Remus of summer, when he and Sirius had wasted away hours wondering through the shops around Camden and Carnaby. And as soon as he thought about summer, he began to miss Sirius all over again.

On the upside, without Jillian around to bother him, Remus was able to spend some time sorting through the rows like he did in the shops back home. The shop attendant never really paid him much mind, he was too busy bobbing his head along to the music as he price-stickered each record. It was a folk song, which didn’t appeal much to Remus, but he wasn’t used to a music store being so quiet. The guys in London were always trying to upsell you some newest release.

“Who’s the band?” He asked, making the shop attendant perk up.

“Oh, uh—” He spun around, picking up the album cover. “New group —husband and wife duo, looks like. ‘The Long… bottoms’. Hm.”

Remus nodded—the name was definitely folky enough—and suddenly a knock came on the window behind him. Jillain was outside, waving like she expected him to come outside and join her. She had a group of her girlfriends with her too, each of them looking keen.

Come on! Jillian mouthed through the glass. She gestured to the girls, clearly wanting Remus to make an entrance.

Pulling a random record off the shelf, Remus raised it like he’d yet to pay. Jillian crossed her arms, but motioned for him to go on and Remus slunk back toward the pay counter, sheepishly dropping the album down in front of the seller.

“KC and the Sunshine Band, eh?” The guy said, turning the record over.

“Er—no, s'a mistake,” Remus said quickly. “Do you have any Sex

Pistols?"

He nodded, and turned around to shuffle through a pile of albums on the back counter. "Aye, yer in luck. Just got a fresh shipment in yesterday. Still going through it, in fact. But those Sex Pistols—hard tae come by."

"I'll take whatever you've got," Remus said, watching patiently as the guy sorted through. He wanted to celebrate when the stack finally revealed the band's single, *Anarchy in the U.K.,* but what came after just about made Remus' eyes roll out of his head.

"That the new Bowie release?!" He asked breathlessly, pointing at the album, which was still fresh and untouched in its plastic. Across its front read, *Restricted release for promotional use only. Not for sale.*

"Mhm, a pal 'a mines helped me get my hands on a merchant copy," The guy picked it up, passing it over to Remus to let him run his hands across it. *Heroes,* it was titled. Remus could hardly believe it.

"Will you sell it to me?"

The guy shook his head. "Na, can't sell it. Against the rules. This baby won't hit shelves for an'nur month or sae. Check back then."

Remus did the math in his head. Sirius was quite possibly more livid with him than he'd ever been. It wouldn't negate the seriousness of what was done, but showing up with a fresh-off-the-presses Bowie album just might soften the blow.

"I'll pay double for it!"

"Sorry, pal. Cannae do it."

Jillian knocked on the window again, looking impatient.

"Please! I'll do anything! I'll... well, next time I'm in I'll sort five crates of stock for free! You're a brand-new shop, I'll bet you're busy enough without having to sort through a million copies of KC and the Sunshine Band."

The guy squinted at him, before smirking slyly. "Ten crates."

"Seven."

"Eight."

“Deal.”

He emerged on the street with both albums, feeling victorious, but with little time to reveal in the glow of the still plastic-wrapped LP. Jillian was waiting for him, arms crossed and tapping her foot like a scolding professor. Luckily her friends had gone.

“Sorry, I had to haggle with the guy,” he supplied meekly. Jillian looked him up and down, then swept her hair out of her eyes.

“That’s alright. I wanted to introduce you a bit more, but girls had a reservation at Madam Puddifoots.”

“Next time?” He winced.

She nodded. “What’d you get then?”

He showed her.

“Bowie? Never much cared for him.”

“He’s great once you get used to him.”

“Really? I always thought he was a bit too ostentatious. Overzealous, maybe.”

“Oh, he totally is, but he’s also pretty… uhm…” He trailed off. Suddenly Remus didn’t feel much like talking about music. “Lunch then?”

Jillian beamed.

They took tea in some random café just off the main drag, and throughout the meal Jillian continued peppering him with questions about his life and growing up in the city. She never forgot to interject with bits of herself though.

“My mum’s family is from London, but we never see them,” she sighed, sipping from her Coca-Cola. “I hate spending the summers in Chippenham, it’s so boring. It’s like, you grow up there and the only other people around for miles are those with babies and their grandparents.”

“Chippenham, that’s close to Bath, innit?”

“Yeah! Have you been?”

He quickly changed the subject; “Do you read much?”

Jillian sat up straighter, apparently pleased that he’d finally contributed to the conversation some. “Not really, I love the theatre though. My favourite is ‘My Fair Lady’. It’s a musical. Have you seen it?”

“Er—no.”

“That’s too bad! I saw it first in London actually, and I loved it so much that I went to see it again when I was in New York. Only then I realised that it wasn’t actually ‘My Fair Lady’, but the original play it was based on. ‘Pygmalion’, or something.”

“Oh yeah,” Remus said, his memory jogged; “Like that guy in Ovid.”

“In what?”

“The Greek figure? Ovid writes about him in… y’know what, never mind.”

Jillian propped her chin up on one hand and grinned at him. “You're so funny, Remus."

"Nah, not really."

"You are," she insisted. "And you have such handsome curls.”

“... Thanks.” *Oh god, was he supposed to compliment her back now?* “You’ve got nice hair too. Very... a nice colour."

Despite the lame attempt, Jillian laughed. *Maybe he was funny.* Then she reached across the table, thumbing a piece of his hair, which had fallen down over his temple. “So soft too,” she praised, before gently running her thumbnail down the side of his cheek.

Remus immediately shivered. He couldn’t do it anymore. He shouldn’t *want to.* He was in love with Sirius, even if Sirius was off with Nydia.

“Jill—”

Perhaps it was women’s tuition. Before Remus could even get the words out, Jillian was popping up from her chair. “Look at us—we’re wasting the day,” she declared, grabbing her handbag. “Don’t worry, this one is on me.”

She left their table to pay, and Remus was left dejected and

disappointed. He wondered where Sirius had taken Nydia. To the Three Broomsticks, maybe? Where they could get a booth along the back so that no one might interrupt? Or maybe he'd taken her to the joke shop James had been chittering on about—the one that supplied gag toys and rubber snakes-galore. Was he telling her of their band, their plans for the future? Was he complimenting *her* beautiful brown skin, or singing to her, or talking about flats and Jagger and his lovely new life at the Potters?

Was he calling her the sky?

You could almost be considered a masochist at this point, what with all the emotional turmoil you churn out, Vicious Moony said. *Are you sure you're a seventeen year-old boy? Sounds more like a lonely housewife to me… Shall I fetch you an apron?*

You're not fucking funny.

I think our audience would disagree.

"Ready?" Jillian asked, reappearing beside the table.

They walked around the village some more, even stopping in to the local confectionery to line their pockets with various sweets. Remus looked everywhere for Sirius—a hint of him among the village's passersby—but never spotted him.

"Oh, Remus! We should take a boat out!" Jillian said, as they crossed into the eastern half of the village. The crowds were less dense there, mostly because of the small lake that took up all of the space on the edge of the nearest neighbourhood. It was nothing compared to Lake Dubh, if anything it was more of a large pond, but there were tiny fishing boats left along the shore by the local authority and they had leave as Hawkings students to use them as they pleased. No one was out on the lake today though, which was a good thing. The weather had turned again and it was clear that a usual Scottish storm was on its way.

"I dunno, Jill," Remus said, surveying the sky. "Looks like it'll rain soon."

"I've brought my brolly," she said, pulling a small telescopic umbrella from her bag. "C'mon, it'll be fun. I won't even make you paddle the entire time."

And that was how they ended up floating across the tiny loch in a

wooden dinghy. The water was pitch black and the entire thing swayed precariously in the shifting breeze, but Jillian only appeared ecstatic. “You can swim, right?” She’d asked him, as they drifted further from shore. He could, but the water was already icy despite being only September, and Remus didn’t much fancy a dip.

"James and Sirius seem funny," Jillian said, while Remus rowed and she sat across from him. It wasn’t raining yet, but she kept her umbrella balanced carefully on one shoulder as though it were a parasol and they were two amorous lovers who’d only just escaped the prying eyes of their snub-nosed rivals. Staring at her, Remus wondered what the probability was that she’d be struck by lightning before they returned to shore.

"They are."

"I've known them both for a while, obviously." She eyed him, like a cobra sizing up a meal. "But you don't seem to have much in common."

Remus tried not to appear affronted. "We have a lot in common. We all like music."

"Oh, but I didn't really mean interests. It was more like, they're... active, and you're reactive."

He didn't understand her meaning, and wasn't entirely sure he wanted to, so Remus just focused on paddling. "They're best friends. Bound to be alike, I guess."

“And is Peter your best friend then?”

“He’s one of them,” he answered sharply. “James too.”

“But you just said that James is Sirius’ best friend.”

The comment made Remus grumpy; as if he and Peter were the leftover Marauders, and must’ve been closer because of it. *The things that I know—that I’ve* seen*—that James Potter hasn’t.*

“There’s also Lily,” he said; “and Marlene.”

“Your ex-girlfriend?”

“She’s just a friend now.”

Jillian nodded quickly. “Of course. I didn’t mean to insinuate

otherwise." She bit her lip. "Oh, look at that, it's starting to rain!"

Despite not having an umbrella of his own, Remus had yet to feel a single drop, but that didn't stop Jillian as she quickly scrambled across the dinghy to take a seat next to him. With all of their weight now transferred to the back, the boat lurched dangerously and Remus clung to its edge, trying to keep it from overturning and dropping one of his oars in the process.

"Uhh—Jill, I don't think we're properly balanced anymore!"

"It's rude to comment on a lady's weight, Remus," Jillian teased, snuggling in close. Eventually the boat stopped rocking, though they were tipped precariously to one end. As Jillian coddled him, Remus peered miserably over the water's surface, mourning the loss of his oar. At least it floated; he could see it several yards away, bobbing aimlessly like a taunt. *What else have you lost?* It seemed to say; *Let us count the ways. You've lost your friends, your mind, your boyfriend, your self-resp—*

Boyfriend...?

Boyfriend?!

"Remus."

He looked back, and Jillian was right there. She was looking up at him, their faces only mere inches apart. It was almost dark under the umbrella, he doubted any rival could've seen them even if they were trying to spy.

"I really like you, Remus," Jillian confessed abruptly. How easy it was for her to say such things. He might've commented on it, wryly—as if to defuse some of the sudden tension—but before he could she was stretching her face up toward him.

Oh god. She was going to kiss him!

He pulled back sharply, his only thought being—*Sirius!* And as he did so, his hand missed the edge of the dinghy and fell onto empty air. There was a sudden shriek—Jillian—then a splash, and just like that Remus Lupin was in the lake.

* * *

It would be funny later when he was looking back on it, but in the moment, Remus was nothing other than humiliated. Jillian seemed equally so—her face was splotchy and red the entire row back and she didn't say a word, but she had helped him clamber back into the boat so that was something.

"I'm s-sorry," he told her, as he stood shivering on the shore.

Jillian didn't meet his gaze. Her peacoat was stained with lake water, and she was fiddling with the strap of her umbrella. "It's alright," she murmured.

"I didn't m-mean to of-f-fend you," Remus said, already working on his incoming cliché. "And it's n-not even you, it's j-just that… there's s-someone else."

Jillian's meek look turned into a deep, frustrated frown. "Oh Jesus—I knew that."

For a moment Remus stopped shivering. "You did?"

"Yes!" She huffed. "If you must know, Lily told me. I thought it was just her way of keeping you to herself at first… but I guess now I know she was telling the truth."

Remus couldn't believe it. It felt as though the entire world was caving in. How could Lily have possibly found out? *And how could she have told Jillian?!*

"I… Jill, we—!"

"Yes, yes, I understand." She glanced bitterly at the lake. "Family matters, and all that. So rare that these things turn out, but you can't help who you like, even if they're *French."*

"I—" Remus drew up short once again. "French?"

"Lily told me all of the details."

She didn't tell me *the details!* Remus scrambled to make sense of what she was saying. *He was French?* That's what she was focussed on? What did Sirius being French have anything to do with it? He would've thought she'd be more caught up over the fact that they both had a—

"You can tell Ms. Farrah that I'm not going to try and steal her

fiancé," Jillian said. "Now that I know she's actually *real.* Though if I were her, I would've never let you come back here without me. Too many girls, too few eligible boys."

Jillian began wiping off her coat, while Remus ran circles in his head. "Farrah?"

"She must be pretty beautiful," she said, "to make a guy stay so faithful when another girl is openly trying to kiss him. I understand why you hid it though—the fact that you're engaged and have an actual fiancée. I mean, we're only seventeen and it *is* 1977. I wouldn't want to be engaged this early, no offence."

Suddenly the dots were starting to connect. "Farrah…" he mumbled. *Lily… Lily and her egregious story… oh—*

"OH!" He cried. *"That* fiancée."

Jillian rolled her eyes, like his unanticipated dip in the lake had turned him daft. "No need to play dumb anymore, Remus. I get it. You were actually pretty decent, all things considered. I've heard that I can be sort of… overbearing."

"Heh, you? Nah…"

It began to rain, spattering them with fat raindrops and further darkening Jillian's sky-blue coat. "I do wish you'd have told me before I refused Roy Nilssen's invitation to the village," she drawled, opening her umbrella. "Why did you ask me anyway?"

Remus licked his frozen lips. Lily's lie was already spun and Jillian was believing it; there was no need to tell her that he'd done it only to make the best friend he was simultaneously sleeping with jealous.

"Well, I was hoping that we could… still be friends?"

She gave him another hopeless look. "Of course we can still be friends." She pat him on the arm, and Remus got the sense that it was more of a pity-offer than anything else. "I'm gonna go now, I think, see if I can catch up with Roy before we have to get the bus. You going to be okay on your own?"

He nodded, lake water still dripping off the tips of his hair. "I'll be fine, don't worry about me. And I'll pay you back for lunch too."

"Keep your money," she said kindly, as she passed him back his

records. “Spend it on your fiancée in Paris. Bring me back a croissant or whatever.”

She left him there on the edge of the Scottish loch, and despite the fact that he was sopping wet and had most definitely ruined the fresh package of cigarettes in his pocket, Remus had never felt more relieved.

Lily Evans, you are forgiven and then some! He promised, as he made his way back up the rain-covered cobbled streets with a new spring in each squelching step. He’d just turned onto the village’s main thoroughfare when a voice called out to him, and he turned to find Marlene standing beneath the awning of the same cafe he and Jillian had eaten at earlier. She was bundled up against the weather in her oversized leather coat, but her hair was spiked up with gel and she was without her stockings, instead having traded them for thick black knee socks and heavy workmen boots. Perhaps even more surprisingly, she held a cigarette between two fingers.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Marlene asked, looking him up and down. “Why're you all wet?”

“Marlene,” Remus said, equally unable to believe his eyes, “are you *smoking?”*

Like she were embarrassed, Marlene straightened up and flicked the cigarette away. “As if you can talk,” she mumbled, casting a worried glance at the cafe behind her.

“Waiting for someone?” Remus asked.

“No!” She answered very quickly, coming forward. She took his arm, despite the fact that he was still wet, and began steering him away. “C’mon, I was just about to head back. You’ll catch a cold if you stay like this.”

“I’m looking for Sirius,” Remus said as she led him; “Have you seen him?”

“Mhm, a while ago though. Think he went to Broomsticks with the others.”

Remus nodded thoughtfully. He didn’t want to make a scene in front of all of their friends—certainly not Nydia. He could wait, clean himself up, and then maybe he’d have a chance to make all of it right again.

“You sure you want to go back so early?” He asked Marlene, as they made it to one of the waiting buses.

“Yeah,” she said, pushing him aboard. “Wasn’t having much fun anyway…”

They sat, and the doors closed as the driver—Stan, the young guy with all the acne who’d driven them to their very first live gig in year eleven—pulled away from the curb. The weather was terrible, a real storm had begun to lash at the bus’s windows, but Remus felt hopeful for the first time in days.

“Marlene,” he said.

She looked up from her seat across the aisle. She’d been drawing on her boot with a pen and had the cap tucked between her teeth. “Eh?”

“Just wanted to say... that you’re pretty.”

She stared at him, then capped the pen. “Delirious already. Right, that’s it—straight into the bath with you.”

Back at the dorm, he took a shower to warm his frozen skin—because a bath would’ve wasted more time—and hightailed it back to Castle Hall with his hair still damp, where he waited in the rain to apologise to Sirius. Each returning bus might as well have been a ship pulling in harbour, but when their passengers piled off and none of his friends were among them, Remus always felt a pang of disappointment.

“Has Sirius Black returned yet?” He eventually asked the waiting prefect—not Trish, thankfully. The boy glanced over his clipboard and shook his head, and so Remus waited. It was nigh seven o’clock when he checked his watch to find that supper had come and gone without him. His legs and arse were aching after spending so long leaning against the cement retaining wall alongside the road, but just as he was considering giving up, another bus pulled up the lane. Among the exiting students were James and Lily, and they spotted him immediately.

“Remus!” Lily declared, rushing over and stepping beneath his umbrella. “Did you have a nice day?”

“Yes,” Remus told her, before all but dropping the umbrella and pulling Lily into a tight hug. “You’re insane, Lily Evans, but you’re also a genius!”

“What did I do?” She asked, voice muffled by his shoulder.

Suddenly another pair of arms enveloped them.

“I’m not sure why we’re hugging,” James said, “but cheers!”

“It’s Jillian,” Remus said, when they’d finished. “She’s done with me. And all because *someone* told her I was already engaged.”

“You’re engaged?! Oh my god… Can I be best man?” James gasped, while Lily whipped him playfully on the arm.

“He’s not really engaged,” she said quietly. “I just told Jillian he was so that she’d leave him alone. I can’t believe it worked, she so totally didn’t believe me before!”

Remus shifted from one foot to another. “Yeah, well… she definitely does now.”

“This is too funny,” James chittered. “Black! Come and get a load ‘a this!”

At James’ call, Remus shot upright, spraying Lily with the rain that had collected on top of his umbrella. He hadn’t seen Sirius get off the bus, but now that he were paying attention, he could see Sirius across the berm, standing next to Nydia.

Sirius threw a hand up in answer, and paused slightly when he noticed that it was Remus James were standing next to. Remus thought about throwing up a friendly hand of his own, but then Nydia tapped Sirius on the shoulder and said something into his ear that had him turning into her. He smiled, that amused smirk of his, and Remus felt his heart plummet.

“They certainly look like they had a good time…”

“Right?” James trilled. “I was gettin’ a bit worried about him—always spending all his time with you.” He elbowed Remus lightly in the stomach. “Guess we know he’s back to normal after all.”

“You’re always encouraging him,” Lily scoffed, as Nydia placed a peck on Sirius’ cheek and strolled away. “Just watch as he breaks her heart.”

“Nah, he won’t break it,” James said, “Nydia’s tougher than that. It’s why he said yes to her in the first place.”

Remus bit down on his thumbnail. *Dammit.*

“Can’t have five minutes without you interrupting,” Sirius said, as he wandered over. There, he looked Remus over. “Get caught in the rain, Lupin?”

“Fell in the lake, actually.”

The barest shadow of a smile crossed Sirius’ face, almost giving Remus hope, but it vanished by the time Lily was rounding on him.

“You fell in the *lake?!”*

“It’s not that big of a deal…” he murmured, suddenly more shy.

“Go on, tell him the good news, Moony!” James prodded. Sirius eyed them both.

“What news?”

Suddenly very nervous, Remus baulked, and it was Lily who stepped in.

“Remus is finally free of any and all persistent admirers!” She announced.

Sirius raised a brow. “You mean Stewart?” He said, and Lily nodded.

“You heard me, Jillian Stewart is no more! Remus is much too busy with Farrah to be bothered with silly school-girl crushes.”

“And by Farrah, you mean…?”

“His beautiful French fiancée, of course!" She chittered. "But be careful, she’s a secret. Wouldn’t want to embarrass him.”

“I’d say that ship’s sailed,” Remus muttered.

Raising his chin, Sirius slipped both hands in his pockets. “Great. Happy for you.”

“Me too,” James agreed, clapping a hand on both of their shoulders. As he did so, Remus nearly fumbled his albums, which he’d been keeping tucked under one arm.

“Got these in the village,” Remus said, passing the first record onto James and Lily to get a look.

“Sex Pistols—nice!” James declared. “Bet they’d be just mental to see live.”

“Yeah…” Sirius answered, keeping his hands in his pockets but peering over as though he didn’t want to appear too interested.

“Might be a bit wet,” Remus said. “But there’s also this.”

Trying to keep his fingers from trembling, he raised the other album, and Sirius’ eyes expanded to twice their usual size.

“Holy shit,” James gasped for him; “Is that a new Bowie record? Black, you think you would’ve told me it’d come out.”

“It hasn’t,” Sirius echoed. “Not until the end of next month.”

“Convinced the guy to give me his merchant’s copy,” Remus said, eagerly holding out. Sirius took the album and flipped it over, taking in Bowie’s black and white image.

“Fucking hell…”

“You’re still so full of surprises, Remus,” Lily giggled.

“Really is,” Sirius agreed quietly.

Trying not to let the comment get his hopes up, Remus cleared his throat. “Practically sold myself into servitude to get that, but you can call it an early birthday present.”

“You mean you got it for me?”

“Well, I didn’t get it for myself, did I? Figure you’re the only one in all of Scotland with a copy.”

“I…” Sirius bit his lip. “I can’t accept.”

“Sure you can, we keep our records in the same place anyway.”

Sirius looked like he wanted to argue, but if there was anything in the world he liked more than attention, it was Bowie.

“Thanks,” he said. “This is pretty fucking rad.”

“Don’t mention it.” Remus smiled, and Sirius returned the look. It was a chastened smile, but Remus took it as a good sign. Perhaps they weren’t entirely down the tubes then. If Sirius could forgive him for

Tomny and he could overlook Nydia then maybe they—

“Sirius, darling,” Nydia called; “we’re heading back to the common room now. Are you coming?”

Sirius raised his chin. “Yeah, be right there,” he told her. “Catch you guys back at the dorm.”

“Don’t stay out all night, tiger,” James laughed, slapping Sirius on the behind as he turned away. Sirius scoffed at him, before raising the record in Remus’ direction.

“Thanks again, Moons. Super cool.”

And just like that he was gone. Remus wanted to scream.

“Don’t be too disappointed, Moons,” James told him, as they headed back to Godric with Lily in tow. “It was good on you for trying. Black’ll come around, you’ll see.”

“And if he doesn’t, then we’ll just sue,” Lily added fondly.

His friends’ lighthearted sympathy aside, Remus was still lost. He’d known that things between him and Sirius weren’t just going to magically heal themselves after Jillian’s departure, but he’d been anticipating that it would at least make it easier to talk about. Judging from Sirius’ reaction though, it’d been a false hope.

“Did ya make a mistake, Lu?” Tomny asked later, when Remus had plucked up the courage to phone him. He'd been nervous ever since Tomny had seen him off at the station, like seeing him slip out of sight had been some great goodbye. He'd even avoided calling, afraid the line would come up dead again, but now Remus felt stupid. Tomny had picked up on the third ring, and he'd been the same as always. Friendly, kind. Just so Tom.

“… Yeah, I made a big fucking mistake..." Remus murmured. He heard Tomny sniff, then chuckle lightly.

“Little sop. Don't cry."

"I'm not crying!"

"Right, right. But all 'ah this is about that friend of yours, yeah? The tall glass ‘a water yer always goin’ on about… Sirius?”

Involves you too, he wanted to say. When he didn’t, Remus began to

gnaw on the inside of his cheek. He knew Tomny had a vague idea of what he meant by the relationship, but so far he'd been tip-toeing around actually calling it what was. He supposed the kiss had been evidence enough.

"Yeah, that's him."

"Orright then, so whatchu gonna do to fix it?" It was such a Tom answer; you break it, you fix it.

"I dunno. Doesn't really feel like a 'right' or 'wrong' thing."

"Those are 'ard, them." Tomny stopped to cough. "But nah' impossible. S'like when yer feelin' down, and you want to feel up again, right? But ya've mixed up all yer pills—just gotta figure out which one's which. Trial 'n error, 'n all that jazz."

"I feel like I've just been 'erroring'."

"That's 'cause yer 'ere, whingin' to me. You should be out there—whingin' to 'im."

"You saying you don't want to talk to me?"

"Nice try, ya plonker. I'm just no good wiff love advice."

The comment made Remus spin around to make sure he was alone in the hallway. He was; everyone else was taking up space in the common room, or else had moved on upstairs for the night.

Remus exhaled, jaw trembling. "You know I'm not gay, right, Tom? I'm just sorta… queer for him…" He laughed suddenly, ashamed. "Does that even make any sense?"

Tomny was quiet for a moment, then; "Well, who am I to tell ya what you are and what you aren't? S'long as yer you, I'm satisfied."

Like with so much of Tomny, Remus carried the conversation with him as he laid down in bed that night. Sirius had always loved him for who he was, he knew that, but as he stared up at the roof of his four-poster, he began to recall all the times he *couldn't.* Couldn't love Sirius as he was, or more properly, couldn't himself as he loved Sirius. Over and over again it went;

Sirius, I can't do that.
Sirius, I can't be *that.*

But what could he do—who could he be? It made him wonder if Sirius had ever asked himself the same things.

The next morning, Remus approached Sirius in the common room. He had an entire spiel prepared, but Sirius had always been quicker to the mark. Before Remus could even begin to explain himself, Sirius was charging on ahead.

“Haven’t seen my light, have you?” He asked. He was busy rooting through the cushions of every sofa in the room. He’d already amassed an impressive collection of shrapnel, lint, and the odd calcified biscuit or two.

“Here, use mine.” Remus felt for his pockets. He had a lighter, but realised at the last second that it was the one Tomny had given him. Somehow it felt like a faux pas. “Er… never mind, I don’t have one after all.”

“S’fine. I’ll ask James for his.” Sirius piled the cushions back into place and moved to go around him. Seeing his chance slip away before his eyes, Remus grabbed his wrist. He dropped it quickly, too conscious of any prying stares and how Sirius might react to their first touch in days.

“Can I talk to you?” He murmured.

Sirius looked at his hand, the one he’d used to grab him, and then shrugged. “I dunno, can you?”

Remus didn’t even have time to read too far into the hostility; James and Peter appeared in the room’s doorway and called them away to breakfast, and the opportunity was gone.

In the breakfast line up, Marlene fell into step with him.

“You look terrible,” she said.

“Love ya too, Cherry.”

“Did you get any sleep at all?”

“Not really.”

“What's a'matter then? Nightmares keeping you up?”

“No. I don't—"

"Right, right. Forgot—you don't dream. Guess that extends to nightmares too. How lucky."

"It's a small mercy in a world so cruel."

Marlene smirked at his sarcasm and reached for a bowl. "Fry-ups again," she complained, as Remus loaded his plate with bacon and sausages galore.

"Since when do you not like back bacon?" He sneered, tucking a piece between his teeth as he moved up the line. Marlene followed, grimacing and pinching him on the side for good measure.

"For your information, I've gone green," she said.

"As in vegetarian?"

"Yes!" She illustrated by ladling her bowl full of over-ripe fruit salad. "It's so much better for the environment. You'd switch over too if you paid any attention to the abysmal conditions that our country's livestock suffer. I learned about it in Morocco, their traditional farming habits are so much more sustainable than ours, though they are driven mostly by exports. But did you know that pigs here—just like the one on your plate—have been genetically altered to such a degree that they reach slaughtering age before they're even six months old?"

Remus swallowed his bacon. "Ohhh-kay… and you enjoy those strawberries picked by five year-olds in Peru."

"You just pulled that out of your arse," Marlene grumbled. She might've said more on the matter, had Chastity Bell not cut between them in the line. The sight alone had Remus backing away, but it wasn't him she'd come for. Chastity stepped right up to Marlene, tossing her long brown hair over one shoulder, one hand on her hip.

"You're a real bitch, you know that?"

"Good morning to you too," Marlene replied, dully.

" 'Good morning'?" Chastity echoed, furious. "How dare you—what the actual fuck was that yesterday? You just left me there! What—thought it would be funny to walk away without saying anything?"

"You didn't seem all that bothered when you were making eyes at Chris Lambert from across the room."

“Oh? So that’s what this is about?!”

Remus was flummoxed. He didn’t think Marlene and Chastity had ever said a willing word to one another. Their conversation wasn’t exactly friendly, but it implied a little more than passing gestures. As he stared, along with several other kids just waiting to collect their breakfasts, Marlene caught his eye and quickly cleared her throat.

“Could you go?” She asked Chastity boldly. “You’re causing a scene.”

“Oh, *I’m* causing a scene?”

“Yes, as per usual, and I… Well, I don’t much feel like arguing about some dumb group project in the breakfast line either.”

Chastity’s eyes doubled in size. “Group project? *Ugh.* Grow up, Marlene.”

She stalked off, and Remus thought it was lucky that Marlene hadn’t ended up wearing her tea. “What was that about?” He asked.

“You heard—class project,” Marlene mumbled, budging him further up the line. “She wanted me to do all the work. I told her tough. Just forget about it.”

“Alright…” Remus turned back to his tray, picking an apple off the buffet table. “Look, I’m green,” he said, mostly trying to cheer her up. He took a bite and she smiled at him.

“Do you want to hang out today?” She asked. “It feels like it’s been so long since it was just the two of us.”

“Uhm, sure. What do you want to do?”

“Anything. We can even skip mass.”

“Skip mass?” Remus gaped. “Who are you and what have you done with Marlene McKinnon?”

“Sorry to surprise you,” Marlene giggled. “The world is a very vast place, Remus. You learn things when you venture out, sometimes even become anew.”

“Only seventeen, and yet so wise.” Remus glanced across the hall, to where James, Sirius, and Peter were sitting at their usual table. They were currently using the back of Barty Crouch’s head for target practice, firing bits of cereal across the room with plastic forks while

Lily groaned and Lottie reapplied mascara in her favourite compact mirror.

“They’ll never change, will they?” Marlene sighed, after following his gaze.

Setting the apple down on his tray, Remus turned to her. “You’re right, it has been a while. C’mon, let’s you and me hang out.”

The grin that split her face was warmer than the sun.

With the late-September storm still beating their windows and nothing else to do on a Sunday other than skip communion and be irresponsible, Remus and Marlene packed up their things and made the trek across campus to their old spot.

“I don’t want to stay at the dorm,” Marlene explained, shouting over the noise of the rain. “Mary’s bringing Petyr back and I can’t stand the guy.”

“Does that mean the two of you fought?” He called back.

“Only a little.” She raised the umbrella so he could keep dry. “Did you and Sirius have a row? Things have felt a little tense between the two of you.”

“They’re fine,” he’d said, steering her inside.

Tucked up on their little window seat, legs all a-jumble, Remus stared out at the storm. The flower gardens they overlooked had been battered to a muddy pulp, but such was the way in Scotland.

“Alright!” Marlene announced with a tired sigh, as she snapped her book shut. “Twenty words or less—go.”

“Nah, you first,” he insisted, having been waiting for her to finish. “I wanna hear this.”

Setting aside the book he’d leant her, Marlene rolled her eyes and held up her hands to count. “Alright, let’s see then… Gonzo eats entire sheet of acid. Stupidly tries to electrocute himself… uh…”

“Careful, you only have nine words left,” he teased.

“Shaddup… Erm… Oh! Threatens Duke guy with knife. Passes out in catatonic despair.”

“That was twenty-one words!”

“Eh, I’m pretty sure it was twenty.”

Remus laughed. “ ‘Catatonic despair’?”

“It’s your book!” Marlene raised it like it were a dead rat she’d found drowned in the eaves gutter. “ ‘Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas’,” she scoffed; “What in God’s name would’ve made you want to buy this book?”

“I enjoy fear and loathing, it’s very relatable.”

“Mhm, sure.”

“You said you liked the last chapter.”

“I did like it—because I heard only twenty words of it.”

He chuckled while reaching into the bag of crisps Marlene had brought with them. Dusting his hands off after, he said; “Alright, my turn then. Let’s hear what your chosen pinnacle of literary genius had to offer.”

As Marlene sat up in earnest, Remus cleared his throat; *“Ahem!”* He began flipping through the pages, before becoming suddenly nervous; “Erm… so this chapter, it…”

“Are you counting those as part of your twenty?”

“No! It’s just…” He stared at the page. “It’s talking about how aliens shag.”

Marlene laughed at him. “It’s science fiction, Remus. These aren’t real people.”

“I know! But it was like…” he scanned the words; *psychosexual, ambisexual, manwoman;* “reading an essay on mating rituals.”

“That’s exactly what it was,” Marlene said, before sighing and taking the book. “This chapter was like an excerpt to help us understand why the Gethenians are the way they are. In their alien society, anyone can have children, therefore no one is a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. They simply exist as they are, all equal.”

“But the author uses ‘he’ for all of them.”

“It doesn’t matter, the Gethenians are genderless. See here—‘the Gethenians are not ‘it’, they are potentials’, as in ‘endless potential’. We’re just seeing them through the narrator’s eyes, and he’s a human and clearly a misogynist, so you see, the entire thing is about unpacking our own biases.”

“… You’ve read this before, haven’t you?”

She gave him an impish look, bending the worn-down spine between her hands. “A few times, yeah.”

“I love it,” Remus said, because he could tell she did too. “Read the next chapter and tell me what it’s about?”

She smiled. “Alright, but only for you.”

Remus took his own book back, flipping to the correct page. He’d just set eyes on the first paragraph when Marlene spoke again, calling him back;

“Remus, do you remember what you told me last year—before Christmas?”

He shook his head.

“You said that you should like someone as a person first. Do you still believe that?”

Remus considered; he’d been sixteen then, stupid and naive, and mostly pissed off over Sirius’ ever-rotating train of paramours. He hadn’t really liked any of the girls he’d seen over the summer either, had hardly known anything about them. But he liked Marlene, and Tomny, and Sirius. Oh how he liked them.

“I suppose there are some exceptions, but yeah, I still think it’s true.”

Marlene nodded thoughtfully, and then returned to her book.

They read on like that for much of the day, and into the afternoon and early evening. When they’d both learned a considerable amount of alien politics and the effects of LSD and other methamphetamines on the so-called American Dream, they left their little perch and retreated back into the reality of everyday life.

“I wanted to stop by the library on my way back, do you want to come?” Marlene offered, as they donned their jackets and wellies.

He went with her, because there really wasn't anything better to do other than return and play hopscotch around his and Sirius' broken feelings. While Marlene was off in search of some book on Advanced Theology, he meandered toward the reference section, innocently curious about some of the words he'd seen in the sexy, not-so-sexy alien book. It wasn't a queer thing, he told himself, it was a literature thing. And there was no reason to be afraid of a dictionary.

The first entry, 'psychosexual', led him to a lengthy definition coined by Freud that he had no real interest in further extrapolating upon, but the second word, 'ambisexual' did not seem to exist in the dictionary at all.

Returning the dusty tome to the shelf, Remus flicked his finger down the line of books until he found a dictionary that seemed more modern. Inside, he carefully scanned each page but again came up empty. Thinking that it was simply a word the author had come up with herself, he gave a last-ditch effort and flipped further back, to 'S'. There he found what he was looking for.

Sexuality */sekSHōōˈalədē/* n. (pl. ***-ities)*** ***1.*** *the quality or state of being sexual.* ***2.*** *identity in relation to the gender or genders of which they are typically attracted to; sexual orientation. (**See also:** heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality.)*

Remus gave pause. He read the definition over, then over again, until the thump of his heart in his ears had drowned out the rough purring of the library's overhead vents.

Gender or genders.

As in… more than one.

Slowly he began to to turn the page, then faster, until he'd dropped to his knees on the carpeted aisle and pinned the book to the floor. There he all but tore the feather-light pages from the spine, furiously trying to find it.

And then, like a lightbulb turning on, there it was.

Bisexual */bīˈsekSH(ōō)əl/* ajd. (pl. *-s)* ***1.*** *being sexually attracted to both men and women. (**Compare:*** heterosexuality, homosexuality.)

Remus couldn't breathe, but at the same time, he *could.* He was finally breathing. *Bisexual*—not straight, not gay, but somewhere in the middle... an option he'd never known he could have. It was like waking up after a coma and being told the meaning of life. Suddenly he had all the answers, and right there on that mulish grey library carpet, Remus felt more like himself than he ever had before.

Finally, an answer. Something to give people when they asked—*if* they asked—but more importantly, something to give to himself.

"What are you doing on the floor?"

Marlene had reappeared at the end of the aisle, clutching a fresh book to her chest. Remus looked up at her, alive and breathing and no longer a nameless thing. Glorious.

"Marls, have I ever told you how much I love you?"

She gave him a funny look. "Weirdo. C'mon, they're serving chocolate cake for afters."

Chapter End Notes

I personally prefer Bowie's live version of "I Wanna Be Your Dog" over the original, but that's just me, lol.

A 'mac' is a raincoat.
A 'brolly' is an umbrella.
'Wellies' are rain boots.
'Shrapnel' is loose change.
'Afters' is dessert.

The book Marlene is reading is "The Left Hand of Darkness" (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin. It's a science fiction novel that paved the way for many women writers. 100% would recommend to anyone interested in the genre.
Also, the actual definition of 'ambisexual' varies, but it would be either a subset of bisexual or defined even as 'of indeterminate gender; androgynous'.

And you're crazy if you aren't into Marlene/Chastity's subtle enemies to lovers to enemies like,,,, if I'm writing any chapter from another character's POV it's this one. Maybe in the summer, lmfao. See you next week.

Chapter 74: Up and Down, Interrupted

Chapter Summary

Chapter 74, in which Remus discovers that Snape makes a GREAT wingman.

Chapter Notes

Dedicating this chapter to Becca, who can always be counted upon to answer even my dumbest questions <3

CW: Lots of emotions in this one. Allusions to mental illness and neglect. Sexual content (non-descriptive).

Also, Remus alludes to his BPD without really having a word to call it what it is. I've had a few people ask me if Remus will ever fully 'know' about his disorders (as in a diagnosis) and yes, he will, but not for a while. If this is at all upsetting to you, I've placed '>>>' to mark the beginning of the conversation and '<<<' for the end portion for you to skip over. It's a very short portion, but I hope this helps.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well, I'm sorry for the things that I told you,
But words only go so far;
And if I had my way,
I would reach into heaven,
And I'd pull you down a star, for a present;
And I'd make you a chain out of diamonds,
And pearls from a summer sea;
But all I can give you is a kiss in the morning,
And a sweet apology…

- "Tomorrow's Gonna Be a Brighter Day" Jim Croce, 1972

Monday 19th September 1977

This was it, he'd decided—this was the upswing. Remus Lupin was finally going to get his life together. He woke up the morning more sure of anything he'd ever known; *this was it!* He was going to make

up with Sirius, prove that that the only person he was truly gone for was *him* and finally things would start to fall into place. He'd even taken the dictionary out of the library, which Ms. Pince only let him do because he was a prefect. He had everything now, everything to explain himself and what he'd been feeling. He still had to own up to the Tomny kiss, but he'd do it. He'd do it as many times as Sirius needed him to, because Sirius was worth every word.

He just wished Sirius was willing to make things a little bit easier.

After his discovery in the library, Remus had rushed back to the dorm and all but begged Sirius for a few minutes alone, but he'd been brushed off in favour of dinner and a rerun of *Pops*. Remus told himself to be patient, that eventually he and Sirius would be alone again and he could make everything clear. It was reassuring to know at least that Sirius was not spending all of his free time with Nydia, though whether that meant their date had gone well or not, he was not sure.

Come Monday, Remus felt like a shaken fizzy drink ready to burst. He'd tried again that morning to talk to Sirius—no dice—and now they were sitting in class, assigned a worksheet while Professor Bilshin took one of his so-called 'conference calls'. (Everyone knew this was just his way of saying he was stepping out for a mid-morning fag.)

Since no sane professor would dream of allowing any Marauder to sit within ten feet of one another, Remus had to turn around in his seat to watch Sirius from the front of the room. He looked handsome today, he noted, though Sirius looked handsome everyday—*the prick*. He and Marlene were working together, but while she'd already busied herself in work, Sirius appeared bored, sitting with his boots up on the desk, shirt untucked and tie loosened around his throat. As he distracted himself by balancing a pencil on his top lip, Marlene reached over and smacked him, muttering something Remus couldn't make out. Sirius just grinned at her, guilty, and Remus felt a pang of jealousy. At least those two got to be seat partners; he hadn't been so lucky.

"You should take a picture, Loony," Snape sneered, from the seat over.

Remus glared at him. Figured that out of all A-Level classes, he'd get stuck with Snape in Classics. "You should piss off, Snape," he told him, in no mood.

"I've yet to decide if it's distracting, watching you ogle your mates

from across the room, or just plain pathetic. Tell me, do you stare at everyone like a lovesick pansy?"

"Not everyone. Some people I stare at with disdain and loathing. You might even know some of them, you miserable toe rag."

Snape smirked, like he'd just won a prize at the faire, but despite the haughty reaction he turned back to his work and said nothing more. Remus was relieved, the last thing he needed was Snape noticing how much attention he was paying to those of the same gender. Still, too tempted, he glanced back at Sirius' seat once more and felt his heartbeat quicken when he realised that Sirius was staring back. He flashed a meek wave, which Sirius returned, more cool and collected than anything else.

Dickhead, Remus mouthed, rolling his eyes dramatically and jutting a thumb at Snape. Sirius smiled then, a small one, and mimed hanging by a noose around his neck that left Remus sniggering into his palm. It felt good—the reaction. It felt like them, and it gave Remus hope.

Today, he swore. *Today we fix this mess.*

And if he doesn't want you back? If he's tired of you?

Remus felt a chill. *Friends. Then we'll be friends. Anything is better than this.*

"Quiet down," Professor Bilshin called, reappearing in the classroom doorway. "Mr. Snape—eyes on your own paper."

Snape scowled, and Remus had just enough time to pocket a grin when Bilshin was calling his name.

"Lupin, come see me at my desk. I'd like to talk to you about this latest essay of yours."

"Get caught plagiarizing, Loony?" Snape asked.

"Piss off," Remus grumbled, getting up from his desk. He met his teacher at the front of the room, while Professor Bilshin leaned back in his cracked leather desk chair, holding his essay and peering at it through half-moon spectacles. Remus thought he smelt a lot like cheap cigars and stale sweat stains.

"I've read your essay," the professor said, stroking his stubbly chin. "What made you want to write on Pygmalion?"

Remus bit the inside of his cheek. "Just sorta popped into my head..."

"I haven't assigned the 'Metamorphoses' yet this term. Does this mean you've already read it?"

He nodded.

"All of it?"

"Uh... no, not all. Just some. What we have in the library."

Professor Bilshin eyed him warily.

"Is something wrong with the essay?" Remus asked. " 'Cause I made sure to list all my sources. I know it's mostly an opinion piece, but—"

"No, it's good," the professor said finally. He adjusted his glasses; " 'Pygmalion's Obsession, a Critique of Love as Justification for Hatred'. It's good. Captures the poem exquisitely. Have you considered continuing with Classics in university? I'd be willing to write you a letter of recommendation."

Remus' lips parted in surprise. It was a generous offer; other students would've leapt at the chance, but…

"I... Well, I wasn't exactly planning on going to university, sir."

"Pity." Bilshin set the essay down, before opening the bottom drawer of his desk and pulling out two books. "Here. Books Seven and Eight of the 'Metamorphoses'. These are my personal copies. Take them—have a read. Perhaps Medea or Odysseus will inspire you into writing an entrance essay or two."

He wanted to refuse, if not just to avoid raising the professor's expectations, but the library's collection on Ovid was incomplete, and Remus wanted badly to read them.

"Thank you, sir."

Bilshin dismissed him with a wave, and Remus quickly retreated to his desk, feeling somehow giddy. He mentally kicked himself for it. What use was academic validation if you were trying to become a rock star?

"Done being reamed out by Bilshin?" Snape sneered. "Your idiot friend, Black, left something on your desk, by the way."

Remus looked down to find that Snape was, for once, right. A note

had been left atop his textbook. Turning away so Snape wouldn't get a chance to spy, Remus unfolded it in his lap, heart racing.

Meet me in the west wing toilet before lunch. We need to talk. Alone. - S.

The note was hastily scribbled, but Remus hardly noticed. He was already spinning around in his seat to gape at Sirius. Apparently he'd meant to keep the whole thing under wraps though; instead of staring back, Sirius had challenged the guy behind him to an arm wrestling competition. He won—just barely—and afterwards Sirius looked up. Their eyes met, and he gave Remus a single quick nod, before turning back to Marlene.

Yes! Remus thought. *Finally!*

Finally they were going to clear the air. He'd get his chance to explain himself, and for once he and Sirius would be on the same page. It didn't matter if the 'we need to talk' drove fear down into his very bones, Remus was not going to let himself dwell on it. This could be good—great, even! They could be back to normal by dinner.

Invigorated by his and Sirius' mutual desire to get it all out on the table, it took nearly every shred of Remus' willpower to make it through his next two lessons. Once everyone else had broken off for lunch, he high-tailed it over to the west wing bathroom of the Gallilei Block where he found a ‘closed for cleaning’ sign hanging over the door. It was just like Sirius—fake everyone out to give them some privacy.

Pushing the door open, Remus made his way inside. “Sirius?”

Sirius was there already, sitting on one of the sinks and smoking. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Remus answered, suddenly nervous. “You… doing alright?”

“Yeah, fine. You…?”

“Mhm!”

The air turned awkward, and Remus wished he had thought of something else to say. His bag felt heavy on his shoulder, the weight

of the dictionary pulling him down like an anchor. Maybe he should just whip it out? Explain everything at once—or was that too crude?

Humming stiffly, Sirius hopped down from the sink, but leaned back against it. “I got your note. What d’you want to talk about that’s so urgent?”

Remus frowned. “What? I didn’t pass you a note.”

“Sure you did. You asked me to meet you here.”

“No.” He pulled his own note from his pocket, raising it for Sirius to see. “You asked me.”

Sirius took it, spreading the paper out between his beautiful fingers. “I didn’t write this.”

“Then who did?”

Just then a click sounded from behind them—the door. Remus turned and pushed one arm against it, but the lock had bolted shut from the outside.

“Fuck!” He cursed, as Sirius came to join him. They both threw their entire weight against it, but the door would not give. Outside, Remus could hear the faintest bit of laughter.

“I’ll bet it was Snape,” he growled.

“OI, SNIVELLY!” Sirius shouted, banging both fists against the door. “YOU LET US OUT OR I SWEAR I’LL TAKE THAT GREASY HEAD OF YOURS AND SHOVE IT RIGHT UP—”

“I’m not sure threatening him is the best way to get what you want,” Remus interjected.

“Well, what else should I do?” Sirius snapped. “Haven’t hardly spoken to the foul git since we got back!”

“Snape!” Remus cried, ignoring him; “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you’re making a mistake! Open the door now or you’re gonna regret it!”

“How’s that any different from my threat?”

“Yours was a promise of violence, I’m a prefect.”

“Oh, right. And shall I fetch your crown and sceptre, my lord?”

Remus scoffed, turning away from the door. “Of course we would end up fighting.”

“If you weren’t so easy to fight with,” Sirius grumbled.

“Piss off.”

“You piss off.”

“Ugh. You’re so bloody immature!” Feeling pouty, Remus turned around and scanned the toilet. The entire thing was outfitted in white tile like the London Underground and there was a single window overhead that let in the blue-cast of outside’s sunshine. It felt like last time, when he'd told Sirius about Tomny, and instantly Remus felt dread. There was a faint whistling coming from somewhere too, like air escaping. The pipes, maybe.

With nothing else to do, he crossed the bathroom and sat down against the far wall. Meanwhile, Sirius, who was still fighting with the door, spun round and frowned at him.

“What? You aren’t going to help me?”

“Help you do what?” Remus blagged. “He’s probably padlocked it. They do it at night so kids don't smoke in the toilets.”

“So we should yell, shouldn’t we? Hope someone hears us?”

“No one’s gonna hear us—they’re all at lunch. It’s why he waited. All you’re gonna do is give him the satisfaction of hearing you whine and cry.”

Unable to argue, Sirius grumbled something Remus couldn’t hear and thumped a fist against the door one last time for good measure.

“Best bet is to wait until the next bell and everyone heads to their next lesson,” Remus told him. “Here, come sit.”

He’d patted the ground next to him, but Sirius was stubborn. Instead he just returned to his earlier spot at the edge of the sink, still pinching his cigarette between two fingers. Remus didn’t let it bother him. At least he’d gotten what he wanted; they were alone.

“What’d you do to get on Snivilly’s bad side then?” Sirius asked.

“Your question implies that Snape must have a ‘good side’, which I’m positive he does not,” Remus answered.

“… I can’t believe you let him prank us.”

“You fell for the note too!”

Sirius took a long pull, appearing dismissive. “Guess it hardly counts as a prank… All he’s done is lock us in here.”

“Someone’ll find us eventually,” Remus said, then; “Aw, shit.”

“What?”

“… I’m supposed to be in the library.”

“Meeting Evans? Tell her it was Snivelly’s fault, she’ll understand, I’m sure.”

“No, it’s prefect duty. We cover Pince’s desk sometimes…” And Regulus was bound to kill him if he skipped out. Even if Regulus didn’t want him there, he wasn’t the type to give anyone a ‘get out of jail free’ card either. If he was to suffer, then Remus was too.

“Can’t believe you haven’t begged Minnie to let you off,” Sirius said, sounding almost amused.

“I have. She’s a menace.”

“Too right. But the fact that you’re still trying to contend with my baby brother? Now that’s pure masochism.”

“It’s not my fault. He might actually be more stubborn than you are, you know,” Remus replied. “Won’t accept help from anyone.”

“He’s a Black, stubborn is in his nature. They raise us on mules’ milk so that when we’re old enough we can ‘crush the common cow’.”

“That’s horrendous.”

“We’re a pretty horrendous bunch.” Sirius began swinging his feet out ahead of him, like a child on a swing. “So… How have you… been?”

After days of not talking, the question was as good as dangling a rope ladder into the bottom of a deep, deep pit. Remus grappled for it.

“Alright,” he answered, dishonestly. “You?”

Sirius shrugged once more. “Fine. You heard anything from your dad or Sandra?”

“Been ignoring all their calls,” he said. “Have you… heard anything from your parents?”

Sirius shook his head. “Glad for it though, who’d want to hear from them.”

“They’re still your parents.”

“Could say the same thing to you.”

“Right…” Remus looked down at his lap. “Look, I’ve been doing some thinking, and—”

“Prongs has been talking about Christmas,” Sirius said suddenly. “It’s a ways off, but Effie keeps bothering us to get our plans together. I think even Evans’ll come. Effie says you should too.”

Remus bit his lip. “Really? You want me to come?”

“Well, they invited you, didn’t they? Should be a good time. We can eat mince pies and go carolling.”

“You actually want to sing Christmas carols in public?”

“Fuck no, but we can throw snowballs at the bible-thumpers who do.”

Remus smiled weakly. “Sirius—”

“You should come!” He said again. “Let Giles pick you up or whatever, but don’t stay with your bloody dad. I don’t care how hot Sandra is.”

“She's not hot!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever helps you sleep at night. But I’m serious—*heh* —James keeps saying it’ll be the best Christmas ever, all of us in the same place… Should be nice.”

Remus thought about going back to the Potters’, to that little beach-themed bathroom. It all felt rather null when he imagined what it would be like not to be able to touch Sirius—*he’d let him touch him, right?*

“We’re on the ground floor, you think you can boost me through that window?” Sirius asked.

Remus glanced up. The window overhead wasn't that small, certainly wide enough to fit a body through—but he wasn't done. They hadn't even begun to fix things.

"Reckon we could talk first?"

"Too starving," Sirius dismissed, grinding out his cigarette and hopping down from the sink. "Here, help me up. Swears I'll come back for you."

"I just think we should—"

Sirius gave a great sigh, tossing his head back. "Look, I know it's awkward, but I really don't want to do this right now."

Oh. Remus stood, feeling pathetic. "When then?"

"When are we gonna talk?"

"Yes. *When?"*

Sirius pressed his lips into a thin line. "Later. Just not here. Now will you help me?"

Defeated once again by Sirius' blithe intemperance, Remus sighed and locked his fingers together, dropping down into a squat. Sirius came forward, using Remus' hands and shoulders to push himself up into the air. Remus struggled a bit, but mostly because it was the closest he and Sirius had been in days. Feeling his thighs pressed against his shoulder... his heart began to beat loudly in his chest.

"Hold on, latch is being stubborn," Sirius grunted.

"Hurry up, you're no feather."

"Try bracing yourself against the bloody wall then." Sirius continued to fight with the window, almost losing his balance. He leaned one hand on the top of Remus' head to catch himself, and Remus immediately felt his patience thin.

"Hurry up!"

"I am! Lift me higher!"

"Ugh—! How 'bout you grow some!"

"How 'bout you grow less!"

“HA! Says the guy who secretly likes it when I lean down to him so he can whisper in my ear.”

Sirius sputtered; “I–I—*geh!*—I do not!”

“You totally do!”

“Shut it, bean pole! Just fucking lift me, already!”

“Bean pole?! *You…”* Bracing both legs, Remus used all of his strength to shove Sirius upwards. Unfortunately, he had just gotten the window open, and as Sirius cried out in victory, his forehead clipped the edge of the open frame and he hissed horribly.

“FUCK! Thanks for that, you bloody—”

“You told me to lift!”

“Not like that!”

“How else would I lift? What, did you expect me to fly you out the—”

“Shh! Shut it!” Sirius ordered, then; “... Do you hear that?”

Remus drew up short. With his head pinned between Sirius’ thighs and the wall, he could just make out a sort of high-pitched whistling noise, like the sound of air escaping. He'd heard it earlier, only now it was much louder, almost threatening.

“Is it coming from outside?”

“Nah, doesn't sound like it.” Sirius craned his head. “I think it’s coming from one of the stalls.” He began to wriggle back and forth and Remus let him down again.

“Oi,” Sirius called, “if anyone’s in there, you better come out now!”

The idea that someone had been hiding alongside them the entire time was horrifying. Remus hadn’t exactly exposed them—Sirius had never let him get that far—but the conversation was certainly worth a rumour or two.

Slowly they both approached the middle stall. The hissing noise kept up, even got louder, like it was building to some sort of crescendo.

“Open it,” Sirius said.

“You open it.”

“But what if it’s a bomb?”

Remus suppressed an eye-roll. “It isn’t a bomb.” He reached forward, nudging the stall door open. “Someone’s just probably busted the lever —what the hell?”

Sirius peered over his shoulder. “What the fuck is that?”

If he were being honest, Remus wasn’t sure what it was. Someone had stuffed the toilet bowl with an array of rainbow-coloured balloons, though the one on top was slowly deflating, causing the hissing noise from earlier. But that was not even the strangest part; the psycho had also left a burning candle atop the toilet roll, like some gross, alternative seance. It was mostly burned down now, but leaning up against it was a single plastic tube, just big enough for the candle to fit through. It looked like some sort of make-shift slide, all meant to act like a—

"It's a fuse," Sirius said. And he was right. The entire time they'd been locked in the bathroom and fighting, the candle had been slowly burning down, and when the weight of the wax had finally boiled over and the bog roll began to tip, they had a front row seat.

Remus saw it in slow motion. The candle tipping—it falling. His first instinct was to reach out and grab it, but luckily for him, Sirius had already called the whole thing. He wrenched him back, probably saving his hands, as the balloons burst and created a fireball big enough to fill the entire bathroom stall. The heat was insane—it was gas, *someone had filled the balloons with gas!*

They hit the back wall, falling on top of each other and cowering beneath the sinks as the fire temporarily blinded them. Pieces of shattered toilet bowl whizzed past, pinging off the tiled walls and their bodies with bruising force. The entire explosion lasted only for about half a second, but what they were left with was a blackened ceiling, a flooding toilet bowl, and two rather shocked expressions.

"It was a bomb," Sirius breathed, sitting up from Remus and pushing his hair from his eyes. *"It was a bloody bomb!"*

"Well, it was..." It took Remus a moment to get his mouth working again. "It—It... yeah. Bomb."

There was a thumping noise—several running feet in the corridor

outside—and then the sound of a key sliding home in a lock. The door opened, and it was Professor Bilshin staring them down, along with a huddle of several dozen shocked students.

"I hope you boys have an explanation for this," the professor said grimly.

Sirius just looked to Remus, his expression a cross between fury and disbelief, and as Bilshin ordered them to their feet, it occurred to Remus that perhaps they were not the only ones at Hawkings capable of a revenge prank.

* * *

Two Hours Later...

“He could’ve killed us!”

“But he didn’t.”

“I think my bloody eyebrows are partly singed off—how could McGonagall not have believed us?!”

“I wonder.”

“You know,” Sirius seethed, already up to his elbows in soap suds. “It wouldn’t kill you to be on *my* side for once.”

Remus raised his hands, which were currently dripping water onto the floor while donned in a pair of yellow marigolds. “Trust me, Sirius, I have never been more on your side.”

Scowling at him, Sirius returned to his punishment. The pair of them were to keep scrubbing until every vial, beaker, flask, and cup in the entire science wing were squeaky clean. It wouldn’t have been so bad, except Snape kept finding more glassware for them to scrub.

“Foul little git…” Sirius grumbled. “Pretty sure he’s making ‘em dirty on purpose at this point!”

Remus didn’t have the energy to agree or argue. It'd have been a fitting punishment had they really been the ones at fault, but despite their proclaimed innocence, they'd been caught red-handed at the

scene of the crime. And crime it was.

Along with the toilet, several of the bathroom's pipes had burst, leaving a small ocean to leak out into the hallway of the west wing. The note, the lock on the outside bathroom door—all of it had been strategically planned. Of course it hadn't been enough just to lure them to the toilet and lock them inside, instead Snape had designed his own trick to give them a real fright and consequently lay the blame directly at their own feet. The balloons had been filled with gas from the school's bunsen burners and set up with a controlled flame just like a bomb with a timer. Luckily no one had been hurt, but the same couldn't be said for the poor bathroom. As far as Remus could tell, McGonagall had been merciful. Without any real proof that Snape had done it, she'd had no choice but to punish them. On the bright-side, it meant Remus did not have to spend his afternoon being hissed at by Regulus, though this did not seem to deter Sirius from doing just that.

"You've missed a spot," he said, handing Remus back a glass beaker he'd only just set out to dry.

"Stop nit-picking me!"

"I wouldn't have to if you'd just do it right! Or is even that beyond the capabilities of the great Remus Lupin?"

"And since when have you been such an expert on washing dishes, you *spoiled—!"*

"Ah, listen to you two, quarrelling like an old married couple." Snape strolled into the science classroom, clutching a tray of filthy beakers and grinning like the cat who got the cream. He set the tray down across from them and crossed his arms smugly. If Remus blamed McGonagall for anything it was that she'd allowed Snape be the one to oversee their punishment.

"I wouldn't try coming near, Snivelly," Sirius growled; "There's more than enough hazardous material in here to deal with the likes of you." He followed the threat up by brandishing a cracked test tube, which they'd already broken against the side of the sink.

"Don't," Remus snapped, taking the glass from him. "You'll just hurt yourself."

"Yeah, suppose that's exactly what he wants," Sirius snarled.

Snape only grinned righteously. “I’m glad McGonagall’s finally seen what a pair of wash-outs you are. Maybe next time she’ll have you shipped off for good.”

“There won’t be a next time, Snape!” Sirius shouted, as Snape set the tray of dishes down beside the rest and turned to go. “Mark my words, your greasy days are numbered!”

“Professor Slughorn wants all of these finished by suppertime,” Snape called flippantly. “I’ll be back to make sure you get the job done. Best work hard or you’ll be here through the night, *ha!”*

As the other boy retreated down the hall, his nasty cackling following him like an echo, Sirius slapped his hands back down into the sink. His frustration only succeeded in splashing Remus across the chest, making him just as irritated.

“Watch it, will you? This water’s disgusting!”

“I hate him,” Sirius seethed.

“No, you hate that he *beat* you.”

“I can hate more than one thing at a time! Like you, for example.”

“Oh? You hate me?”

“You’re not exactly my favourite person at the moment, no!”

“Well that’s good, ‘cause I hate you too.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

With a sharp huff, Sirius began scrubbing another beaker. “… Snape’s a fucking arsehole.”

“Right piece ‘a work,” Remus agreed, busy scrubbing his own. “Probably bathes in bleach.”

“He doesn’t bathe. Maybe he drinks it.”

Remus felt a smile tug at his lips. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend…*

“We could pay him back, you know,” he suggested. “Just a little…”

That got Sirius' attention.

"How?"

Remus glanced down—at the sludge that had collected at the bottom of his sink, practically clogging the drain. "I just mean, who *knows* what's in this stuff."

Sirius grinned. "Moony, my dear, I think I'm experiencing what the people call déjà vu."

They worked quickly, setting their quarrelling aside long enough to fetch a bucket and chair. By the sink, Remus ladled great scoops of soapy water out of the sink, leaving behind just the grey ooze at the bottom. "Feels like silt," he said, "like mud, mostly."

"Knew it, he's just dirtying them on purpose," Sirius grumbled, as he used his gloved hands to scoop the sludge into a large bucket. "You sure he'll fall for it?" He said later, as he manoeuvred the bucket up onto the top of the doorway.

"He'll fall for it," Remus said, holding the chair and helping Sirius down when they were finished. The plastic pail teetered ominously on the edge of the open door, its yellow colour shadowed with the threat of all the nastiness it held within. It was certainly childish—not at all up to the Marauders' usual standards, but it was good for short notice.

"Hope you enjoy your shower tonight, Snivelly," Sirius said, standing back to admire their handiwork. As he did so, Remus couldn't help but admire him. The sharpness of his jaw, the way his hair curled perfectly around his ears, and the three little moles there, like a scattered constellation.

"I don't actually hate you," Remus said. "Just… so you know."

Sirius looked at him, and for the first time in days it felt like they were really seeing each other.

"Me neither," he said.

"I was just angry."

"Me too."

"I miss you."

Sirius came up short then, and Remus scrambled to fill the gaps. "I've

got something to tell you, if you'll just *listen—"*

"Moony." Sirius looked up, covering his face. "I don't—I don't think I can do this right now."

"Then when?! Now—later? Because if it's not soon, then something's gonna give, and I'm afraid it's gonna be me."

Sirius pulled his hands away, looking sad and frustrated. "I don't know how to talk about these things," he confessed. "I'm not James or Peter —I'm definitely not Evans or McKinnon, and if this is how we have to do it then I'd rather we just fizzled out. Less fighting that way."

"I don't want to fight," Remus pleaded. "Not anymore, and if you'll please just listen, I think we could sort it out—really!"

"Have you sorted out what it is you want then?"

"Yes!"

Sirius let out a breath. "So have I."

> > >

It might not be you, the voice warned. *You could've still ruined it all.*

Then what else is there to lose? Remus replied.

“I can’t really explain it,” he said to Sirius, desperately. “But I think something’s wrong with me. I just get… nervous? No—*wrong*. I feel wrong all the time. Tired and empty, and I used to think the only one who could make it better was you... but I think it’s just me, Sirius. I’m empty because of me.”

“You’re not empty, Moons.”

“No, but I am. And that's just part of it. Some days I even wake up feeling full, like today. But when I’m not… It’s like I look for it in other people. In you, and in… him. Because you're full, Sirius.”

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"Look, Moony—”

“I know I fucked up big time.”

Sirius gave a dry chuckle. “Yeah, we’ve been over that part…”

“J-Just please! Please let me finish?” Remus pleaded. “There’s still so much to say, and I haven't even apologised yet.”

He appeared surprised at first, but slowly Sirius acquiesced. He stepped back, leaning one hip against the counter, while Remus tried his best to psyche himself up. He’d never been especially self-aware, but if vomiting up these thoughts and feelings had even a chance of fixing things, then he’d babble until the sun went down.

“I fucked up, kissing Tomny. Even more so, I think, with the way I told you. I should’ve admitted it right away—told you when it happened. But I felt guilty and I—well, I just wanted us to be okay for a little while! I really hate not being okay with you, Sirius.”

Sirius glanced down at the ground. “I hate not being okay with you too…”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Remus said; “I might never know, but I like you for you, not for what you can give me or how it’d make me look. I like you for the way you treat your friends, and the devious way you plan pranks, and the way you take a sad thing and make it bearable—every time! You Sirius! *You* make me feel like the luckiest person in the world, and I could never, ever hate you. I’m sorry if how I’ve been acting has made you feel even the tiniest bit otherwise, but I want to hold your hand. *God*—do I want to.”

Sirius shook his head like he didn’t believe him, but then startled both of them when he laughed. “You’re too good at that,” he moaned, covering his face again. “When’s it bloody gonna be my turn to apologise with some grand confession?”

“You could try right now,” Remus said, laughing nervously and on the verge of tears once again. "Not that you... you know."

Sirius pulled his hands down, exhaling heavily. “I won’t apologise for being upset—”

“You don’t have to.”

“—But… I underestimated you, I think. I know that none of this has to do with me—that it’s not me you’re ashamed of.”

It’s yourself. The words seemed to hang in the air. And Remus nodded, because of course Sirius was right.

“Earlier in the toilet, I thought you were going to tell me that you

didn't want to be with me anymore," Sirius said. "Was I wrong?"

"What? No!" Remus gasped; "I mean—yes! I wasn't going to say that at all, I only meant to tell you that… Tomny is my best friend, my *oldest* friend, but you... I'm so grateful for you, Sirius. You don't just make me whole, you make me better."

Sirius wiped beneath his nose, then the corners of his eyes. "You're patient."

"What?"

"I love it about you—that you're so patient. Even when you're griping and grumbling, you're patient with me. With everyone. And you always tell things how they are, not just how they appear, but you never intentionally hurt anyone's feelings. And you have great taste in music—even if you can't stand more than three Bowie songs in a row."

"I would say three is generous."

Sirius smiled, hopelessly. "And you're so fucking tall. You're like a giant, but you never make anyone feel small. People feel comfortable around you, it's why they like you instantly. It's why strangers talk to you in the street. You've a trusting face."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Dunno," he shrugged, stepping forward and closing the space between them. "But I love it about you. I love all those things. And I love you."

"I love you too, Sirius."

Sirius raised a hand, trailing it across Remus' forehead and pushing a curl out of his eyes. Slowly, as Sirius' thumb dipped to trace the scar over his nose, Remus reached out and grabbed him gently by the hips. His hands were shaking, and he didn't even care. *Oh, how he'd missed this.*

"I forgive you," Sirius said, after a long moment in which they just held each other. "And I believe you too. I know that if you could do it over again, it'd be different. I believe you, Remus."

Remus felt like he could've held up the world. But he had to know.

“Sirius, I'm not angry, but I need to ask... All that stuff with Nydia…?”

Sirius’ expression fell slightly. “You were right," he said glumly, hands still cupping Remus' face; "It was only about making you jealous. I thought giving you a taste ‘a your own medicine would make me feel better, but it didn’t. I apologised to Nydia for it after we got back from the village. And I’m sorry for doing it.”

“You were never serious about her then?”

“No. And I didn’t kiss her, in case you were wondering..."

He had been wondering, of course he had, and the relief when he found out he was wrong was imminent. Remus let his head fall forward, until his forehead met Sirius' and they were both laughing.

"Can I kiss you, Sirius?"

Sirius smiled. "Thought you'd never ask."

In a second arms were around his neck, and Remus felt lips on his own. Sirius' lips. Perfect, soft, right—how right it felt to be held by him. To be kissing *him.* They went slow; the same sort of clumsy as their very first time, but sure enough Sirius' mouth began to open wider—his tongue pushing deeper. Remus didn't want to pull away, but there was one more thing left to discuss.

“I found something,” he said, when he'd finally managed to pry the two of them apart. Sirius watched breathlessly as he turned for his bag, and the look he gave him when he returned with the half-soaked dictionary was surely a sight to behold.

"Did you take that from the library? Pince's likely to skin you alive."

Remus chuckled. "Might be worth it," and pressed the heavy book into Sirius' hands. Sirius stared at it.

“Why are you handing me a dictionary?”

“Just—” Remus sighed, opening it to the correct page; “Read there.”

A moment. A breath. Then;

“ ‘Bi… sexual’?”

Sirius looked up.

"What's this?

“I think it's what I am, Sirius,” Remus said—*believed.* “I think I finally figured it out.”

Sirius' brow furrowed. “But… I'm a guy. And... Tomny’s a guy?”

“I know!" Remus half-laughed. "That’s just half of it, you see? *Bisexual* —as in both. I could like both, and it doesn't even have to do with Tomny. It’s me. I’m… this.”

It seemed as though the cogs were moving behind Sirius’ eyes. “Huh,” he murmured. “So not gay…?”

“Not all the way, anyway…” He rubbed his hands together anxiously. “Does it make sense?”

Sirius read the page over again. “I-I mean… sure, yeah? Why wouldn’t it?”

Remus realised his jaw was trembling. “I’m not gay,” he said. “But you… are, aren’t you? Like... fully queer?”

Now it was Sirius’ turn to look nervous. He clutched the dictionary tightly, before shaking his head. *“Bloody hopeless you are,"* he muttered. "Of course I’m fucking gay. Are you blind?”

Remus suddenly felt very stupid. "No! I just thought that maybe if I was—*this,* then you... And there were all those girls... Man, it just felt like maybe you could…”

“No,” Sirius said firmly. “I’m a queer, Moony. A poof. A bloody shirt-lifter. Never felt a thing for a girl in my life.”

“Never? Not with Kimmy or Chastity or any of the others? Like—not with Mary?”

“Nah. I liked being with them, but not being *with* them, ya know?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Feels a bit weird to have to say it. After—you know—shagging for this long.”

"What can I say, I like to give people the benefit of the doubt."

"Ha. Idiot." Sirius kissed him again, using one hand to pin Remus in

place by the collar of his shirt. As they snogged, the warmth spread until Remus could feel his heartbeat in every inch of his body.

“Sirius," he mumbled against his lips; "if you’ll still have me, I want you to be my boyfriend.”

There was a moment’s pause, and then Sirius pulled away. “Actually?”

“Yes." *A thousand times yes.* "I’m sorry it took me so long to get the words out, but I want you all to myself, forever.”

“I won’t share you,” Sirius swore. “If you’re mine, you’re mine for good.”

“Yes.” *Please.* “Please.”

“No more girls—no more Tomny. None. Just us.”

A nod. “Just us.”

Looking almost shy—and Sirius was *never* shy—Sirius snapped the ruined dictionary shut and tossed it onto the nearest table. “I suppose then,” he started, “that this must mean we’ve fully made up.”

“I hope so."

“Does this mean I get a make-up kiss from my boyfriend?"

Remus felt his mouth go a bit dry at the word 'boyfriend'. Who knew it'd be so nice to hear him say it.

"Haven't I already been giving you make-up kisses?"

"No," Sirius scoffed; "I was giving *you* pity kisses. Obviously."

Cheeky prick. Remus leaned in, already reaching for Sirius’ waist again, but before he could get close enough to brush their lips together, a voice rang out;

“I hope you haven't started cleaning up!” Snape called, as he pushed open the classroom door. “Because I’ve got plenty more where—”

The bucket tipped, flooding the spot where Snape stood and leaving him covered from head-to-toe in muck. In the same magnificent cascade, the sludge arched out across the science room floor, and Sirius leapt up onto the desk to avoid having his shoes ruined. “It fucking worked!” He cried, delight plain in every word. Across the

room, Snape was not so pleased. He began spitting, screaming as he wiped the wet grime from his eyes.

"Fucking bastards!" He wailed. "I'll kill you! I'll—I'll have your badge for this, Lupin, you fucking lunatic!"

"You're welcome to it," Remus said, already cracking up.

"Ooh, hold that pose, Snape!" Sirius began to play at looking around. "Now, where did I leave that camera?"

Snape fled, howling about how they'd only made more mess for themselves, but Remus wasn't the least bit bothered. With a sickening squelch, the door fell closed and he had Sirius pinned up against one of the tables in an instant.

"You're too devious," he murmured, hands already laced into black locks. "What'll I ever do with you?"

"Mmm, dirty talk already, Moons?" Sirius hummed, suddenly fisting the front of Remus' shirt. "I think you'll find that you already know exactly what to do with me, Mr. Boyfriend."

It was insanity—they'd only just gotten rid of their worst enemy and it was broad daylight in the middle of a public classroom—but Remus was *up*. Both physically and metaphorically. Today he wasn't empty, and for however long it lasted, he wanted to enjoy it.

"Trousers—*off,"* Sirius grunted into his mouth.

"We can't fuck in the middle of the science wing," Remus said back, though he did begin fighting with the buttons of his shirt at the same time.

"Not fuck," Sirius corrected, as he turned his mouth into the crook of Remus' neck; "just everything else."

Lord.

As lips and tongue began to dance their way across the hollow of his throat, Remus tipped his head back and moaned. He heard Sirius hum back, obviously thrilled, and then a hand suddenly found itself clasped tightly over the crotch of his trousers. Flinching at first, Remus shook his head before clasping Sirius around the jaw and pulling him back until they were nose-to-nose.

“Devious.”

Sirius clicked his tongue. “Do something about it, stud.” He blew in Remus’ face like a taunt. “I dare you.”

He puckered, so, *so* pleased. “I’m not your toy, Sirius Black. You can’t just—”

Sirius squeezed and Remus flinched again.

“Ah!”

“You were saying?”

Remus let out a heavy breath, and then a staccato-like laugh. “Alright,” he nodded. “Alright.” Then, keeping Sirius in place against the table, he prised his boyfriend’s hand away from his trousers and slowly bent down.

Sirius’ eyes flashed greedily, and then he was biting his lip. “Oh fuck, Moony…”

That was another Remus loved about Sirius; he was so articulate in bed.

* * *

“Think Snape’ll tell McGonagall what we did?” Remus asked later, as they emerged from the Gallilei Block into the cool night. Snape had been right about one thing—cleaning up the aftermath of their gag had taken quite a while. They’d scrubbed right through dinner, and now Remus was left wondering if they’d be able to scrounge anything up in the Godric kitchenette. Soup, maybe. Tea, definitely. Toast and biscuits if they were lucky.

“Nah,” Sirius said. “It’d mean he’d have to admit to getting fooled again. He won’t say anything.”

Nodding, Remus looked down between them and reached for Sirius’ hand.

“Are you sure?” Sirius asked, when their fingers were intertwined.

“No one’s around,” Remus said, gesturing to the darkness. “And besides, I want to hold my boyfriend’s hand.”

“Oh.” He could’ve sworn he saw Sirius blush. “Well, I suppose that’s fine then.”

Remus felt his heart skip, and then he thought he should ask that fatal question. “Sirius, does this mean we're really dating?”

Sirius whipped his head up. He blinked at him for a moment, then he raised their clasped hands and bit Remus right on the wrist.

“OW! What—?”

"Are we dating? Are you joking me?!"

"I didn't mean it like that!" Remus laughed. "I meant like, I dunno... you're all mine?"

Sirius gave him a look. *The* look. “You are an idiot, Remus Lupin.”

“I... I love hearing you say my name.”

Like he couldn’t help himself, Sirius laughed too and then smacked Remus in the side once more. “Don’t steal my line!”

“Ow! … I’m almost tempted to take this abuse as a yes, you know.”

“Go ahead.” Sirius’ smile fell slightly. “You sure you want to date a man though?”

“Of course I do,” Remus replied. “It’s you.”

“Mhm, right. Because you’re in love with me?”

“Because I’ve *only* ever been in love with you.”

Rarely ever speechless, Sirius Black opened his mouth and closed it again. “Well, we—uhm…” He cleared his throat. “Took our sweet time, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, but we had some fun along the way.”

“We sure did.” Sirius lifted his hand, this time placing a kiss over the spot he'd bitten. “Do you want to go somewhere with me? There’s something I’d like to show you.”

He’d been expecting some prank, or maybe a second tryst in the astronomy building, but Sirius had always been able to surprise him. He led Remus to the Bellchant building, which was already locked up

after hours but still had some of its lights on. Jimmying the lock with one of the pins Sirius had been using to keep his fringe back , they got inside and snuck down the main hallway to music room #2.

“This is gonna be so great,” Sirius said, so giddy he was practically skipping. Remus watched him, a smile pinned to his face. He’d been trying to keep up, but somewhere on the walk over he’d begun to feel tired. It was late, he told himself, he’d be fine in the morning. Sirius just wanted to show him something first.

“C’mon, Moons!” Sirius said as he began to fall behind. “I wanna show you this before Filch catches us.”

“I’ll…” Remus slowly came to a stop in the middle of the hall. Sirius was already at the music room's doors. “I’ll be right there!” He tried again—impulsively. “Just… gonna use the loo first.”

Sirius nodded; “Don’t take all night,” and disappeared inside.

Taking a moment to breathe, Remus finally turned and made his way back down the dim hallway, except he did not stop at the washroom. Instead he carried on, deeper into the building where the walls gave way to old photographs and even older memories. Halfway there, he began to realise how clammy his hands had become, which was silly of course, because well—she was dead.

“Not really sure why I’m here, he’s waiting for me after all…” he murmured, standing ahead of the frame but not really looking at it. “But I guess you could say that I've been waiting for this. Like, I can’t tell anyone else, but what are you gonna do—not love me? That ship’s already sailed, don’t ya think?”

The hallway was silent; like a grave.

“I’m in love with him,” he announced, more boldly this time. “Yeah, that’s right. I love him! Can’t hardly describe it. Almost makes me afraid of what’ll come next. Like… how could I ever love him—or anyone—more than this?”

Smiling bitterly, Remus began picking at a hangnail. What else to say?

“I figure one day James and Lily’ll get married... Makes sense, right? It won’t be like you and him though, it’ll be a good sort of marriage. They’ll get married in some pretty church or James’ backyard or whatever, get a mortgage and a house, have babies, be happy…” He winced, then; *“Fuck… this was stupid. I wish you’d fucking say*

something now, not just in my bloody head! I mean, c'mon—what the fuck? *Why?* … Oh god, I know why… You always did have a way of making me feel crazy…"

C'mon, if you're gonna blame her for all of your crazy, at least say her name.

Not real, Remus reminded himself; ***Not. Real.***

Around him, the dim lights of the hallway buzzed. *Real.* He pinched himself. *Real.*

"You know," Remus breathed shakily, "I used to tell myself that I'd never get married. I mean, what'd it do for you? Dad's perpetually miserable and you clearly weren't any better off. But if I stay with him then I suppose I'll never actually have to worry about it—getting married. And really, who cares?! I don't want to be miserable—you hear me? I won't be miserable anymore! I won't be like you—sick and… *ngh* … unhappy... And I would never do to anyone what you did to me. You know, you *should've—"* He whimpered again, like a kicked dog; "I–I wish you'd never told me… I wish you weren't my mum… Well…? *SAY SOMETHING!"*

But of course, she didn't.

Remus dropped his head into his hands, agonisingly tired. The hangnail was bleeding now, and he could feel its sting as blood welled up around his finger. Coming there had been stupid. He'd thought it might bring some closure, but all it'd done was ruin his *up.* He hadn't even talked to her since he was a kid, scared and lonely at night without anyone to tuck him in to bed, and the women in the photograph wasn't even the Hope he remembered. This Hope, sitting in front of a piano, happy and with her best friend Sheila at her side—she didn't even know he existed.

Reaching into his pocket, Remus slowly withdrew a second photograph. He smoothed out its rumpled corners, taking in the image of the three smiling faces; *Hope, Sheila, Tad.* Best friends. He hadn't shown it to anyone since Sheila had given him the year before, not even Sirius. It felt like a secret—it was a secret. And if Sirius tried asking him about it, he wasn't sure he could stand lying to him.

Remus looked back up at it. At *Mr. Derry's year 13 Music Class, 1954-55.* At his mother.

"Why did you marry him?" He asked. "Why did you do that to both of

us?”

She was silent.

“… Nice talking to you, Mum.”

Wiping beneath his eyes, Remus shoved the photograph back into his pocket and left the scattered memories behind where they hung on the wall.

“About time,” Sirius called, he pushed the door open and walked inside. “Get lost on the way to the loo?”

“Something like that.”

“You okay?”

Remus looked up to find Sirius staring back at him with a raised brow. He’d been sitting on the bottom riser of the orchestra stand, hastily scribbling across a piece of paper.

“Yeah, I’m great,” Remus murmured, not wanting to worry him.

“You’re sure?” Sirius stood, looking him up and down.

“Absolutely.”

“What are you thinking about then?”

“You, mostly.” Remus reached out and hooked a finger into the pocket of Sirius' trousers, pulling him close. As he did, Sirius cracked a small smile and pressed upwards to kiss him on the mouth. He tasted sweet.

“I want to play for you,” Sirius said as they broke apart.

“But we don’t have our instruments.”

“Don’t need ‘em. Come see.” Leaving one last peck on the corner of his mouth, Sirius snatched up the paper he'd been scribbling on and leapt up the music risers to the raised platform that housed Sheila’s grand piano. Weaving amongst the scattered drums and percussion instruments, he took a seat on the bench and waved him over.

“Come join me, Moons!”

Remus did so. It made his heart soar a bit, to see Sirius so eager to play again. As he slid in next to him on the bench, Sirius cleared his

throat and let his delicate fingers settle across the keys. He still had his black nail polish on, now chipped and worn.

"I tried my best to remember what I'd written, but the rest of it is back at the dorm," Sirius said, flexing his fingers. "This is just the first half."

“What is it?” Remus asked, scanning the paper.

“Just listen. And go easy on me. I am a bit rusty, after all.”

Remus didn’t even have the chance to tell him that he was being silly, the fervent little melody that came next was already transporting him. Sirius’ music did that; made you feel like you were somewhere else—*someone* else. It was a reset of an otherwise disappointing reality. It was just so Sirius.

“I love it!” He called.

“Just wait,” Sirius said back, fingers picking up speed like a sports car approaching its first turn. Remus could hear the song on the electric guitar already—perfected by James’ colourful ear and aided by a funky backing track from Peter. He almost said as much, but then Sirius began to sing.

“Hey, have you seen my friends around? Oh, I swear they’re pretty hard to miss… One’s yay-high with flowers in her hair, and the other you’d likely kiss.”

Remus laughed. Sirius’ voice stayed light and airy, like he were slightly gassed and telling a story to a gaggle of pub-goers.

“They’re those downtown girls, ripping n’ roaring along, neon lights pale in their midst… Yeah my girls are free and wild and young—pretty as porcelain, shiny as glitz… Made their names ruining marvellous times, chasing the handsomest guys, performing new crimes… Sharing broken heels and kisses in the bathroom, never left the party—how could they?!” Sirius flashed him a smile. *“They’re high off the moon!”*

“Stupid!” Remus chuffed, face going red.

Sirius kept on, making the notes practically dance for him; *“Yeah, those are downtown girls, ripping n’ roaring along—flashing neon lights pale in their midst… They’re free and sprung and wild and young… Pretty as porcelain, shiny as glitz…”*

He repeated his chorus a few more times, weaving its story like a

Hollywood film. Remus loved every second of it. He loved Sirius more. And when Sirius had finished and dropped his fingers from the keys, his heart was still racing.

“I sorta wrote it for Mary,” Sirius said, catching his breath. Smiling, Remus leaned into Sirius on the bench, bending his head so his lips shyly grazed the top of his ear.

“Careful, play that and she might actually fall in love with you.”

A tremble ran through Sirius’ shoulders, and Remus felt it before Sirius was swatting the air in front of his nose. *“Augh*—god, don’t make me shiver while talking about Mary, you nob.”

“Why’s that so revolting?” He teased. “Mary’s hot, right? Even you can admit that.”

“Yeah, sure," Sirius drawled. "But don’t tell her or she’ll want a page-long dedication on the back of our first album.”

“Tell you what, we’ll tell her when the song actually sells.”

“She’s bound to be insufferable.”

“Mm, bit like you. You're too jealous, Padfoot.”

“Says the nob."

To shut him up, Remus bent down and kissed him. Their lips were still warm from earlier, and Sirius acquiesced for the moment, slipping his tongue in before suddenly pulling away as though he’d remembered something very important.

“Speaking of jealousy—‘Farrah’? … Really?”

Not at all satisfied, Remus chased Sirius’ lips. “I’m sorry, whomst?”

Sirius pushed him away. “Don’t fuck around, Remus Dean. Farrah, your ‘super sexy French fiancée’ that everyone’s been talking about. You should hear the rumours already! Heard about half a dozen ‘a them just yesterday—apparently she’s twenty years your senior, to boot!”

“Ah,” Remus mused, “that Farrah.” It felt so good to tease him.

“Yeah, her!” Sirius smacked him in the shoulder. “Didn’t know you were into cougars too. What do you call a sexuality for old bints?”

“Oh c’mon, you know it’s a rumour!”

“Mhm sure.”

He snorted, leaning in and kissing him. “A *rumour,* Padfoot.”

Sirius pulled away stubbornly. “I hate her.”

“Oh good, ‘cause she’s not real. You can blame Lily.”

“Ugh, Evans, always mucking up my love life. First McKinnon, now *Farrah.* Honestly... And I can't believe you didn’t even play at inviting me to a threesome with your sexy Parisian lady-friend!”

He kissed his neck. “Mm… Try some French pillow talk next time and we’ll chat.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you, you little pervert.” Smirking, Sirius turned back to the piano and began to play. This song had no words, and it wasn’t anything either of them had composed, but Remus still recognised it instantly.

“ ‘Clair de Lune’?” He asked, straightening. “Really?”

Sirius continued on smirking, his fingers a poet on the keys. “I like Debussy. He broke all the rules, just like us. I like to imagine what sort of nonsense was going through his head when he wrote. Him and all the masters. Fill the silence between their agape, you know?"

"Can you give me an example?"

"Sure." Sirius changed tempo, launching into a brisk, staccato-like piece. "For example, Tchaikovsky definitely just thought about barking dogs and train crashes.”

“Is that right?”

“Mhm. And Schumann imagined himself surrounded by the cries of dying children. But it’s just a hobby, really.” Sirius transformed back into "Clair de Lune", picking up where he left off with such fine precision that even Debussy himself would've been impressed.

“Only you can make jokes while playing music like this," Remus said, still admiring his hands.

“Just special, I guess.”

“So what do you think Sheila thinks about when she plays then?”

Sirius started into the piece’s rolling arpeggios, humming softly to himself. “I’ll bet you anything it’s something sickly sweet, like baby bunnies rolling in daisies.”

Remus didn’t say it, but he almost disagreed. Any time he’d heard Sheila play, which was usually in brief stints to start off a warm up in class, she always played with her eyes closed. He couldn’t imagine anyone who pictured rabbits in spring would have to keep their eyes shut. Regulus played with his eyes closed, he remembered.

As Sirius continued his song they both lapsed into silence, and eventually Remus leaned back in, wrapping his arms around Sirius’ waist and gently resting his head on his shoulder. It hurt his neck a bit, Sirius being considerably shorter in the torso, but he liked touching him too much to stop.

“I told my mum about us."

“Oh yeah?” Sirius’ shoulder continued to drift back and forth under him as he played. “And how’d that go?”

“I think it shocked her a bit. She couldn’t get a word out.”

“Ha, funny. Bet my mum would have enough words for the both of them. She’d probably start with ‘you shameful little bastard’. But I still think it’d be nice to throw it back in her face a bit. The old hag…”

His fingers slowed, and Remus reached out a hand to trail over his knuckles, soothing the tightness there. “Don’t stop, Sirius. Don’t let her ruin it.”

As if for comfort, Sirius took his hand and squeezed it. A moment later he lifted it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on Remus’ own knuckles before returning to the keys. He picked up where he’d left off, rolling the harmonies together into that perfect cadence the piece was known for. Remus never wanted it to stop, but eventually it did, as Sirius hit the final note and let out a long sigh, leaning back on the bench.

“I wish I’d kissed you here,” he said. “Ages ago, when I first played for you. I don’t…” He leaned away, so they could look one another in the eye. “I don’t think you don’t know what you did for me then.”

“That’s okay,” Remus said. He doubted Sirius knew what he’d really done for him either. “I didn’t know you wanted to kiss me then.”

“Well, I bloody did. It sure would’ve made a better kiss than that one in the toilet anyway.”

“Oh I dunno, sort of thought it was pretty decent for how pissed we were.”

“You looked good in that tiny rainbow t-shirt.”

“Are you really going to make me bring up Mary’s tube top?”

Sirius’ eyes twinkled wryly.

“If you’re so worried about not having our first kiss here,” Remus started slowly, “then well… I wouldn’t mind pretending.”

“That we kissed here first? Like what, some sort of stupid do-over?”

“Sure.” Remus straightened up and held out his hand. “Hi, I’m Remus. You are?”

“You’re actually gonna pretend you’ve never met me?” Sirius snorted. “Are you sure about that? I’ve sucked your—”

“OH, I’m sorry, *have* we met? I think I would’ve remembered. I’m certain we’ve never kissed before though.”

Shaking his head, Sirius took his hand. “Well, *enchanté,* Remus. I guess we better change that.”

Yanking him forward, Sirius threw his arms around his neck and they met in the middle, pressing their lips together as though they could drown in one another. Remus wouldn’t have minded; he would have gladly let himself drown in Sirius any day. But unlike that first first time in the bathroom, this kiss wasn’t fervent or desperate. They’d had each other before—tasted each other before. Yes, this kiss was like the gentle cadence of Debussy, estranged to everyone else but perfect for them. There were no barking dogs or train wrecks or rabbits in spring, there was only Sirius.

Sirius, Sirius, Sirius, Sirius, Sirius.

Maybe he was drowning.

“Want you,” Sirius told him, his voice gruff and mumbled between their lips.

Remus groaned. “We *just—! … Ngh…* We’re not desecrating every

piano we see."

"Not 'desecrating'—'christening'."

"Ha."

They broke apart, still so close Remus could feel the heaving of Sirius' chest against his own. Maybe he wasn't *down* again after all, maybe this was just what it meant to be loved.

"Sirius, do you think any of this will ever get easier?"

"Guess that depends what you mean by 'this'."

"I mean all of it. Like… us, and life and all it's shit?"

Sirius pursed his mouth thoughtfully. "Sure I do. I mean, it got better today, right? Stands to reason that sometimes it just has to get worse first. Then when you've made out to the other side, well… you have nothing to worry about."

"Is that where we are? The other side?"

"I hope so." Sirius smiled, comfortingly. He grasped Remus' jaw gently. "Hey, don't worry about it. Eventually none of it'll matter. Eventually, it'll just be okay."

And because he wanted to believe him, Remus said;

"Okay."

Chapter End Notes

Marigolds are rubber gloves.
(As referenced in the chapter before) 'Pgymalion' is a Greek figure who fell in love with the statue he created.

Re, my posting schedule: I cannot commit to more than one chapter per week currently. I know it feels slow, but I'm still rewriting parts of this year as I post it, and life is busy, busy, busy. Hope you guys can understand. In the meantime, I'm always active on tiktok and I reply often to asks/post chapter hints on tumblr (both @motswolo). Shoot me a message on either if you want to chat!
See you next week for a fun chapter. Peace <3

Chapter 75: Slow Ride

Chapter Summary

Surely you're not adverse to a little grand theft auto, Remus?

Chapter Notes

WOW... okay so not really sure how it happened but not only did we pass 100k hits, but we've got over 500k words now... I'm actually rocked to my core, you guys are all so amazing. Thank you for the love :')

CW: Marjiuana references/smoking, Jesus, car crash (??), smooching, mentions of homosexuality (though for once it's happy!)

Also note, I cannot drive manual. So for story purposes... fml.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Me and you and you and me,
No matter how they toss the dice, it had to be;
The only one for me is you, and you for me,
So happy together;
I can't see me lovin' nobody but you,
For all my life;
When you're with me, baby the skies'll be blue,
For all my life…

- "Happy Together" The Turtles, 1967

They had to be more careful at school than they'd been over summer. There were more people around to catch them, and few were strangers. Someone was bound to notice if they were constantly sitting with their legs pressed up against one another ankle to hip, or eyeing each other suggestively from across the room when they were supposed to be concentrating on class work. Luckily, Sirius had always been a flirt, so they did get away with *some* things in public.

"C'mon, Moony, take it!" Sirius crooned, mumbling around the baby

carrot he was dangling in front of his face with his lips. Remus pushed him away by the cheek, but stole the carrot and snapped it in two with his teeth, making Sirius purse that perfect mouth wryly and look away.

He was glad they'd talked. More than glad, even—Moony was over the moon. Since making up Sirius had been as bright and sunny as ever, back to teasing his friends with fervent pleasure. Remus wasn't really sure where they were going to end up, but as long as it was somewhere together, he was content. And he liked this Sirius—he liked the Remus he could be with *this* Sirius. Even if it had him missing summertime, unable to wake up and witness the way the morning sun dusted across his dark eyelashes.

"James said he's glad you're out of that 'funk'," Sirius told him, the first time they'd stolen away to the astronomy room together. "He told me yesterday in class. Asked if I knew anything about it."

Unable to deny his 'funk', Remus hesitated in the dark. "And so did you…?"

"I told him it was something to do with your London friends, but that I didn't know what. He pretty much let it rest after that."

Well, it wasn't entirely *un*-true. He still wasn't sure what to make of Lee, and then there was the kiss with Tomny—which was totally over and done with, as far as Remus was concerned.

"He's been more curious lately," Remus said. "Yesterday he wouldn't leave me alone at lunch. I think he's noticed how much time we're spending together."

"He'll get used to it," Sirius reassured him. "Keep telling him we have detention or something."

"And how long do you figure that'll work?"

"Long enough to come up with a better excuse." Sirius turned toward him, smoothly sliding one leg across Remus' thighs until he was straddling his waist. "You're making a liar out of me, Lupin."

"And you've already made a thief out of me," Remus said, leaning in. "I'd say that makes us even."

"Hmm... Sounds like we're a bad influence on each other." Sirius pressed his lips against the corner of his jaw. As he did, Remus

reached down and took Sirius' wrist, pulling him closer until they were entirely chest to chest, lips moving against one another in slow, thoughtful movements.

"Mhm," he murmured around Sirius' tongue, "the *worst*."

Remus would've been lying if he said it hadn't taken them a bit to warm up to one another again, but once they were over the shy coddling and nervous reassurance, they'd thrown themselves at each other like they had that very first night on the Underground. In front of others they had to be careful—coy—but any chance they had alone was a free-for-all. They tried to keep it out of the dorm room, but the afternoons James had practice and Peter was busy with club activities were just too tempting.

"Got a light?" Sirius would ask after each time. Having a post-romp fag became a way to keep things grounded in reality. It was the switch from Remus *and* Sirius to just, Remus and Sirius. And despite the fact that Sirius most definitely had a light, Remus would always lean over with his zippo and light the cigarette for him. Occasionally the intimate closeness of the otherwise trivial gesture would lead to another pointed glance, and after checking the clock to make sure they had the time, Sirius would stub out the cig and pull Remus back in behind the bed curtains.

Their equal enthusiasm was comforting. Despite his initial concerns, Sirius seemed to need his touch just as much as Remus craved his. He was respectful, never going any further in front of others that couldn't be explained away with a simple excuse or Sirius' generally coquettish disposition. When they were alone he liked to lead, and Remus was more than happy to let him; but that didn't mean he didn't get his end-away either. It would usually start with kissing, then touching—fisting each other's clothes until they were all but tearing them off one another. Things were always aggressive and fervid, but Remus didn't mind. It made things harder to over-think, easier to lose himself in.

And when 'get on me' began to feel like old hat—*oh* the things they said to each other.

It wasn't just the hooking up that had Remus relieved either. Once he and Sirius had gotten over their joint 'funk' ("It *was* joint and you know it.") they were also free to be with their friends.

"Ah, finally joining us, are you? What was it this time—did you glue all of Filch's brooms to the ceiling?" James had said, when they'd

reappeared after an afternoon spent hidden beneath the football stands.

“No, but that would be a good one,” Sirius said, falling into him on the common room sofa. It was only natural that James be slightly overbearing. He’d never said it, but Remus got the sense that he now fully considered himself to be Sirius’ keeper. They were almost real brothers now—the Potters were Sirius’ family as much as they were James'. After their first week Effie had sent them all care packages, but she’d signed Sirius’ card with ‘love from Mum and Dad’. Sirius had denied it, but Remus was pretty sure he’d cried over it later.

They’d spent Peter’s birthday with just the four of them, crowded around a telly in the AV room and playing *Pong* on the Atari system his parents had sent as a gift, as he couldn’t really get much use out of the drum kit while at school.

“You said it was a sports game!” James wailed, after losing his third game in a row.

“It is! It’s like tennis! All you gotta do is bounce the little dot back,” Peter cackled.

“Well, if this dial weren’t so damn sensitive! It acts like my nan when you tell her she looks any older than thirty-five.”

“Who would’a thought we’d see the day that Pete would beat you at a sport,” Sirius cackled, promptly missing the dot and making the telly beep in displeasure.

“We should do a prank,” he said later, as they were sneaking their way back across the campus. In continued celebration, they’d broken into the dining hall and lifted a plate of biscuits, several mini chocolate mousses, and an entire pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream. They’d justified the theft on birthday grounds, but Remus had seen James leave a few quid taped to the freezer with a short note of apology.

“What sort of prank?” Peter asked, carrying the ice cream with one hand and munching on a biscuit with the other.

“A good one. One that’s bound to be noticed. Our reputation’s on the line, after all.”

“But Moony’s a prefect now,” James pointed out. “And you’ve already gotten him enough detentions this term.”

“We told you—that was *Snape.”*

“You mean to say that all of those detentions were Snape’s fault?”

Of course they weren’t all Snape’s fault—the detentions in question weren’t even really detentions at all. They were just excuses to get away together. Knowing this, Remus nudged Sirius from behind. “Any ingenious pranking ideas then?”

Sirius smirked. “I may have a few…”

“I just hope it doesn’t involve Regulus this time,” James ragged. Scoffing, Sirius snatched the ice cream from Peter and pressed it to the back of his friend’s neck, making James howl in surprise.

“Get back here!” He lashed, as Sirius tossed the ice cream tub back to Peter and took off across the lawn. Remus watched them, falling into step with Peter and imagining all of the devious ideas Sirius was hatching in his brain. Even if the two of them were now officially a secret item, it was still fun to be stupid with their friends. Music, pranking—it didn’t matter. The pleasure came from knowing that even when they weren’t able to be together as Sirius *and* Remus, they were still together as Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. As Marauders.

It was the best.

* * *

Sunday 25th September 1977

“It’s the fucking worst,” Sirius hissed, as they shuffled into their pews for Sunday mass. “Five quid says they spent my entire year thirteen tuition on it.”

“I can think of a million other things to spend that kind of money on,” Remus agreed scornfully.

“Like a car. Like a debut album. Like a *bloody cool* motorbike. Fuck, the things I could do if my entire family wasn’t on Satan’s payroll.”

“It certainly is ‘in your face’ enough,” James replied, from his spot next to Sirius.

“Speaking of faces, is his supposed to look like that?” Asked Peter.

All four of them tilted their heads to the side, peering quizzically at the freshly-carved statue of Christ standing behind the heads of the student choir. The ten foot tall carving was a new addition to the church, one generously commissioned by the Black family, as thanks for ‘the school’s continued dedication to corrective instruction and established education’. It had appeared just the Sunday before and Sirius had wasted no time making fun of the garish sculpture—comments that only got worse once he’d found out that his family was the one to donate it in the first place.

“You guys staring at the new kid in class again?” Lottie teased, shuffling down the pew with the other girls in tow. Lily quickly slipped down the line, taking a spot between James and Peter and giving her boyfriend a quick peck on the cheek in hello. After she’d passed, Sirius threw a hand out, scoffing;

“It’s positively hideous. I mean, if they’re going to find a way to rub their money in everyone’s faces isn’t there a better way to do it than dangling a half-naked bloke in front of all our noses?”

“I think the son of God is a lot more than some ‘half-naked bloke’,” Marlene said pointedly.

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. “Whatever. Didn’t think you cared all that much for western religion after your trip down south, McKinnon. Didn’t you discover Ghandi or something?”

“Not Ghandi—Allah. Plenty of Moroccan people follow *Islam,* Sirius. And no, I’m not suddenly converting.”

“What about you, Mary? Still Buddhist?” Remus asked.

Mary winked. “Only on Sundays, love.”

“I bet if they had it their way, it’d be me nailed to that cross instead,” Sirius continued, grumbling loathsomely.

While the other girls all frowned in sympathy, Lily reached across James’ lap to take Sirius’ hand. “You don’t have to worry about it anymore, you’ve got us now,” she said comfortingly.

“Yeah,” Sirius mumbled, squeezing back, “yeah, I do. And besides, we won’t have to look at the ugly thing for much longer. At least not for today, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh nothing,” he smirked.

Lily pulled her hand back suspiciously, turning on her boyfriend. “Potter?”

“Sorry, Daisy, I’m not saying anything.”

“What have you lot done now?” Lottie asked, nudging Peter.

“No idea,” he answered dumbly. “Moony, any thoughts?”

“No, not really. But I did wake up to find my private stash a bit light today. Anyone know anything about that?”

James and Sirius both swallowed their smiles.

“Oh, this ought to be good,” Mary scoffed playfully, crossing her arms over her chest.

When all the other students were settled and Professor McGonagall had stood up to call order, the priests filed in for their entrance procession followed by the altar bearers, each of them swinging the heavy metal thuribles ahead of themselves. Remus watched as the smoke from the censer burners wafted between the rows, purifying the students and raising their prayers up to Heaven. It was subtle, but as they reached midway down the aisles, one of the altar boys reached up to rub at his nose. Steadily, more and more kids began to blink in the light haze, expressions of recognition coming over each of them that ranged from confused to aghast to amazed.

“Nice,” Remus sniggered, once he’d gotten a whiff for himself.

Next to him, Lottie whirled around in the pew, her eyes wide. “It smells like—”

“WOAH! WHO BROUGHT THE WEED?!”

The amused cry went up very suddenly, making every priest and teacher shoot up in their chairs. What followed was a cacophonous roar of laughter as the procession came to an immediate halt, the head priest shooting down the aisles toward the confused altar boys, snatching the smoking metal pots from their hands. But it was too late. By now the entire room could smell it, and Marlene gaped at Sirius and James, who were falling into themselves with smug

laughter.

“You didn’t!” She trilled.

“Of course we didn’t,” Sirius snorted, clearly lying.

She smacked him.

“James!” Lily blagged.

“He just said we didn’t do it! … But if we did, it would’a been real funny.”

“Real funny,” Peter agreed, knocking his fist against his best friend’s happily.

“I can’t believe you guys,” Marlene gasped. “You’re so going to get caught.”

“Why? It’s not like Sheila’s around to pin it on us. She's stepped out this weekend,” Sirius said smugly. Leaning back with his hands behind his head, he put his feet up on the pew ahead of him while the priests fled the church with the stinking censers in hand and the room continued with its chaos. Remus eyed him, before turning back to a very blanched Marlene.

“Yeah, Cherry, don’t worry, they got no real proof anyway.”

* * *

“Agh—! Damn it…”

Hissing, Remus pressed the tip of his thumb into his mouth before withdrawing it to examine the small cut. The silver thuribles had edges that could cut glass, and the little notched holes in the side that were meant to allow the smoke out acted more like the blades of a cheese grater. He might’ve thrown more of a fit, had the prank not worked out so masterfully. Though McGonagall must’ve thought herself pretty smart to choose him out of all the prefects to stay and clean up; if she couldn’t directly pin it on all four Marauders, then the single prefect among them would have to do. Remus was just thankful Regulus wasn’t asked to stay. He didn’t need any more animosity where he was concerned.

“Fuck this,” Remus griped under his breath, tossing the charcoal-smudged rag at the pile of metal censers they had left to clean. The metal bowls went down with a grand clatter, scattering themselves across the front dais of the church. Behind him sat the chancel in all its golden glory, and beyond that—the Blacks’ statue of Christ. Remus glared at it, flipping the crucified man off for good measure.

“Well, that was rather dramatic,” Trish drawled, appearing out of the vestry hallway with two more thuribles tucked under each arm. They were to clean every piece of silver in the entire church, it seemed. Déjà vu all over again.

“This feels like detention,” he scowled, kicking away one of the censer lids that had rolled toward him and turning to dangle his long legs off the side of the raised dais.

“This is pretty normal prefect stuff, actually. They always get a couple o’ us tae sweep up after mass.” Trish set down her load, before pushing up onto the edge of the stage next to him. “Ye’v just added to it.”

“It’s still shit,” Remus grumbled. *So much for not throwing a fit.*

“Meh, it’s not that bad.”

“Why are you even here, Trish?” He asked. “McGonagall didn’t force you to stay—why the hell would you volunteer?”

“Maybe because I actually did have prefect duty today, ‘n I’d rather be ‘ere than chasing kiddies around the primary campus with Jillian breathing down my neck.”

“Oh, so you just wanted to get out of other prefect stuff?” He asked gingerly.

“Yep.”

“No… other reason?”

“Na, why?”

“Well, you just… you don’t happen to… have a thing for me do you? Because—er—it just wouldn’t work.”

Trish gave him a deep frown before bursting into laughter. “ ‘A thing fur yeh’? Whit? No offence, Loonarny, but I barely ken who you are—

you could be an axe murderer for all I know. Or some stuffy loud-mouth with an Adderall addiction."

Remus hung his head, horribly embarrassed. "Oh. Wow—um… Yeah, sorry. That—That was weird… hah…"

"Are you that used tae strangers openly declaring their love for ya?"

"What? No, I—"

"Ah mean, I guess you're braw enough, though that might just be the fact that you look like yer related to a tree, but—"

"It was weird!" Remus interjected. "I'm sorry. I just… bad track record lately, that's all."

Trish gave him an amused look. "With Jillian, right? She's said a lot o' stuff about you."

Embarrassed, Remus picked up one of the rags and began absent-mindedly polishing one of the thurible pieces. "Yep…"

"She really had a thing fur yeh."

"I know. Didn't think the two of you got along all that well, actually."

"S'a girl thing," she giggled. "She's bearable on her own. Yer a lad, so you wouldn't get it."

Remus thought of Regulus, who hated him whether they were alone or not. "Yeah…"

"So…" Trish mused, "how's that 'fiancée' o' yours then?"

"You heard about that, huh?" Remus snorted.

"Aye. Heard she was a solid ten outta ten actually. Real 'peng'."

"Really?"

"Mhm, oh yeah—absolutely *gorgeous.* French, with locks down tae her bum 'n a real affinity fur English bad boys."

"Jesus Christ."

"Canny, or he'll hear you," she sniggered, pointing at Sirius' favourite ugly statue. Remus looked back, smiling and a bit amused by her.

“Look,” he started, “don’t tell anyone, but I’m not actually engaged.”

Trish gasped sarcastically. “Nah, ye don’t say!”

“Ha, ha. Yeah, it was just something my friend Lily came up with to let Jillian down easy, so keep it to yourself?”

“Meh. She’s dating that jimmie in my year, Roy Nilssen, anyway now, so I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“He on the football team?” Remus asked, trying to recall his face.

“Na, that’s Troy Michaelssen. Roy’s on the rowing team.”

“Oh. I see…”

“Suddenly feeling jealous?”

“No!”

Trish grinned evilly at him. She reminded him a bit of Tomny, but that might’ve just been the accent. She rolled her ‘r’s just like he did, though Tomny’s brogue wasn’t ever as pronounced.

“On the subject o’ lying,” Trish started, before turning away and rummaging around in her blazer’s pockets; “I may have had an ulterior motive for staying behind in church—one that doesn’t have tae do with yer handsome puss anyway.”

Intrigued, Remus straightened up to get a better look, and Trish came back with a joint tucked between her lips, which she lit off a pocket lighter and puffed to life.

“Trish!” He gasped, whipping around to make sure they were alone.

“Whit?” She blagged. “No one’s here—everyone cleared out after you and those muckers o’ yers tried hotboxing God’s living room.”

“You knew it was us?”

“Everybody knew it was you. Ye’ve actually got quite the reputation, Remington.”

Remus scoffed. “Please enough, I do not need any more nicknames.”

Trish let out a breath of smoke. Then she held her hand out to him. “ ‘ere, think this belongs tae ya.”

He glanced down, letting her drop the item into his palm. “My lighter!” He exclaimed, turning it over and pressing his thumb to the engraving there.

“Did’nae mean tae nick it,” she said. “Found it in my bag ‘n couldn’t remember who it belonged to. Luckily Black has your initials memorised.”

“Oh, well, you could’ve just given it to Sirius then.”

“Na, meant Regulus.”

Remus blinked. “Regulus?”

“Mhm. I did have ‘a go trying to give it to him actually, but he’s gey stubborn.”

“Right…” Remus pocketed the lighter. “We aren’t exactly friends.”

“Hey, I get it.” Trish took another drag. “So… how’d you do it?”

“You mean the prank? Well, the hardest part was just not getting caught really. We did it this morning before anyone else was awake.”

“You must be tired then.”

“Always.”

Looking him up and down, Trish took another long puff on the spliff before reaching over and offering it to him. “C’moan,” she teased, “not like anyone’s gonna notice the smell. Not until they start airing the place out anyway.”

He eyed her a moment and Trish shook the weed pointedly. “Well? Don’t tell me yer frigid?”

Smirking lightly, Remus took the joint from her and brought it to his lips. “You’d be surprised by the things I’ve done, kid,” he told her. Then the delightful smoke was enveloping his throat like a warm blanket—nothing like the dry, nasty stuff they’d used on the thuribles. Sirius had had to bribe that crap off some random tenth year just to avoid draining their entire stash, and the stuff tasted like it’d been left in a sock drawer for a decade.

“That’s some nice hash,” he said immediately, blowing smoke out his nose before handing it back.

“I know, right? Got it from my cousin, Clyde. He lives in the village actually. Every now ‘n then he brings me his maw’s cooking, but sometimes it’s the fun stuff.”

“He taking on clients?” Remus asked. “I’m in the market for a new fence.”

“Nah, not really. He’s a bit stingy.” Trish passed him the joint again. “But I’m sure I can put a good word in.”

She winked, and Remus accepted the weed with humble gratitude.

“You know, Trish, I kept thinking this school couldn’t surprise me anymore. I think I might’ve been wrong.”

“Oh, Remington, is there really any point in a life that can’t surprise ye?”

“No,” he said lightly, puffing on the end of the joint, “no, I suppose there’s not.”

She smiled at him, before tossing a rag at his head. “Okay, time tae get back to work, naughty boy.”

By the time they’d finished, they’d smoked and scrubbed themselves right through lunch. Father Minsin, the priest who’d caught them the prank’s first time around, had been pleased with their progress when he’d finally returned, but Remus was still given a week’s detention for the stunt and the smell it left. He wasn’t bothered. It’d been a good day nonetheless.

“Pretty sure that silver’s ne’er been so clean,” Trish said, stretching her arms out above her head as they skipped down the chapel’s front steps.

“Moony!” Sirius barked. He jumped up from beneath an oak tree across the courtyard, waving both arms over his head, James and Peter at his side.

“I’ll see ya later then,” Trish said, “ ‘n don’t worry, I’ll make sure to pass yer name on to Clyde.”

“Thanks, Trish,” Remus said, breaking away from her and crossing the lawn, hands tucked into his pockets.

“Who was that?” Sirius asked, staring after the twelfth year.

“Trish. She’s a prefect.”

“Did you get detention too, Moony?” Peter asked.

“Yeah. I think McGonagall's actually starting to regret making me a prefect. She gave me a whole week.”

“That’s bollocks, we got two,” James snorted, rolling an apple between both palms.

“Favouritism,” Sirius scoffed.

“Favouritism, my arse,” Remus said. “Just look at my hands, they’re rubbed raw from punishment.”

“Here, I’ll kiss ‘em better.”

Sirius made a grab for him but Remus just side-stepped, accidentally tripping the other boy and sending him sprawling into the grass.

“You wanker!”

Remus smirked in Sirius’ direction. “So, what, you guys have detention or should we practice tonight? I wanna get a jump on Sirius’ new song.”

“We could…” James started, glancing at a smiling Peter.

“Or—”

“—We could neglect our future careers just long enough to do something fun!” Sirius declared, springing up from the ground. “Moony, you drive, yeah?”

“You know I can, I—” Remus stopped short. “Why would I need to drive anywhere?”

Sirius ignored the question; “Cool! Potter’s been around the block a few times too, havent’cha, Prongs?”

“Yep, Dad took me out over the summer,” James surmised.

“But Pete and I,” Sirius smirked, “we’re total virgins.”

“Ugh, why do you have to say it like that?” Peter squirmed.

“Oh, get over yourself, you ninny. We all know you and Moira finally

got your end away this summer—about time if you ask me—I meant *driving."*

"Why would we need to drive anywhere?" Remus asked again. "Where would we even go?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Moons—just around the lake and back."

"Oh-kaaay, in what car? Or are you planning on taking one of Kettleburn's ponies out onto the road?"

"Ha, no." Smugly, Sirius held up a small ring of keys, each one glinting in the fresh afternoon sun. "While you were busy shining silver with Penny Prefect, McGonagall had us helping Stan replace the tires on one of the trolleys in the garage."

"You *stole* Stan's keys?"

"Borrowed," Sirius eased; *"bor-rowed.* And besides, they're the spares! He had me hold 'em and then forgot to ask for them back! So you see, it's perfectly legal."

"Define 'legal' for me!"

"I thought it was insane too," James interjected, "but then Stan practically dared us to do it."

"Wha…?"

Peter held up one finger in imitation; " 'As if any of you posh poncers could drive such a beast. You'd likely just ram 'er into a tree as you would run a stop sign'. Can you believe it? There aren't even any stop signs on school property."

Remus could picture Stan saying the words perfectly; though his trolley wasn't all that bigger than a milk float and could hardly be considered a 'beast'.

"So you see, Moony? He was *telling* us to take it," Sirius insisted gleefully.

"This is how people end up in prison."

"Oh, excuse *me* for thinking you wouldn't be adverse to a little grand theft auto."

“That—” He drew up short. “That was *different.* And this doesn’t count as a prank.”

“So it’s not a prank.” Sirius dangled the keys in the air again, letting them chime. “That mean you don’t want to go for a nighttime joyride?”

Remus sighed, and while sensing his crumbling resolve, the boys crowded in.

“It’ll be fun!” Sirius grinned.

“Just one teensy-weensy whip around the lake!” James prodded.

“We’ll even go the speed limit!” Peter added.

“I don’t even know why you’re acting like you need my permission! I’m a prefect not your mother.”

“No, you’re right, that’s Potter,” Sirius nodded; “You’re our Moony. Can’t do a thing without our Moony.”

I hate you, Remus thought. *I hate you and I love you and I hate you.*

“We’re gonna be in detention until Wormtail’s next birthday.”

“Probably!”

“We could crash.”

“Maybe!”

“Stan’ll kill us.”

“Absolutely!”

“This is a *bad* idea.”

All three of them grinned. *“PLEEEEEAASE, MOOOONYYY?”*

“Alright!” He cried. “Alright! Just shut your gobs before someone overhears!”

“YES!” Sirius tossed the keys in the air in celebration. “You hear that, lads? Moony’s gonna teach us how to drive!”

“That was definitely not what I said.”

“I like to read between the lines,” Sirius said, “saves time. And besides, there’s no way you’re going to resist barking at us from the passenger seat anyway.”

“There is no passenger’s seat in a bus!” Remus shouted, but the lads were already off—racing back toward their dorm in earnest glee.

Because they weren’t total thickheads, they waited until midnight and once James had finished his nightly rounds as dorm monitor and the common room had emptied out, they snuck out into the darkness and the prank-not-prank was on. After making sure the coast was clear, Remus got the garage door open and they slipped inside, weaving between the small fleet of trolleys until they found the one their set of spare keys belonged to. Pushing the bus doors open, James bounded up the steps and dropped down behind the wheel, pattering it with his fingers.

“This’s gonna be great!” He announced. “A few turns around the lake and back, just like we agreed on!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Remus sighed, trodding up the steps after Sirius. “Just keep the headlamps off until we’re out of the garage and *try* to keep the noise to a minimum.”

“Us, noisy? Really, Moons, who do you take us for?” Sirius asked, before dropping a portable cassette player down on the bus’s dashboard.

“Where’d you get that?” James asked in awe.

“Borrowed it off some twelfth year kid over at Crowley House named Fergus. Thought our first drive together deserved some ambiance.”

“Can’t believe he just gave it to you.”

“Of course he did, I’m cool like that. Oh and by the way, we owe him a date with Mary.”

“I think you need to reevaluate that ‘we’,” Remus scoffed, before turning back to James. “Make sure you’ve got your feet on the clutch and break before you turn it on.”

Gingerly, James glanced at the pedals before sticking the key into the ignition and giving it a sharp turn. The bus rumbled to life beneath them, yellow lights striking on. They immediately illuminated the huge garage doors, as well as Peter, who was waiting by the wall

switch to open them up.

“Damn!” He cried, throwing his arm up over his eyes. “Warn a guy next time!”

“Sorry, Pete,” Remus called, reaching over James for the right dial and turning the lights off.

“Kay… right, let's do this,” James breathed, grabbing the gear stick.

Remus stopped him; “Hold on, you forgot to make sure you were in neutral first.”

“I need to do that?”

“Uh, yes? Haven’t you ever driven a manual before?”

“No, Dad’s got an automatic.”

“Maybe Moony ought to be the one to drive her out of here,” Sirius said, draping himself over the bus seat behind them.

Shrugging, James got up and he and Remus traded spots. Sitting down, Remus quickly realised that Stan’s seat sagged in the middle and smelled horribly of stale cigarettes and old coffee, but he managed to adjust the mirrors, catching a wink from Sirius in them as he did.

“Okay.” He started. “Pete, open the doors!”

Peter did so, hitting the large button on the wall that left the entire room shaking as the garage doors curled up overhead. A moment later, he scuttled up onto the bus and pulled the doors shut after himself.

“Everyone ready?”

“Ready!”

“Hold on just a sec, Moons!” Sirius cried, just as Remus was getting ready to shift the gear into second. He popped up from his seat and hit play on the cassette deck, letting it shriek for a moment as the tape caught hold and the sound of a warped kick drum echoed out from its measly speakers.

“Fucking hell,” Remus chuckled, as Sirius threw his head forward and screamed; *‘WAH-HOOO!’*

James and Peter screamed with him, and as Remus drove the bus out of the garage and down the street, they all began singing over the band;

'Slow ride, take it easy!
Slow ride, take it easy!'

"There, Moony, take that right!" James said, pointing to the side street that would lead them toward Lake Dubh's docks. He turned, blowing past one of the empty trolley stops and down towards the deep dark of the lake's wilderness.

'I'm in the mood,
The rhythm is right;
Move to the music,
We can roll all night!'

It was pure adrenaline, rumbling on as the paved school streets turned to cobble, then rubble, then dirt.

"You sure this thing can handle this sort of terrain?" Peter asked, sounding nervous as they all bounced along, barely twenty yards from the edge of the lake.

"Oh yeah, she's a beast after all!" Sirius cackled.

Smiling, Remus finally flicked on the headlamps and threw the tram into a higher gear, narrowly avoiding a patch of gravel that had given way at the edge of the road. Trolleys never came down so far, but Filch and the school's other greenskeepers regularly took their lorries out along the back roads. The ground would hold.

"Anyone else want a turn?" Remus offered, after they'd made it to the western side of the lake. The road had grown windier, snaking around Lake Dubh like a racing circuit, but it was more than wide enough for the trolley to fit. They made Peter go first, only because he was the most sceptical, and after all of them had crowded around the front seat for a quick lesson and to get a look at the clutch and the gas, Remus stood up and traded him spots.

"It's a bus so it's going to take more effort to turn the wheel than a regular car," Remus instructed, as Peter limped the tram along. "Don't

worry about overcompensating, the wheels'll correct themselves."

"Okay!" Peter said, before yelping as the entire bus gave a particularly bad lurch. Remus didn't think he was doing all that bad, but barely five minutes into Peter's stint, they hit a deep pothole in the road that had him nearly tumbling down the stairs. After that Peter thought it was time for James to have a go.

"C'mon Prongs, let's see how fast you can get her to move," Sirius egged, flipping the tape in the cassette deck and hitting play again.

"Shut your gob, Padfoot, I'm trying to concentrate!"

"There, double pump the clutch like I showed you," Remus said.

Smoothly, James switched gears and Peter congratulated him on it, as Remus slid back a few rows and relaxed back in the seat next to Sirius to enjoy the ride. "See," Sirius said, "aren't you having fun?"

"Yeah, I am," Remus admitted. Though the cassette's volume could barely be heard over the tram's rumbling, he was glad Sirius had brought it along.

'You're my all day study, you're my midnight dream,
You need love I need love, rock me baby 'til I scream!'

Remus felt Sirius' hand on his leg. He just brushed it at first, like a comfort, but then Sirius slid his hand higher, toward the inside where he gave Remus' thigh a light squeeze through his jeans. Turning rigid in his seat, Remus glanced forward at their friends. Both were squinting eagerly ahead at the road, while James drove and Peter did his best to provide back-seat advice.

"Padfoot, you don't know what it is you're doing," Remus murmured.

Sirius slid his hand higher. "I think I do."

'I need somebody, save your loving for me!
I need somebody, save your loving for me!'

In one fluid movement, Remus had Sirius pushed onto his back against the bus seat.

“Oh!” He gasped, as Remus crouched down over him, the music and rattling filling their ears. *“So* eager.”

“Shuddup.” Remus kissed him and Sirius laughed against his mouth. He let his head lean up against the metal wall just below the window while Remus cradled his neck with his hands, holding Sirius between himself and the bus seat as his boyfriend’s wicked tongue slid further and further into his mouth. It was terribly cramped, trying to keep all their limbs hidden behind the seat ahead of them, but in the moment, Remus didn’t care. He hadn’t kissed Sirius since the day before and was due for a top-up anyway.

Sirius ran his hands up Remus’ sides, only playing at peeling his clothes away before dipping his fingers deeper into the waistband of his jeans. It was tempting and evil, and Remus just ground his hips forward for more, until he could feel the outline of Sirius between both of their trousers as they traced each other’s lips and neck.

Distantly Remus thought he heard James calling his name, but Sirius had moved on—running his teeth along the edge of his jaw and ear and—

“LUPIN!”

That was definitely James.

“YEP—!” Remus blurted, shooting up in the seat and pushing a hand on Sirius’ chest to keep him down. “Sorry! Just er—dropped my… pen?”

“There’s someone coming!” Peter said desperately, before James popped the clutch and the entire trolley started skidding down the gravel road to a stop.

Significantly less aroused, Remus leapt up from the bus seat and threw himself down the aisle where he grabbed the back of James’ seat and peered out into the dark. “What do you… oh shit.” Perhaps a hundred years away or so, a pair of headlights were rounding the side of the lake, dipping in and out of view behind the trees.

“Cut the lights!” Sirius called, appearing behind him, all rosy-cheeked and breathless. He grabbed the cassette player, slamming his hand over the stop button as James put out the headlights. The bus continued to thrum beneath them—if they didn’t sort out what to do and fast they’d be caught for sure.

“We’re still in the middle of the road, he’s gonna drive right over top of us,” James fretted.

“There was that little cut-away path a few yards back,” Peter supplied. “Maybe we can drive down it and hide until they pass!”

Remus took charge immediately. “Potter, outta the way so I can back this thing up. You and Sirius go to the back and make sure I’m not driving us into the lake. Pete, keep an eye on that car.”

Eagerly, James popped up from the seat and he and Sirius took their places at the back of the bus while Remus tried not to let his hands shake as he put the gear stick in reverse.

“Hurry, Moony,” Peter urged, clenching the back of his seat with both hands, “I can see the lights getting closer.”

“I’m gonna keep her straight!” Remus called, slowly beginning to back the bus up down the road. “You two tell me when I need to turn.”

“Got it!” Sirius said. A moment later; “To the left—WAIT—no! I meant my left—your right!”

“DON’T DO THAT!” Remus wailed. He could see the lights directly ahead of them now. Whoever it was would be on them in seconds if they didn’t hide.

“Faster, Moony!” Peter pleaded, throwing himself forward to fist the back of Remus’ shirt.

“To the left!” James cried. “Now the right!”

Remus spun the wheel desperately.

“No, not that far! Left—*left!* Now right again! Careful or you’re gonna drive off the road!”

“There, I see it!” Sirius shouted. “Just a bit more, then you can ease off at the fork!”

Remus grunted; “Peter, you’re choking me!” A second later, James and Sirius were racing up the aisle, pointing out the window to a small side-road that led deeper into the trees. It was pitch black, but if they hesitated any longer the headlamps from the other car were going to light them up like a Christmas tree.

“Turn!” Sirius cried, as Remus threw the gear shift back into forward

and wrenched the steering wheel as far to the left as it could go. The tires gave a nasty squeal, but rolled forward and quickly they were shooting down the side path. When they were just far enough to be hidden amongst the trees, Remus cut the engine and made sure all the lights were off before joining his friends at the back of the bus. As they all peered out and watched the dim headlights creep closer and closer through the foliage, he could feel the thump of his heart beat drumming in his ears. They'd be safe as long as the headlamps didn't catch the reflection off the bus's windows, but he wasn't sure their luck was that good.

The lorry kept coming, and all four Marauders held their breath. Then suddenly, the lights halted at the edge of their trail, the noise of an old vehicle purring in the dark. The driver had stopped.

"You think McGonagall'll expel us for this?" Peter whimpered, making Sirius jab him in the side with an elbow.

"Shhh!"

Remus was still holding his breath. All it would take was for the car to turn into the mouth of the path, then they'd be spotted it'd all be over. Expulsion seemed very likely, indeed. He began to imagine how Lyall would react—disappointed, no doubt. And Giles…? Oh, he'd be furious.

There was a sudden clatter as Sirius fumbled the cassette player and dropped it, knocking the play button and starting the tape up mid-song at full volume. Peter screamed, and James had to clamp a hand over his mouth to silence him.

"Shut it!" Sirius cried, scooping up the player and wrenching open the tape deck to stifle its noise.

"You shut it!" Peter replied, already pushing James off.

"Both of you, be quiet!" James hissed.

"Look," Remus said, pointing, "it's moving off."

They turned to the windows again, but Remus was right. He'd thought for sure that the end was coming, but after a few more seconds of dreadful anxiety, the truck mercifully began to move forward again, plunging on down the road and drawing away from the trolley until its headlamps were lost to the dark.

They all let out a sigh of relief, sagging into different bus seats as calm finally settled over them.

“Bet it was Filch in his bloody lorry,” Peter grumbled.

Sirius sat up straighter; “Bugger—How does he *always know?!”*

"Maybe he's magic. Pretty sure he communicates with that cat of his telepathically."

“I don’t care, let’s just get back to the garage before he decides to take another lap around the lake,” James moaned.

After Remus had backed the bus back onto the main path and they’d decided it was safe to switch their lights on again, he turned to Sirius.

“You want a try?” He asked. “There’s only a bit of lake left to go—you can take her back to the garage.”

Humbly, Sirius accepted and dropped down into the driver’s seat, tracing his hands across the gear stick and steering wheel before throwing it into drive. As he did, the engine heaved and the bus shot forward jerkily before catching, making all of them squeak in surprise.

“You just stalled,” Remus murmured. “You gotta depress the clutch.”

“Pfft—I knew that,” Sirius scoffed, before doing as Remus said and getting the tram moving again. Despite his shaky movements in the beginning, he was a graceful driver, tapping his fingers along the wheel as the cassette played its music.

‘I feel hazy and it’s crazy, forgot everything I know,
Before I leave, give me one more for the road;
All the sad songs and the bad songs the jukebox played tonight,
A little rock and roll will make everything alright;
Drive me home, drive me home!’

“So where does this rank on your scale, Moony?” Sirius asked from his seat.

“And what scale would that be?” Remus asked. He was sitting next to James, watching the way the moonlight cut across the front windshield and highlighted the blue tones in Sirius’ hair.

“You know, the scale of absolute insanity? As comparable to your mates back home? Don’t tell me Good Tom’s ever stolen a bus before?”

“Bus, no, but I’m afraid he’s still got you beat in the stolen car ratio,” Remus chuckled.

"Fucker."

“Your friends sound absolutely insane, Moony,” Peter laughed.

Remus smiled. “You *are* insane.”

“Aw, my heart.” Sopily, James wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled him in close. Remus let him.

“Considering none of us have had a drop of alcohol, I’d call this a tame stint,” James added, making Sirius sigh in irritation.

“It hurts to know we’ll never live up to their lunacy. Next time we should get drunk first.”

“And end up in the lake?" Remus drawled. "Nah, you make up for it in other ways."

Sirius eyed him playfully in the mirror. “Hey, anyone dare me to go faster?”

“No,” Remus and Peter said together, while James cried; *“Yeah!”*

Already appearing smug, Sirius threw the bus into a higher gear, making the engine squeal with effort as it got up to speed. The edge of the road fell away from them in a dark blur, and Sirius took every bend at top speed, skidding the back wheels until they were all grabbing onto the seat ahead of them to remain upright.

“You’re mental!” Remus cried.

“All the best people are!” Sirius cried back.

“I see school!” Peter said, pointing out the window to a row of low-cropped buildings used as storage rooms for the rowing team. At the same moment, the bus hit a horrible pothole, launching all of them out of their seats as the tires came back down to earth and Sirius scrambled to keep the steering wheel straight.

“Bloody—wow!” He laughed. “Did you see—”

“SIRIUS, WATCH OUT!”

Spurned by Remus’ cry, Sirius looked up just in time to see that a section of the road ahead of them had caved out. He didn’t have time to swerve around it before their front tire caught the dirt and the whole trolley was toppling off to the right, diving downwards off the road. They crashed down the embankment with four erratic screams, and might have flipped entirely had Sirius’ forward momentum not kept them soaring across the dirt hill and toward the stone-covered edge of Lake Dubh.

They hit the water's surface with a great smack, sliding into its depths with such speed that the icy lake was instantly flooding into the cabin, leaking under the door and rising up over the stairs in seconds.

“FUCK!” Sirius cried, scrambling to free himself from the driver’s seatbelt.

“Out the back!” James yelped, grabbing Peter and pushing him ahead of himself.

Dazed—he’d smacked his head on the seat ahead of himself—Remus reached for Sirius, grabbing him by the back of the shirt. “Sirius, come on!”

“I can’t find the tape deck!” Sirius moaned, before letting out another screech as the freezing water leaked up to his ankles.

“Forget the bloody tape deck!” Fisting the back of his shirt tightly, he hauled Sirius down the bus’s aisle toward the back doors. They had to practically climb to do so; the trolley was sinking nose-first toward the endless bottom of Lake Dubh, and it wanted to take them with it.

James and Peter had reached the back doors first, throwing the emergency handle wide and flooding the cabin even further. “SWIM!” James ordered, and a second later all four of them had thrown themselves into the freezing water.

“Kick, Peter!”

“I am kicking!”

“Don’t let it suck you down!”

Sputtering over a mouthful of water, Remus looked left and right, desperately trying to spot Sirius’ flailing arms and legs in the pitch

darkness. “Sirius? *SIRIUS?!”*

“I’m right here!” He called, pushing him on by the shoulder. “Swim, Lupin, swim!”

As shocking as the accident had been, they weren’t all that far from shore. Haggard and stunned, they dragged themselves onto the banks of the Dubh and turned, breathlessly watching as the trolley’s back end bobbed in the water for a few moments like a fishing lure, before gurgling and disappearing beneath the surface. Remus could see as the headlamps slipped down into the deep, before ultimately sputtering out and leaving all evidence of the trolley lost to the lake.

“Well,” James breathed, his black curls damp and sad, “sure wasn’t expecting that.”

"You jinxed us, Moony!" Sirius wheezed. Remus glared at him. “You must like bloody lakes more than I thought!”

“Is everyone alright?” Remus grumbled.

“No,” Sirius answered; “What am I gonna tell Fergus about his tape deck?”

“That’s what you’re worried about?!” Peter guffawed. “We just sunk an entire bus in the lake! We are so fucked!”

James held his head in his hands. “Pete’s right…”

“You sure about that?” Sirius asked.

At his words, Peter began to splutter; “O-Of course I’m sure! An entire bus—just gone!”

“Gone,” Sirius echoed, nodding. “Gone with no evidence…”

“Oh my god.”

Sirius threw his arms out. “I’m right though, right?! No evidence! I don’t see a bus! Do you?” He looked to James. “Did you see what happened to Pete’s mysterious trolley, Prongs?”

James looked down like he was weighing his entire future and career as football captain before raising his head; “No, Padfoot. As a matter of fact… I didn’t.”

“Well, Wormtail? Do *you* happen to see the missing trolley

anywhere?"

Peter moaned, he looked like he wanted to argue, but Peter had never been much good at that. "No… No, I do not."

Everyone looked at Remus.

"And you, Mr. Prefect?" Sirius started, smiling guiltily. "Did you see what happened?"

Remus rubbed his eyes. He was wet and cold and miserable, and yet he couldn't bring himself to care all that much.

"… What trolley?"

Sirius snorted and pushed himself to his feet, clothes dripping on the stone beach. "Well, I feel a bit bad, but who knows what could've happened? Maybe Filch took her for a whirl."

"This is insane," Peter said. Sirius helped him to his feet, patting his friend on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, Wormy. We just went for a midnight swim, s'all. Perfectly innocent."

Still in varying states of disbelief, they started up the beach to the road. Trailing behind, Remus shook his head; "If anyone finds out about—"

" 'If'," Sirius said quickly. " 'If' they find out."

Peter and James started laughing simultaneously, and Remus just started after that beautiful lunatic of a boy. They were lucky, really. Lucky they hadn't gotten caught, lucky none of them had been hurt, lucky they'd found each other in the first place.

"C'mon, Marauders," Sirius said finally, using his hands to clamber up the embankment to the road, "let's go write a song about all this."

"And get drunk or something?" James offered.

It was Sirius' turn to laugh.

"And get drunk."

* * *

Tuesday 11th October 1977 – Two weeks later…

Remus thoughtfully tapped the tip of his pencil against his songbook. He wasn't really sure when he'd started referring to it as that, but it was what Tonya had intended the journal to be for, and its pages didn't hold anything other than his nonsensical scribbling anyway. Some of it though, some of it wasn't bad.

So bring me back to July,
Warm and rich with soft orange skies;
There we could talk about anything we want,
But now we're left—
We're left with winter;
You say not yet,
It's only September…

He'd written 'September' for the month that never seemed to end. For all those days he and Sirius had spent off-kilter. When those had passed and they'd finally talked, he'd looked at it again and decided that it somehow still fit. Remus didn't think they'd ever have another summer like the last, but that just meant that they'd have to try to make the next one even better. If you were to get specific then they'd really only been together for the tail-end of July, but very few things rhymed with fucking 'August' anyway.

Dropping the pencil, he turned back to James' acoustic guitar and began plucking away at the gentle piece he'd been toying with for the last couple of days. It was much easier to write songs on the guitar, the melodies came so much quicker and all it really took was a bit of chord progression to make a decent sounding lick. So far Sirius hadn't caught on to his sudden interest in the new instrument, and he hoped it would stay that way. It'd be nice to get to surprise him on his birthday. There was no way he would be presenting him such a song as sappy as 'September' though.

"Could you *please* stop with that incessant strumming?" Regulus hissed from the other side of the office.

"I thought you weren't talking to me," Remus said haughtily.

"I'm not, but your poor attempt at a pentatonic scale is making my

ears bleed."

"Oh, you mean this?" He strummed the guitar furiously.

"Yes! It's horrid!"

"I'm so sorry, m'lord, shall I find you some ear plugs?"

Regulus scowled bitterly before turning away from him, back to the pile of files they were supposed to be organising for the records department. All it had taken was one grumbled complaint from Remus over the right to child labour for Regulus to tell him to buzz off, but Remus suspected he'd have done as much regardless.

"If you'd actually let me help we'd be out of here a lot quicker, you know," Remus said.

Regulus promptly ignored him, and as punishment he gave another harsh strum. Not even a glance this time.

Unsatisfied, Remus clamped his hands over the strings and huffed. He knew neither of them wanted to be there, and it all felt rather moot anyway. Simply trying to talk to Regulus was impossible. He often wondered if it was his fault—for encouraging the cruel prank they'd played the year before—but Regulus had always been sour. There wasn't anything he could do to change that.

Bored and about ready to fall asleep in his chair, Remus stared up at the clock and watched its hands count down. Absent-mindedly, he began plucking his D string in time with the seconds; *dun, dun, dun.* Quickly that descended into the opening riff of "Smoke On the Water"; *dun-dun-dun! Dun-dun-DUH-dun!*

"God—don't you know any real music?" Regulus snapped.

"It was a fucking D chord."

"... 'D' for 'dickhead', I suppose."

Remus' patience was thinning. "Tell me, what constitutes 'real' music, Reg?"

"Something that doesn't sound like you picked it up off your back porch!"

He almost brushed the comment off, but that vicious part of him that was always lying in wait managed to dig itself to the surface. Quickly

he tugged the folder of sheet music from his bag, throwing it open on the desk to his right.

“Sorry it’s not ‘courante’,” Remus said snidely, before giving his best rendition of Bach’s "Solfeggiettio". The piece obviously wasn't written for guitar, but he really only knew a couple of the arpeggios anyway, and he only wanted to be stubborn in the first place. It sounded terrible, all clunky and nothing like the sweet serenata he’d caught Regulus playing the year before, but it was enough to shut the other boy up for a little while.

When he’d finished with the parts he knew, Remus looked up. “That ‘real’ enough for you? Or is your witch of mother gonna show up and beat me with a stick until it sounds right?”

It was subtle, perhaps even a trick of the light, but for a second Regulus’ eyes turned glassy. He turned away for the third time, back to his stacks of papers, only this time his usually-nimble fingers slipped and the records scattered across the classroom’s tile floor. He cursed, embarrassed, and Remus let out a sigh as he slowly set the guitar aside and came to join him across the room.

“I don’t need your help,” Regulus rumbled, as Remus began gathering the papers together.

“Yeah well, I actually want to make it to supper on time.”

“I said I don’t need help!” Regulus raised his hand, but Remus saw it coming from a mile away. Before he could bring his palm anywhere close to him, he snatched the other boy’s arm out of the air, holding it tightly as Regulus tried to wrench himself free.

“You were really gonna try and hit me?” Remus breathed in moderate disbelief.

Regulus grunted pitifully. His wrist was thin, like a bird’s.

“Let me go!”

Remus did as he demanded, releasing the fragile wrist and letting Regulus fall back on his butt on the floor. Tired and absolutely finished with the pointless squabble, Remus matched him, sitting back and cradling his knees very casually.

“Okay, you’ve had your chance at a swing, now is this the part where we actually have a civil conversation, or do we need to go a few more

rounds?"

Regulus glared back at him, but didn't try anything else. He wasn't stupid, at least.

"Why are you even still here?" He spat.

"Because it's part of our job," Remus shot back.

"Ha, yeah right. I'll bet you're just afraid your crazy girlfriend'll hunt you down the moment you walk outside."

Remus rolled his eyes. "Jillian *isn't* my girlfriend."

"You should tell her that then. Maybe then it'd get her to stop coming around. She's annoying."

"So are you, you sour sod. Jillian stopped coming around weeks ago, we're just friends now."

"How easy that must be for you. 'Remus Lupin—friend to the masses'."

"You know, this attitude of yours is getting a bit old."

"You know what's getting old? Having to listen to you yammer on."

"As if. You're like if Ms. Pince and Filch had a baby. I never thought I'd feel bad for Barty."

"I feel bad for your face!"

Remus laughed. "Is this the same brain that got you top marks in your year?"

"At least I know what a top mark looks like."

Remus' laughter faded. "At least I've had my first kiss."

"Bragging about being a slag, Lupin? That's new. And here I thought you were frigid."

"Can you even get a stalk-on?"

"Can you? Or is that just a baby carrot you dropped down your trousers?"

“That’s pretty crude, coming from you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I use too many syllables? I’ll try to keep to three or less so as to not confuse your tiny brain.”

“You know what? You’re not as smart as you think you are.”

“And how smart do I think I am?”

“Nice. Now you sound like a real toff.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Remus slapped his hands down on his thighs. “God, you’re incessant!”

“No, just more clever than you!” Regulus hissed back.

“This is about last year, isn’t it? I know it is, because you weren’t nearly as intolerable back then!”

“Oh, because I’ve always wanted to be tolerable for you!”

“It was a prank!” He wailed. “A fucked up prank, I know! But I’ve tried apologising—dozens of times! You just won’t get off my bloody back about it!”

“I don’t want your apologies,” Regulus scoffed. “Eventually everyone’s gonna realise you’re just as slimy as the next chav, and it’ll be them you’ll have to deal with.”

“You sound like Snape.”

“You sound like an idiot.”

Remus shook his head. *Lord, how you test me.*

“I’m surprised you even care about this,” Regulus kept on; “Everyone knows you’re only agreed to be a prefect because McGonagall made you. Either that or you were out on your arse, isn’t that right?”

“Okay, fine. Tell me then, Reg, why are *you* a prefect? As far as I can tell you have about as much interest in other people as you do the dust on that windowsill. I mean, do you even like *anything?* Anything at all?! Or does your apple not fall that far from the Black family tree?”

Regulus’ mouth grew even more pinched and he looked away again,

shoulders square and tight like a cornered animal. Remus hated it, but he instantly felt bad.

“Sirius does the same thing, you know,” he started, more softly. “He gets this guilty look when he’s angry—eggs us on until we’re angry too, that way he doesn’t have to feel so bad about yelling. I think it’s just a fear thing. If we’re mad at him it means his guilt is justified and he doesn’t have to kill himself wondering why he felt so awful in the first place.”

Regulus was on his feet in an instant. *“Don’t—!* Compare. Me. To *him.”*

“Wasn’t comparing you," Remus replied cuttingly. "Only said that you do the same thing. It’s up to you how you want to take it.”

Regulus scoffed at him again, snatching up the papers from the floor and setting them back in order. “Are you done with your shitty life lessons yet or are you going to make yourself useful and go get the damn secretary?”

“Didn’t realise you were finished.” Remus sighed, pushing himself to his feet. He paused at Regulus’ side, watching him furiously tap papers into neat piles.

All year, a voice rang, *you’re going to be dealing with this all year.*

“We are sorry for what we did,” he told him quietly, “all of us. If you… If you actually talked to him, he’d tell you that himself.”

“Just go away.”

Remus did. After collecting his bag and the guitar, he left Regulus to his bitter silence and made his way through the Flamel Block feeling frustrated and defeated. He wished he didn’t care so much. A part of it was self-preservation, sure—he *was* going to have to spend the next several months at Regulus’ brooding side—but the rest felt like a favour to Sirius. Which was stupid because Sirius had never asked him to mend the broken bridges between him and his family in the first place. It was so exhausting that it should’ve cured his insomnia on the spot. The Black brothers were meddlesome and exhausting in their own right too. In a lot of ways they were similar like that. Remus hoped he never had to meet the rest of the unsavoury clan.

As he was rounding another corner, a door clicked open ahead of him and none other than Chastity Bell stepped out. Before she could spot him, Remus slipped behind a display of academic trophies and

watched as she glanced around, as though she were making sure she was alone. He felt a little silly; it was after lesson hours, everyone else should've been at study hour. Plus, there was the added fact that the doorway she'd come out of belonged to a supply cupboard.

Apparently satisfied that she was alone, Chastity turned back to the cupboard and picked up a bag. As she did so, Remus got the perfect view of her leaning back into the doorway as if she was talking to someone. Finally she shut it and began promptly straightening out her uniform, adjusting her finger-mussed hair and dabbing at her lipstick before setting off down the hallway away from him.

Oh. Well, that's juicy. Someone else must still be inside. He imagined how it would feel to tell Sirius that his ex was having secret trysts in the janitor's closet and immediately got a little thrill. Remus wasn't a gossip, but who could resist this?

Would it be someone from their year, he wondered, as he laid quietly in wait. There were fewer of them than last year, it being A-Levels, but there were enough eligible Hawkings boys to make it story-worthy. Was it Lance Brady, maybe? Preston Ross? Someone with enough money or prestige to make Chastity look twice, surely. *God,* he really hoped it wasn't a teacher.

Several agonizingly-long seconds passed and no one had emerged from the closet. Getting impatient, and very aware of the grumbling in the base of his stomach, Remus finally left his hiding spot and strolled down the hall, careful to keep his footsteps quiet. Perhaps he'd been seeing things and the cupboard was empty after all, but then why would Chastity…?

Remus reached for the door handle. A millisecond before he was about to grab hold of it and twist, the door shot open, narrowly missing his nose as he fell back away from it. His eyes shot wide when he realised who it was, and she looked up at him, horrified.

"Marlene?"

"Remus!" Marlene gasped, clutching at the front of her school shirt. "Oh my god—you just about frightened the fucking life out of me! What are you doing here?"

"I think the better question is, what are *you* doing here?"

Marlene straightened up, clearing her throat a bit as a blush crept up her neck. Her shirt was misbuttoned and untucked from her skirt. and

her short, wheat-blonde hair had been mussed like she'd been running her fingers through it.

"It's nothing," she muttered quickly, coming out of the supply cupboard and nearly tripping over a mop bucket. As Remus reached to steady her, she flinched and then sheepishly shut the door before attempting to do up her school tie with nervous fingers. "You didn't happen to see—uhm…"

"Chastity?"

"Y-Yeah! Did you see which way she went? She—er, forgot her study notes!"

"You were studying in a closet?"

Marlene's tie unravelled and they looked at each other for a moment. Remus got chills. All of the colour had drained from her face; she was utterly caught. It was that inevitable waterfall moment, and only he could catch her.

"Marls—"

"Please don't tell anyone."

He wasn't sure why, but Remus baulked. Never before had he thought he'd find himself on the other side of such a dreadful conversation.

"I…"

"It was a mistake," she whimpered, tears lining her lashes. "It didn't—I-I'm not… Chastity's just… *oh god."*

He could feel her fear like it was his own. She was terrified. Any second now she'd pitch herself off a cliff—Remus had pictured it in his mind more times than he could count.

"It's alright," he said quickly. "I understand. I won't tell anyone."

That was when Marlene really began to cry. She clamped her lips into a thin line and then covered her face with her hands, falling into him so she might sob in the embrace of another. Remus held her, and it was like holding himself. Not healing, just… enough for the moment. They stayed there a while and he counted each second, listening to her sobs.

"I won't tell anyone," he murmured into her hair. "I won't tell. I won't

tell. I won't ever tell. I'll… I'll die first."

Marlene pulled away. She wiped her cheeks. Then she smiled at him, faintly.

"You dramatic fool. You can't die, I need you. You're my bestest friend, Remus."

Remus sighed—pure relief.

"Then I'll wash James' football kit. Or I'll tear out my own fingernails, and let Mary play me her mixtapes. Jump into a tank of man-eating sharks. I'll even partner up with Snape for a lab project and pay him a compliment—*and* I'll actually mean it."

"Will you start going on morning runs with me and Potter?"

"Okay, so there are some limits."

She laughed, sadly, and looked down, wiping beneath her eyes again. "Ugh. I hate crying."

"Me too."

"I look so ugly when I cry. Mum used to say the toilet's the only good place for crying... at least there you can wash your face."

"... Hey, Marls?"

She looked up at him. "Yeah?"

You're pretty, he almost said. Almost.

"You really don't have to worry about me telling anyone 'cause… Sirius and I… we…"

Realisation dawned on her face, and Marlene's entire body fell slack at once, stepping back as though the shock was travelling to every inch of her body. Remus felt a bolt of panic, but before any horrid thoughts could surface in his mind, Marlene opened her mouth.

"Holy shit." She clapped a hand to her forehead, blinking incredulously. "I mean—HOLY SHIT!"

"Shhh!" Remus hissed, grabbing her other wrist. "… I know."

"You and Black?" She whispered harshly, wiping her face once more—

tears all but forgotten.

"Yeah."

“Like, for reals?!”

“For reals.”

“Jesus-fucking-christ.” A smile exploded onto her face. “You and—fuck! You know, this actually makes so much sense. I’m just—like, wow. Holy shit...”

His jaw was trembling from nerves, but Remus found that he was smiling too. “I know,” he said sheepishly; “It’s kind of insane.”

Marlene took both of his hands. “For how long?”

“Since summer. Maybe a bit before that, but things were… messy.”

She sighed, and then sniffed again, rubbing at her tear-streaked face. “I can’t believe I didn’t clock the two of you first. You’ve been fighting like a pair of angry hens—I knew something was up! Mary said it was just your usual drama, but I thought… Oh man, this is… just—*wow!”*

“You can’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t!” Marlene said quickly, locking her lips and throwing away the key. “Never. I… I’m just so glad you told me. Does anyone else know?”

“No one aside from Sirius.” He bit his lip. “And if it’s alright to say, I’m really not sure I’m ready for that. For others to... you know.”

“I get it,” she nodded. “You don’t want them to look at you differently. Neither do I.”

Of course she gets it, Remus thought. They were the same, always had been. They’d been each other’s first time, and now they were each other’s keepers. It felt almost like fate.

“Hey, Marls?” Remus said again. “You’re really, *really* pretty.”

“Fuck off, ya poof.”

“You are. I’m not just saying it.”

She cupped her cheeks then, embarrassed, and sighed happily. *Thank*

you, she mouthed.

You're welcome, he mouthed back.

She laughed at him then, Marlene, pretty like the sun. Even with eyes rimmed red and snot lining her upper lip, it was the truth. It didn't matter that one day they'd be wrinkly and old, smelling of prunes and maybe even voting Tory over Labour; as long as she was Marlene, Remus would love her forever.

Chapter End Notes

A 'milk float' is a milk delivery truck. 'Lorry' is also a truck. Trish is Scottish and uses some Scottish slang. I am decidedly, not Scottish, so if anyone who is thinks her delivery is somehow over the top, lmk so I might tone it down ^^

Songs are: "Slow Ride", "Save Your Love (For Me)", and "Drive Me Home", all by Foghat. The one after the lake crash is a song I've written for fic purposes (see below).

It's been asked a few times, but just to clarify for those who are curious—every song "written" by a character in this fic is a song that I've written. Unless explicably stated within fic or in the chapter end notes, then I've probably written it. That being said, I am NOT a song writer lmfao. I can't even write poetry (a true bane, to be sure) so if they're lame, I really can't help it askjhfkjdh I had decided early on that I didn't have any desire to 'repurpose' modern songs for this fic because it felt,,, idk,,, outside of the canon I'd built? Maybe I just like making more work for myself... (see you next week xx)

Chapter 76: Communication Breakdown

Chapter Summary

Remus and Marlene grow even closer, while others... unknowingly drift apart.

Chapter Notes

Chapter picks up almost directly after Remus & Marlene's "discovery" the chapter before. Maybe re-read if you're having trouble remembering any of it.
I open the chapter with a Beatles song, but [personally] I love the 1995 Oasis cover even more, haha. Just a rec.

I'm not super confident in this chapter, like maybe I was trying to juggle too many things, but it came down to just posting it and letting it go or going crazy over it for forever, so here it is, meh.

CW: Difficult conversations throughout regarding sexuality and religion. Sex discussed in passing conversation and sexual content toward the end of chapter, though I'd consider it relatively mild. If you're not interested, stop reading at '> > >'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everywhere people stare,
Each and ev'ryday;
I can see them laugh at me,
And I hear them say;
Hey, you've got to hide your love away,
Hey, you've got to hide your love away…

- "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away" The Beatles, 1965

Later that evening…

Remus had never known another queer person aside from Sirius, and that had never really counted for much, considering they were both so dense when it came to things such as *queer* matters. Marlene, on the other hand, seemed to know everything. Within the first few hours of coming out to each other, she'd told Remus all there was to know

about gay and lesbian rights within the UK. It got to the point that he was starting to feel stupid. Marlene had clearly done her research, and considered herself a part of those communities, even if no one else knew it. It was harder for Remus—thinking of himself as the same as those who campaigned for their rights. And well... baby steps, he supposed.

“Homosexuality is still technically illegal here in Scotland, but for England and Wales, the age of consent for gay men is twenty-one,” she’d informed him; “Which is complete bollocks too, of course. It’s only sixteen for heterosexual couples. The laws are more murky for lesbians—they always are, it’s the misogyny—but generally there’s still the threat of conviction if you’re caught. I’ve looked into it and Hawkings doesn’t have any rules prohibiting buggery, but they’re bound by Scottish laws, so…”

It was a dreary conversation, one Remus would rather not be having, but a part of him felt blessed. The information burst out Marlene like a geyser. She talked about how sexuality was a ‘spectrum’ and gender was ‘subjective to the majority party’—that was, whoever held the power decided what gender was to be. She had all these theories too, like about how Hollywood was always covering up its stars' 'queerness' and that everyone was at least five percent gay. Remus realised early on that he’d have quelled much of his emotional turmoil had he just come out to her sooner. She knew exactly what he meant the moment he described the sort of attraction he’d felt not only for Sirius, but for other boys and girls as well.

“So you’re bisexual?” She’d asked, simple as that. Remus still had trouble saying the word himself, but he’d nodded timidly and she hadn’t pressed the matter any more.

Afterward they'd made their way toward the Flamel Block, skipping dinner and setting up in their regular spot. Remus enjoyed it, and the familiar place provided a sense of calm amidst such a worrying conversation, but as reluctant as he was to discuss his own sexuality, Marlene seemed to hold no such qualms. They’d talked well into the evening about how Marlene had always known she were gay, but like so many, she’d tried squashing the feelings—the *urges*—hoping they’d dissipate on their own.

“I honestly thought I could like you,” she’d told him, blue eyes turning glassy again. “You know, the way Mary likes all of her boyfriends, but it never felt quite right. I’m sorry if this hurts your feelings.”

“It doesn’t,” he’d replied. “I liked you, but Sirius was always there, even, I think... when I didn’t understand what that meant."

"And now?"

"It’s always been him, Cherry... But yeah, I still liked you.”

She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. “God, if I could put you in Chastity Bell’s body…”

Remus had laughed then, and then Marlene filled him in on everything to do with her and Chastity. It turned out that the two of them had been innocently paired off together for a class project and because Chastity found it hilarious to tease everyone, she’d waited until they were alone in the library to dare Marlene to kiss her over their textbooks. Apparently she hadn’t been banking on Marlene actually doing it. The little peck had ignited something between the two of them, but no matter how well things went under the covers, they couldn’t help but argue the moment it was over.

“It’ll never turn into anything serious,” Marlene said; “She’s not like… you know. Not really. I don’t even think she’s bisexual, just likes the attention, maybe. Is Sirius like that?”

“No,” Remus said. “He’s queer.”

“But he’s dated so many girls.”

“He’s queer, Cherry.”

Marlene fell quiet a moment, before ultimately nodding in understanding. “Have the two you told anyone else?”

“Not really. There’s one friend back home that knows—Tomny—but that was mostly a mistake.”

“Did he catch you walking straight outta the closet too?”

“No, I sort of kissed him.”

“Oh shit—ballsy!”

Remus shook his head. “No. I told Sirius I loved him for the first time, and then kissed Tomny the same bloody day, like a royal fucking idiot. Completely ruined everything for a while there.”

Marlene grimaced. “I take it Sirius didn't react very well?”

“No, but that’s hardly his fault. We figured it out in the end though. You sorta helped actually.”

She perked up. “I did?”

“That book of yours—the mating ritual one? Helped me figure out that I was… erm… bi…”

“As in, bi… sexual?”

“Yeah, that.”

Marlene giggled faintly. Then she took his hand and kissed it. “Well, I’m honoured.”

“Have you told anyone else?”

“No. I can’t help but imagine myself telling other people though. Like I could say something to the girls, but… nah.”

“You don’t think it would go well?”

“It’s not that. Obviously I know they’d still love me, but it’d be different. And I don’t want everyone to always be thinking about it, you know? I don’t want to miss out on the big moments of their lives just because I wasn’t… *like* them. I want to walk in their weddings, and be a good aunt to my nephew—and I want to be proud of who I love, but I also want to spend holidays with my family and live in relative peace, and…” She broke off, wiping a single tear from her cheek. “I don’t want to just be ‘Marls the lesbian’.”

Remus nearly shattered. How excruciating it was to hear his own thoughts said aloud.

“I’m the same way. Telling people is…”

“Hard,” she sniffled, sadly. “It’s hard, I know, and maybe it sounds ridiculous, but I sorta used to wish that my family would just figure it out on their own. That way at least they’d have saved me the torture of having to say it myself. But I'm pretty sure they don’t suspect a thing. Perks of living far from home, I guess.”

“And you won’t ever tell them?”

She shook her head. “Truly, I think that would be it for me. It's like, a few years ago there was this guy at our parish… His name was Adam. He helped run the youth ministry. And I—I really only ever saw him

at Christmas or during the summers, but I remember he used to be there *every* time we had church. Never missed a single mass. But then one day, he just… didn't show up."

Remus stared down at his hands. He already knew where her story was going, and he couldn't bring himself to look at her as she told it.

"Everyone was talking about it, of course," Marlene scoffed. "They called him such horrible things. A dirty queer—filthy homo. Said he was going to Hell… but my mum—*oh god,* my mum, ever the faithful servant—she said that we should *pray* for Adam! Beg God to forgive him for his sins. And I… Well, I did! I prayed *every day*. I prayed that he'd get better, as if he were broken, as if he needed to be *saved*. But then I began to realise how big of a hypocrite I was, so I started praying for myself too and I was terrified. I mean—*fuck!* I literally tried to 'pray the gay away', can you believe that?"

He could sense her spiralling, and so to save them both, Remus slid across the window bench and gathered Marlene into his shoulder. "Hey, hey," he told her, "I understand. It's alright."

"No, it ain't alright—it's fucking laughable! I just feel so stupid! I still talk to God, but I don't know if He even hears me anymore."

"He does," Remus swore. "He has to. Doesn't God love all of his creations—even the queer ones?"

"That's what they like to tell us, but then they get spiteful when we turn it around on them." Marlene wiped her cheeks. "I love my family, Remus, for whatever they may be. And I love my faith too. I know you don't believe in God, but I love talking to Him. He makes me feel good."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me, Marlene. I love your faith. It inspires me... You inspire me."

She looked up at him, and then pushed the chair from his face, holding him by either cheek. "You're amazing, you are."

He cupped his hands over hers, and let himself breathe. It was peaceful.

"Tell me what it was like for you," he whispered; "To kiss a girl for the first time and really *know."*

"To 'know'?" She echoed wryly.

“Yeah, I need to know—is Chastity Bell really such a great snog? Have I missed out that badly?”

Marlene laughed, and though it was more like a sigh, Remus was relieved. After she released his face he helped her wipe her tears away, and that Marlene smile shone through. “How’d you know Chastity was the first girl I ever kissed?”

He gasped; "Cherry! So this means you’ve kissed someone else then?”

"Maybe."

"Well? Don't leave us in suspense."

Marlene leaned back against the window, eyes drifting off wistfully. “I never even knew her real name actually, everyone just called her ‘Dee’.”

“How daring. Where’d you meet her?”

“Morocco—over the summer. But she’s actually from London.”

“Shit.”

“I know, small world. But she was volunteering too, and I really just saw her and… mhm…”

“She must’ve been really something, to put you at such a loss for words. What’d she look like?”

“Oh—gorgeous! She wore her hair in locs with these beautiful glass beads and cowrie shells, and... and she had just the *best* style. She liked music too, knew so much about it. You would’ve liked her.”

“Well, you said she’s from London. Have you tried looking her up?”

Marlene shrugged haplessly. “Dunno, felt a bit weird. She ended up leaving first and we just sorta… said goodbye. Seemed like the end of it.”

“Does this make her the one that got away?” He teased.

“Nah, more like the one I was lucky to find.”

Remus thought that it was a beautiful way to look at it.

“But what about you and Sirius?” Marlene prodded. “I’ve heard your

other story—about how you bravely rescued him from his family—but it must've been a hot couple of days before heading over to the Potters, eh?"

Remus swallowed a smirk. "Well…"

He'd never seen Marlene so scandalised. Even afterwards, as she mocked him, she was kind. She never pushed for any detail he wasn't more than willing to give, and always waited patiently so that he could find the right words. That was the best part about Marlene—she never demanded the heavy stuff, but was always strong enough to help you carry it.

It seemed as though they'd run out of night before they'd run out of things to talk about, but eventually they were both struggling not to fall asleep on the window bench. They had to dodge Filch's lorry on their way out, but by the time they were coming up on Rowena house it was the dead of night and the cool air had turned their cheeks pink.

"You're sure I look alright?" Marlene asked, fretting over her swollen eyes. "I don't want them to know I was crying in case they're still awake."

"You look great," he told her. She rolled her eyes (with love) and a second later they'd stopped beneath her bedroom window.

"I'm so grateful for you, Remus. Seems like you're always looking out for me. You're like a gay guardian angel."

"I think you mean, *bisexual* guardian angel."

"Oh good, so you can say it aloud." She wrapped her arms around his neck, and Remus hugged her back.

"Thank you," Marlene said. "I can't wait to talk to Sirius."

"Me neither," he said, meaning it.

There was a short clattering noise, and they both looked up to find Mary sticking her head out the window, night bonnet and all. "Blithering Christ, do you know what time—oh." She squinted in the dark. "Is that where you've been then—off shagging under the moonlight?"

"Ugh—no!" Marlene scoffed, springing away.

“Mhm, alright. Does this mean the two of you back together then?”

“Marls may have suggested it,” Remus called, “but I’m a simple bloke, and she’s just a bit too high-maintenance for me.”

"Shut up." Marlene pushed him then, and Remus went down on his arse in the damp grass. “We just got caught up talking, now move your fat head outta the way so I can come inside,” she grunted, while climbing onto the electrical box.

Mary sniggered; “Jealous Remus was the only one who got to ‘come inside’?”

A shriek cut across the night as Marlene reached up to tug on Mary’s bonnet and let it smack back into place over her eyes.

“I’m blind! She’s blinded me!” The girl wailed, as she ducked back out of sight. Inside, Remus could just make out the voice of a one, sleep-addled Lily, telling her off for being so dramatic.

“I’m never going to date you again, you know,” Marlene said, pausing with her hands on the edge of the window.

Remus stood up from the grass. “I know.”

“—But I do love you.”

He smiled. “Sleep tight, Cherry.”

She blew him a kiss, and then clambered up inside, shutting the window after her. He had to watch back to Godric alone in the darkness, but Remus didn’t feel the least bit lonely. He was actually entertaining the idea of waking Sirius up and telling him the good news right then, but luckily Sirius was practically a mind-reader.

“There you are!” He called, nearly making Remus jump out of his skin as he passed by the common room archway. Sirius swung himself up from one of the sofas, where he must’ve been waiting, and draped his arms across the back, looking irritated.

“Finally back from prefect duties, I see. Thought my brother had killed you.”

“He wanted to,” Remus said. “Suppose his conscience won out today.”

“What conscience?”

Remus chuckled. The common room was empty apart from the two of them, but he was already feeling daring. He strode straight up to Sirius and grabbed him by the collar of his nightshirt, pulling him in for a much needed kiss. Naturally Sirius reciprocated, and after a few seconds, grabbed hold of Remus' arms and all but hauled him over the sofa back.

"Blimey," he panted, when they'd finally broken apart again. "Not that I'm complaining, but what's brought all this on?"

"I told Marlene about us."

Sirius' mouth dropped open, clearly astonished. "You... You did?"

"I did."

"Holy shit."

"That's exactly what she said when I told her."

Sirius gave him a hopeless smile, as though he still couldn't quite believe it. "You really told someone," he said.

"Yup." Raising a hand, Remus pushed a piece of hair out of Sirius' eyes, stopping to stroke the skin over his eyebrow with the pad of his thumb. "I'm sorry it wasn't James or Peter. It's different with them, you'll—you'll see why, and... I'm still sorta working on this. I swear, I am."

Sirius kissed him again, this time on the mouth, then again across his neck and collarbone. "Don't be stupid, this is good news."

"I thought so too," Remus said, biting his lip over a moan. Sirius had moved upwards and was tracing the shell of his ear with his tongue. He felt every breath, and Sirius' roaming fingers across the front of his chest were doing wonders. "Now at least this way, if we have another fight, you'll have someone to vent to," he mumbled. "Marlene's a—*ah!* —a pretty good listener..."

Sirius broke away, mouth open to show a single, pink tongue. "You want me to vent to your ex-girlfriend?"

"There have been weirder relationships," Remus said, already chasing his mouth. "Trust me."

They kissed again, and Sirius moaned against Remus' lips; *"You're*

mental."

"Mm… Mental makes art… Right, Black?"

He retaliated with a single strategic bite—directly over Remus' bottom lip, and they were both done for after that. Sirius pulled him down on top of himself, already reaching for Remus' belt. There was a metallic rattle, only distantly heard over the sounds of their kissing, and then a second as Remus began ridding Sirius of his own. It was foolish, he knew; they were right there in the open—anyone could come down during a late-night spell of sleeplessness and catch them directly in the act, but in the moment Remus did not care. It was a fleeting shred of recklessness, otherwise disguised as bravery, and he wanted to feel Sirius upon him everywhere.

"Sometimes I think I've thought you up," Sirius said after. They were fully dressed again, but with a blush still impressed on both their cheeks. "That one day I'll open my eyes and you'll have never existed at all. All the time, I have to check just to see if you're real, else I'll go absolutely insane."

Remus tongued the inside of his cheek. He could've explained to Sirius how mental it was, but he understood better than anyone how it felt to wake up without the person you loved most there beside you. So instead he took one of Sirius' hands in his own and pressed it to the centre of his chest, between the open buttons of his shirt, and just over his heart.

"Real," he said. "Always real."

Sirius splayed his fingers wide, and slowly he raised his gaze from Remus' beating chest to his face. His eyes were so grey—and so, *so* beautiful.

"Remus Lupin," Sirius said, "you are the sky."

* * *

Wednesday 19th October 1977 – A few days later…

Remus had to hand it to McGonagall, when it came to keeping the dorm kitchenettes stocked, she did not cheap out. There was always tea and biscuits galore for those late-night study sessions, but that

evening, the only thing that was getting schooled was their arses in a game of poker. He really didn't know how Lottie did it, but they'd never managed to catch her cheating no matter how many rounds she won. He already owed her three packs of cigarettes for that evening alone, but it'd been a while since they'd all had a night-off together, especially a Wednesday.

"Need any help?" Marlene said, appearing at his side while Remus set to arranging their drinks on his tray.

He glanced at her. "Thought you were gonna head out?"

"Nah. Decided I didn't want to deal with Chastity's bullshit tonight. Rung her dorm and she said pretty much the same for me."

"I still don't get why you continue to see her. You don't even like each other."

She glared at him lightly. "You really don't get it? I thought you'd be the only one *to* get it—get it?"

Remus puckered, slightly abashed for picking on her. Of course he got it. "But I thought you said she wasn't…"

"I said she wasn't gay," Marlene muttered, "not that I wasn't gonna see her. Now do you need any help or not? 'Cause Lily's going on about binomials and Oxbridge again and I can't take much more exams-talk in flippin' October."

Sighing, Remus put the sugar tin away. "I don't know why she's freaking out so much. She's already sent off like two applications, you'd think she'd have relaxed a bit. Pass me those napkins?"

"You'd think." Marlene passed the paper napkins over as requested. "But what about you? You seem pretty 'relaxed' about all of this. Were your predicted marks just that good?"

"They were fine. Decent."

"Any plans on where you'd like to apply then?"

"Nah. Dad wants me to go for Manchester—that's where he went. But I don't care, he can go top himself."

"So you're really not going to apply anywhere?"

"Hadn't planned on it. You?"

“Maybe a few places…” Marlene replied shyly. “But to be honest, I’m not sure either. I think I’d like to volunteer some more, maybe take a gap year. It’ll give Mum a heart attack, but maybe then I can move out and she’ll finally get off my back a bit.”

“Fucking parents, am I right?”

She laughed, and then because it was Marlene—pushed him, nearly causing Remus to knock over the tray of teacups. “Oh shit,” she snorted, rushing to fix them as Remus also burst into laughter.

“Oi, McKinnon,” Sirius called, appearing through the kitchen doorway. “You best not be coming on to my man.”

“Voice down, Black,” Marlene said, “I was just checking that he didn’t get lost on his way to the fridge.”

Sirius pressed his hands into his pockets, looking amused. “Lottie’s won again, by the way. Hope that’s not why you disappeared, cause I wasn’t done comparing notes.”

Remus cracked a smile. “You suddenly interested in Oxbridge and binomials too, Black?”

“No,” Sirius grinned. “We were talking about shagging, naturally.”

“Ah, yes, *naturally.”*

“It’s actually so fun though—watch,” Marlene keened, before leaning in to Sirius and nudging him with her elbow. “Hey, Black, have you noticed that silly little face Remus makes right before he—*you know?* It’s all like—”

“Yeah,” Sirius cut-in, “I always thought it was the sexiest thing though!”

Marlene gasped wickedly. “Are you serious?”

“I’m always Sirius, McKinnon!”

They might have kept going, except Remus had already caught on. “Stop, stop, stop!” He yelped, waving his arms between them like a wall. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

“We told you, Moons, exchanging—”

“When I said that I thought the two of you talking was a good idea, I

meant talking about yourselves, not *me!"*

"That is an entirely unfair thing to ask of us," Marlene blagged, before leaning in and whispering; "After all, we've both sucked your nob."

Remus' mouth dropped open, and as did Sirius'. "You gave him a blowie, McKinnon?" He replied hushedly.

"Once. He lasted like thirty seconds. Made a real mess too."

"OH MY GOD." Remus buried his face in his hands, completely mortified. "Right, that's it." Spinning around, he picked up the tea tray and marched out into the hallway with it.

"Where ya going, Moons?" Sirius called after him.

"To find Chastity and compare *your* sexual abilities!"

"Kay, but maybe bring her back round here then? We can play spin the bottle and massage each other or something."

"Oh, I would *love* a foot rub," he heard Marlene cackle.

Leaving his intolerable lovers behind, Remus emerged into the common room, breathing deeply to cull the flush that had surged into his face and neck. He set the tea tray down on the table in front of the rest of his friends, who all perked up happily.

"Cheers, Moons," James said, before picking up his cup and gingerly tasting it to make sure it wasn't overloaded with sugar. Remus took up a spot on his and Lily's other side, across from Lottie, Mary, and Peter, who were lounging on the carpet in-between the coffee table and the fire.

"Anyone for another round?" Lottie said, while counting her winnings, which were mostly made up from rumbled notes, plastic poker chips, and cigarettes. Next to her, Peter shuffled the cards, looking only slightly bitter.

"Sure, but you have to play blindfolded."

"Why?"

"Because you're totally counting cards!"

"One cannot simply learn card-counting overnight," Lottie retorted. "And besides, card-counting should almost be legal anyway. It's just

maths. Basic probability."

Peter rolled his eyes, but began dealing again. As he did, Mary reached over the table in a long stretch, batting her eyelashes coyly. "I heard a little rumour today," she said, in that Mary voice of hers. She began eying Remus purposefully, and he knew he was in trouble.

"What sort of rumour was it?" James prodded, busy checking over the cards in his hand.

"A juicy one."

Please, Remus silently begged, *Please don't let this be about Marlene. Or any of us. Actually, none of us would be best.*

"Go on then, Macdonald," Sirius said, reappearing behind the sofa with Marlene in tow; "Give us a story."

Mary looked at Lottie, who giggled while twirling a blonde ringlet around one finger, clearly in on the joke. "Remus, when were you gonna tell us that you're dating a model?"

Remus choked on his drink. The others began to laugh, but Sirius just leaned over and flicked Remus in the back of the head, looking coy. "Yeah, spit it out, Moons. Where did you possibly find the time to woo such a lush ol' bird?"

"Eugh—give it rest!" Remus moaned, swatting at Sirius with one hand and wiping his mouth with the other. "I fucking hate these rumours."

"Sounds like this fake French fiancée of yours has really taken on a life of her own, Lupin," James said. And it was true. By either Lily's will or Jillian's, everyone seemed to know about 'Farrah' and Remus' whirlwind romance. Talk had spread like wildfire, but at least Sirius didn't seem all that bothered. Yet, anyway.

"I came up with the part about how she kept leaving fake tan on the seat of your father's Cadillac. I mean, the girl has to have *some* flaws," Mary grinned, exchanging cards with Lily as dealer.

"How about the fact that she finds Remus' morning breath really sexy?" Lottie added.

"I thought the part where he saved her from drowning in the River Seine was pretty good. Especially considering he's never even been to France," Peter said.

Marlene rapped Remus on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, some of us are looking out for me. I’ve been telling everyone she’s got a body and face like Jerry Hall.”

“You’re all viciously enjoying this,” he hissed.

“Well, of course!” Mary conceded. “I haven’t heard something so spicy in ages. It’s delightful.”

“It’s a *lie*—perpetuated by this one!” He thrust a finger in Lily’s direction. Up until that point she’d been shuffling her cards around innocently, but she *tsked* when Remus called her on it.

“Me?”

“Yes, you! You solved one problem by creating another!”

“I told you from the beginning,” Lily replied mercilessly, “tell Jillian you aren’t interested and avoid the whole thing. But did you listen to me? *Nooo.* Well, now you suffer.”

“You’re getting coal for Christmas, Evans, mark my words.”

Sirius cleared his throat, snatching up one of the teacups and sipping from it innocently. “So tell us, Lupin, how *does* French *chatte* taste?”

“The joke doesn’t land if no one knows what you’re saying,” Remus snarked.

“Shouldn’t you know? Your fiancée is French, after all. How are you going to *baise-la stupide* if you can’t even understand the difference between ‘give me more’ and ‘that’s the wrong hole’?”

While everyone else moaned in distaste, Mary amicably leaned in, translating into Remus’ ear. “You’re assuming she’d ever say anything apart from—” he bent down again; *“What d’ya say? …* Ah—say anything other than, *‘je suis ta petite pute’.”*

Sirius spat tea everywhere and Mary howled with laughter. “Slag,” he said to Remus, wiping his mouth.

“Tart.”

Sirius’ eyes glinted devilishly and Remus felt a slight tug just behind his navel. Perhaps he’d be hearing more on the subject in private, but for now he couldn’t be caught tossing knowing smirks back and forth with his best friend turned boyfriend.

“Gonna step out for a smoke,” he said eventually, standing.

“We’ve only just gotten into the game,” Peter pouted, automatically picking up Remus’ cards to give them a once-over.

“Lottie’s already winning anyway.”

“He’s right,” Lottie said, flashing her hand. “Straight flush. Pay up, suckers.”

James slumped back in his chair. “Do you take credit?”

Cigarettes in hand, Remus made his way out onto the front steps of the dorm. The sky had long-since gone dark, but the air wasn’t freezing at least. On his way he passed a few boys heading in for the night and one even stopped him to ask after their history homework.

“Finished it, yeah,” he said. “You can borrow my notes if you want.”

“Cheers, Lupin,” the boy, Ramsey, said. He pat Remus on the shoulder and walked on, and Remus was left feeling oddly satisfied. His younger self would’ve been embarrassed to know that others were coming to him with help on their homework, but there were worse things to be known as than a swot.

“Mind if I join you?”

Remus looked up from his spot on the steps to find Sirius hanging over him.

“You sure you won’t be missed?”

“Of course I will. But the only one who can rival my staggering wit is you, which means I was feeling a bit underwhelmed when you left.”

Remus pat the step next to him. Sirius sat, looking pleased, and accepted a cigarette when offered. “Moony, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“It’s pretty serious though. Are you sure you’re ready for it?”

Remus raised an eyebrow sceptically. “What’s the question?”

“Are you…” Sirius leaned in very close; “secretly a wizard?”

Remus sighed, and reached into his pocket for his zippo. “You age me

every day."

Sirius snorted, and popped the cigarette between his lips as Remus went in to light it for him. "Really though, I'm starting to wonder if you put a spell on me," he mumbled around the filter.

"Sod off."

"For real, it's too easy to like you. Farrah should really watch out."

"You're stupid."

"Mhm. Still, if I'm being honest, I sorta thought I was gonna be the one who'd have to find myself a beard. Figures it's you though. Surprising bastard."

As Sirius exhaled and let the smoke hover up between them, Remus tucked his zippo away and pondered the idea. "What d'ya mean by 'beard'?"

"You know, someone you date to make it look as though you're not queer as a clockwork orange. Like you and McKinnon."

Remus paused, his own cigarette halfway to his lips. "Marlene wasn't a 'beard'… she was my girlfriend."

As if surprised, Sirius pulled fag from his lips. "Actually?"

Remus nodded slowly.

"Oh, I just thought that… oh." Sirius coughed into his elbow. *"Ahem —!* Right, 'course…"

"Did you forget that I'm—"

"No! Just… having a laugh, s'all. Forget I said anything."

Pursing his lips, Remus began to pick at the filter of his cigarette. "So, uhm… can girls have beards too?"

Sirius laughed—bright and foolhardy—and Remus had to fight to not be offended.

"Oh, Moons, you're really so cute."

"What? It's just a question!" Remus crossed both arms and Sirius nudged him, already grinding his cigarette out on the steps.

“Do you want to skip away for a bit?” He asked.

“What about the others?”

“They’re fine, won’t even notice, I’ll bet.” Sirius grazed his fingers along the top of Remus’ thigh. “It’ll just be us…”

Remus swallowed. “We can’t go upstairs.”

“Obviously. But there are other places. It's only just gotten dark, the astronomy building should be guaranteed free for a while…”

He glanced back at the dorm, its windows turned a golden orange with all of the vibrant life going on inside. Distantly, he could hear laughter. There would probably be questions later if they just disappeared…

“You’re worrying—stop worrying,” Sirius urged; “Look, I got these, even!” He held up a baggy of wrapped spliffs.

“You got those from my drawer,” Remus scoffed.

“Obviously. You’re the best at rolling ‘em.”

“Thief.”

“Prude. C’mon, I’ll do that thing with my tongue you like so much.”

That was certainly convincing enough. Remus popped to his feet. “I hope it involves swallowing it.”

“Guess that depends on what it is I’m swallowing,” Sirius mused, already skipping down the rest of the steps with eager glee. Remus followed, and they’d just made it to the end of the lawn when a voice hollered after them;

“Hold on! Where are you two going now?”

They spun around. James was standing in the dorm’s doorway, arms raised in question.

“Moony left his book in class!” Sirius called back. “But just in case we don’t feel like coming back on time, don’t wait up!”

“I thought we were gonna finish cards and then go over that song again?”

“Tomorrow! We’ll do it tomorrow, swears!”

James dropped his arms. “But it’s almost headcount soon.”

“And I’m sure you can cover for us, o’ prestigious dorm monitor,” Sirius grinned. He nudged Remus again. “Quick. *Ándale,* Moons—before he catches us.”

They made real haste, scarpering around the side of the lawn and up the road toward the rest of campus.

“You might want to tone it down,” Remus said, once they’d stopped and he’d had time to catch his breath. “At this rate he’s bound to get jealous or something.” *Or notice.*

“What, Prongs? Nah, he’s cool,” Sirius said, gently toying at Remus’ hand with his pinky. “He knows we’re friends—me and you. It’ll be fine. I’ll make it up to him, you’ll see.’

“If you say so.” Glancing down at Sirius’ wanting hand, Remus took it. It was dark enough now, and the smile it put on Sirius’ face was worth all the risk.

* * *

Friday 28th October 1977

Somehow between classes, band practice, and the frequented snogging sessions, October had flown by. There’d been little time leftover for pranking, which was probably a good thing, since McGonagall had launched what appeared to be a very real investigation into the missing trolley. As the resident prank masters extraordinaire, she’d grilled every Marauder individually on its whereabouts, but not even Peter managed to break. Now, with the headmistress of their back and less than three days until Halloween, the boys of room 4A had plenty on their plate. There was to be a massive party, and if Sirius was to have his way, then they'd be playing not only hosts, but also entertainment. So far none of the teachers seemed to have caught on, and so all that was left was to remain casual and make it through the rest of their lessons for the week. This, of course, was easier said than done, at least where James Potter was concerned.

After spending half the lesson drilling them with notation and endless

rounds and canons, Sheila had parked herself in front of the piano and ordered James to sit next to her. There she patiently let her fingers dance up the scale, singing while he stared at her like a dead fish.

"Do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do! Now James, what note did I hit on 'fa'?"

"F."

"And on 'do'?"

"C."

"Good." Sheila pointed to a note on the sheet music on James' music stand. "And what is this note?"

"A… squiggly line."

"Yes, but what does the squiggly line *mean?"*

"Do... not pass go, do not collect two hundred pounds?"

Remus and Peter broke down in laughter as Sirius spun his chair around backwards and dropped down between James and the piano. "Sheils, you're wasting your time, really. It's his ears that do all the work, not his brain."

"Oi," James scoffed, offended. "I know it's an 'F' because of how it looks in *here."* He tapped his skull. "That's brain-power! Now you tell me how this squiggly line is supposed to make any more sense."

"It just does!" Peter said.

James crossed his arms, uncharacteristically bitter. "Yeah, well it's stupid."

Sheila pat him on the shoulder comfortingly. "Considering you all have a quiz on musical notation next week, I suggest we keep at it, Mr. Potter, no matter how stupid." With a warning smile, she stood up from the bench and strolled off across the room, to where Debbie McGuire was tripping her way through a concerto piece on her clarinet.

"It almost feels like you're getting 'em wrong on purpose now," Remus said, making James glare at him.

"I'm not! I just don't understand how you can keep it all straight! Quavers, semiquavers, demisemiquavers—it's worse than maths, it's

mental!"

"Don't forget the infamous 'demisemihemidemisemiquaver'," Peter snorted.

"The *what?!* You've gotta be fucking joking me."

"Cool it, Potter. You'll do fine," Sirius said, replacing Sheila on the piano bench. "Just remember your note rhymes, *EADGBE*— 'every alter-boy deserves God's big erection'."

Peter grimaced horribly. "What's wrong with 'every amateur does get better eventually'?"

"I'm partial to 'every acid dealer gets busted eventually', meself," Remus said.

Seemingly unimpressed, James slumped back in his chair, his '69 Stratocaster still draped across his lap. "What's it matter anyway? We agreed to play rock music, not symphonies."

"Nah, can't think like that," Sirius said, kindly reaching over and balling up James' sheet music, tossing it over his shoulder; "What are 'Kashmir' and 'Achilles Last Stand' if not symphonies?"

"Bloody hard to play, that's what," Peter mumbled, already scribbling repeating music staffs in his notebook to study.

Stretching out his legs, Remus leaned back in his chair and raised his hands up behind his head. "So that means we're practising later, yeah?"

"Hell yeah, gotta be ready for Halloween," Sirius winked. "If we're to put on a real show, that is."

"You mean we're still doing that?" Peter asked, glancing at Remus nervously. Remus did have some sympathy for him. Sirius had been chattering about throwing a Halloween bash for days now, but he wasn't sure when talk had shifted from simply getting drunk to getting drunk and *also* performing live in front of their classmates. Just like Peter, the idea both thrilled and terrified him. He didn't think he had stage fright, but then again he'd never been on a stage.

"Obviously!" James said, more enthusiastic than before. "We're totally ready! I've never heard a group of amateurs sound so good."

“Only covers though, right?” Remus pressed. James was already nodding, but Sirius sighed.

“Come *onnn,* I still think we should play some of your songs.”

“No, they’re not ready.”

“You mean *you’re* not ready.”

“Same difference. Everyone’s gonna be pissed anyway, do you *want* to be booed off stage?”

Sirius crossed his arms with a haughty expression, but luckily James Potter was to the rescue. “Let Moons off the hook this once,” he said. “He's right, and besides, we don’t want to push him too hard, lest he quit the band before it’s even started. Artists are sensitive like that.”

“Watch it, Potter, or I’ll tell Lily you’ve kept her photo up and kiss it goodnight every time you go to bed,” Remus threatened.

James opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by a sharp ticking of a metronome. Across the classroom, Sheila began rapping her conductor’s baton along the front of her podium. “Okay class, individual practice is over. Now everyone break out ‘Newcastle March’ and we’ll see how that run-through’s going—and yes, Mr. Potter, that means you too.”

“Have some mercy, Mrs. Buchanan,” James moaned, dragging his music folder out as Peter popped up from his seat and went to sit next to the rest of the percussion students.

“I want to hear my percussion section first,” Sheila instructed, “and a one, and a two.”

Peter kicked the song off, lazily tapping his snare and symbol along to the tempo they’d been practising since the beginning of term. Remus didn’t mind it as much, it was upbeat and loud, but it was far too easy for his friends, who all danced through the chords and beats with more ease than a greased-up seal. They were lucky that Sheila allowed them so much time for solo practice. A more stringent teacher would have driven the group of Marauders up the wall long ago.

When class finished and they all got up with their instrument cases slung over their back, Remus approached his friends. “I asked Sheila and she said the room can be ours during dinner hour. She doesn’t mind if we eat in here, either, but no fizzy drinks. Not after Peter spilt

last time."

"Well, if Sirius hadn't honked that trumpet behind me while I was walking up the risers," Peter grumbled.

"Just trying to improve your pitch, Wormtail."

"Oi, Lupin," another kid called, "your girlfriend's here."

Alarmed, Remus spun around to find Marlene waving at him from the doorway.

"Not his girlfriend," Sirius muttered as Remus shut the Fender into its case and crossed the room to meet her.

"Hey, you."

"Hey." Marlene wiped the hair from her face. Her cheeks were pink, but that just might've been the cool breeze they'd woken up to that morning. "Do you have any time before dinner? I just have something I wanted to run by you."

Remus checked his watch. "Yeah, sure, why not? I don't have anything to do in private study anyway."

"Moony!" Sirius was giving him a pointed look. "What's tricks, then?"

"I'm gonna go with Marlene, I think."

Sirius appeared indignant. "But what about that *thing* we were gonna do?"

" 'What thing'?" James and Peter echoed together, making Sirius cringe.

Remus smiled half-heartedly. He and Sirius had of course made plans to sneak off together, but they could surely do that after supper. "It'll just be for a little while," he reassured him. "Catch you guys back later here for practice. Do something useful, why don't you, and help James study."

"Yeah," James said, "help James study. God knows you're always disappearing lately."

"It's true. We miss you," Peter added.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Oh, piss off."

“We do!” James declared, hopping up from his chair and wrapping his best friend up in a large bear-hug. “We miss you, Padfoot! Quick—serenade us with your beautiful song!”

“Ugh—get off!” Already busy fighting James off, Sirius spared a moment to raise his fist in Marlene’s direction. “Oi, McKinnon, you keep stealing Lupin away and I’m gonna have to start charging you a renter’s fee!”

Taking Remus by the arm, Marlene poked her tongue out. “Don’t be greedy! You get him the rest of the time!”

Sirius shook his fist at her. “That’s my bassist you’ve got there!”

“ ‘*Your* bassist’?” James and Peter exclaimed.

They left them there, the idiots, and slipped out of the classroom along with the rest of that morning’s bustling mob. Outside, Remus and Marlene pulled their coats up tighter around their chins and leaned into one another to ward off the chill.

“A few weeks ago I would’ve thought he were just acting jealous,” Marlene mused. “Now I know he is, but not of you—of *me*. Quite territorial, that boyfriend of yours is.”

Remus fought a blush. “What'd you want to talk about?”

Looking shy, Marlene turned and led him away from the clusters of kids mulling between each school building. They went the long way back to the dorms, around the Scamander Greenhouses and campus gardens, where the paths were made of worn stone and scattered leaves. There Marlene drifted a bit, absently picking the leftover wildflowers that had yet to wilt along the path and collecting them in her palm. Remus watched her, switching the Fender’s case into his other hand and waiting expectantly.

“Cherry…? What is—”

“Nicole asked me to go to the village with her!” She burst.

“Oh… *Oh!”*

Marlene nodded vigorously. “Yeah!”

“Wow, I…” Remus swallowed his surprise. Nicole and Marlene had been on the football team together for years, but he’d no idea that she

was… well, now it seemed almost obvious. “That’s great—Nicole’s great,” he blabbed; “But we don't have our next Craigtyre trip until November..."

“I know. She's offered to sneak out with me tomorrow,” Marlene explained. “Almost feels a bit daring, right? Now I guess I know what it’s like to date Black—not that you weren’t terribly daring too, of course.”

“Thanks for saving my pride.”

She glanced down at the daisy again. “I was hoping to—er… tell her about the hole in the eastern wall if that was okay. I wasn’t sure if you wanted anyone else to know about it, but I’m sure she’d keep it quiet.”

“Don’t matter to me. Ain’t my wall.”

“Well, considering what Sirius calls it…”

“Sirius is an arse.”

“True.” Marlene picked another flower and paused to admire it. “Nicole’s sweet. She’s got cute dimples… pretty hair. We like a lot of the same things too. I think I could actually like her.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Is that too crazy?”

“Of course it’s not.”

Marlene nodded, like she was trying to convince herself more than anything. “Remus, have you ever gotten that feeling before—the one where you get so excited that you feel dizzy?"

"And it's hard to breathe?"

"Yeah! And you just want to shout and cry at the same time, but all you can do is think about drinking in the very sight of them?”

He grinned. "Have you met Sirius?”

"Ugh. Romantic twat."

Suddenly Remus felt very proud. “Is that how it feels when you're with Nicole?” He asked.

“Mm-hm, I think so! … And I know I shouldn’t get my hopes up or anything, but do you reckon this could be an actual date? Like between Nicole and I?”

“You mean you don’t already *know?”*

“It’s harder than that!” She insisted. “Girls ask each other out all the time! Doesn’t mean it’s always, like—a *romantic* thing.”

“Well—er… Marls, no offence, but I wasn’t there when she asked you. Did it sound like a romantic thing?”

“Uhm, yes? … Maybe? *Ugh.* I just figured that she wouldn’t go to all the effort of asking me to sneak out with her for just a regular hang-out, right? But I dunno… She could’ve just wanted to go to the village. I just thought that since you’re so good with people, maybe you’d know—”

“You do realise that the only girl I’ve ever legitimately dated is you, right? I think that kind of says something.”

“I suppose it does," she laughed, running a nervous hand through her choppy hair. "Honestly, I’m lucky it was you who caught me and Chastity, and not Lily or James or something.”

“Why am I the lucky option?”

“You have less reason to tell people—after all I already know your guilty secret.”

“You *do?”*

“Yeah, I’ve seen that little face you make when you finish in bed.”

He was relieved and horrified all at once. “There is no ‘face’!”

“Sure there is, it looks like this.” Marlene contorted her face up as though she’d just shut her finger in a closet.

“Ohmygod—don’t ever do that again.”

“I wasn’t finished! You also sort of make this little noise too, like *‘nghnn!’”*

“NOOO!” He knocked her in the shin with the Fender’s case. “Shut up! God, all my friends are bullies.”

“Ah, you love us though.” She puckered her lips at him and they kept on down the path.

“Did you ever… finish?”

“With you? Do you want the honest answer?”

“Oh, alright. Fuck me then.”

“Eh, been there, done that.”

She smiled at him, and Remus reached over, plucking one of the flowers from her fingers and reaching up to tuck them behind her ear. “I can’t say if this thing with you and Nicole is a ‘date’, Cherry, but she’d be stupid not to absolutely love you if it is. Not everyone has someone who wants to ‘drink in the very sight of them’.”

Marlene sighed happily and took his hand in hers, pulling it over her shoulder as they continued past the gardens. The leaves crunched under their boots as they walked, a million different autumn colours blurring into one. He could see how happy she was, and without realising it, Remus that contagious happiness overtake him. When they finally circled back for lunch and emerged in the Hawkings dining hall, they met their friends at their regular table, waiting for supper to be served. James and Peter were engrossed in a heated debate on whether or not Arsenal had a chance at the FA Cup that year, while Lily sat on the other end of the table with the girls, debating Lottie over the ethics of dating a man twice her age.

“He’s already got a stable job. I could drop out and move in with him tomorrow if I really wanted to,” Lottie blagged. Lily appeared about ready to throttle her.

While Marlene took a seat next to Mary, Remus stopped at the head of the table and looked around for Sirius, who was mysteriously missing.

“Where’s Padfoot?” He asked the other lads.

“Over there.” Peter jutted a thumb to where Sirius was standing, mixing a cup of tea. Remus made a beeline for him, strutting up from the behind and leaning in.

“Hi.”

“Hey,” Sirius said, turning on him fondly; “Thought you’d be along.

Made you a cuppa, four sugars just how you like it." He raised the mug, and Remus took it and set it back down on the counter.

"Come away with me?" He asked quietly.

Sirius' eyebrows shot upwards. " 'Away with you?' Wow, don't you sound romantic. Has my birthday come early?"

"No…" Remus drawled. "I just suddenly feel very greedy, and I *just might* want you all to myself."

Sirius tilted his head, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Really?"

"Really, really."

"Are you sure? I already told Prongs we'd sort those Halloween costumes after dinner. Figure out the party."

Remus held his gaze. "Come away with me," he said again.

"Mm... And what, pray tell, will you do with me?"

"Whatever I want."

Remus could tell that Sirius was resisting one of his looks. "We have friends around, Moony," he said teasingly; "people who are counting on us."

"What I want to do with you, I can't do with friends around."

Sirius bit his lip over a silent nod, and Remus knew he'd won. They abandoned their freshly poured teas, and escaped out the back doors, throwing all caution to the wind. Remus was thrilled. For so long now they'd been making silent, frustrated passes at one another and spouting any excuse that would get them even a moment alone together. It was as though each time he talked to Marlene, a new fire was ignited within him—a fire only Sirius could put out. Remus had never prayed to God, so what was the point of repenting? He might as well embrace all of the sin and have his way.

They left the dining hall entirely, going one building over to the science wing. There Sirius pulled him into an empty classroom where they could finally satiate their voracious appetites. They had each other pressed up against one of the front tables within seconds, attached at the lips while their hands roamed up and down. It wasn't

as though they'd planned to have it all out with each other right then and there, but these things tended to bottle up when one was hiding every careful glance and fleeting touch from view.

"What's gotten into you lately?" Sirius asked, when their lips parted long enough to get a word out.

"Nothing," Remus panted, cupping his boyfriend's jaw, "just want you."

A grin split Sirius' face. He wrapped his arms around Remus' neck, holding him tightly. "Then have me."

Remus folded. He would have him—*right there*—the same way he'd had him in the common room. He lifted Sirius up onto one of the lab tables, nearly toppling a tray of beakers and test tubes that had been left out. Sirius didn't even notice. He was too busy kissing a line up Remus' tender throat, finishing at the corner of his mouth where he plunged a kiss in so deep it was as though they were breathing for each other. This was what it was to want someone you shouldn't. To be star-crossed in a plight you could barely explain. Remus couldn't bear it. Every inch of Sirius he had, and yet he still wanted more. He would have it too, *he would.*

But then the door opened.

Remus had expected—and Sirius had probably hoped—that it would be one of their friends who discovered them first. At least that way they'd be expected to fess up and suffer whatever consequences, but it seemed as though neither of them had counted on being found out by an outsider. Remus saw him first, over Sirius' shoulder. He watched in slow motion as the door opened and the other boy walked inside. It was Corban Yaxley, innocently carrying a stack of textbooks. The worst possible outcome, curated just for them.

In a scramble to separate himself, Remus lost his footing entirely, slipping on the linoleum floor and knocking a tray of beakers to the ground with a thunderous crash. Sirius gaped from his seat on the desktop and Yaxley just about threw the armful of textbooks across the room.

"What are you two bloody doing in here?!" The other boy shrieked, as Remus stressed over the shattered glass.

"None of your business, you bleedin' twat!" Sirius barked back, more harshly than he might've had they not just been caught in such a

compromising position.

“Sneaking around like a couple of bloody queers,” Yaxley spat. “Probably just another shitty prank. Why don’t you and your loony boyfriend find someone else to piss on, Black?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about—*now get out of here!”* Sirius roared, picking up another beaker and actually throwing it at the wall next to the door. It shattered on impact and Yaxley quickly retreated from the room with his books and another frenzied yelp.

Remus wasn’t able to do anything. It was as though Yaxley’s words had driven ice into his very veins. He stared wide-eyed down at the bits of glass, the image of his warped and ugly reflection leering back at him.

I had to pray for myself, Marlene’s voice echoed. *I was terrified.*

“It’s okay, it was an accident,” Sirius said urgently, slipping down from the countertop to begin carefully sweeping up the mess with his hands.

I was terrified.

“Moony.” Sirius grabbed him by the shoulder. “I’m gonna fix this.”

But what could Sirius have possibly fixed? Yaxley had seen. *He’d* **seen** *them.* He was probably on his way to tell everyone and their mother right now.

“Wait here,” Sirius told him, then he withdrew his hand and just like that, was gone.

For a while, Remus was just, maybe had even blacked out. When he finally came to he was scooping up the glass with rigid fingers. He’d cut himself—just a little slice across the pad of his thumb.

“Good lord! What’s this?” A voice called. It was Professor Slughorn. He’d strolled into the classroom and yelped when glass began crunching beneath his oxfords next to the doorway. “Is that you, Lumby?”

Remus stood, the tray of broken glass in hand. “Was an accident…” he mumbled.

“An accident?” Slughorn spluttered. “Well now, you’re not even

supposed to be in here, are you?"

When Remus didn't answer, Slughorn dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief and then handed him a broom from the corner cupboard. "I trust you'll be able to clean up after yourself. Honestly, Lumby, I do hope Professor McGonagall hasn't made a mistake making you a prefect."

The professor left him, and Remus leaned his head against the tip of the broom. Perhaps McGonagall had overestimated him. It would not be the first time.

By the time he was outside again, Remus couldn't not remember sweeping up the rest of the glass. He considered briefly returning to the scene of the crime to check, but he was interrupted.

"You alright, Remington?" Trish asked. She'd emerged from the science building behind him, tapping a book against one shoulder casually. "You look like ye've seen a ghost."

Remus shook his head. "Did you—I mean, have you seen Sirius?"

"Ye mean bigger Black? Na. What, you looking tae batter him? Don't tell me he nicked your girl? I heard about that by the way—wicked funny. Can you even steal someone who's not real? I mean I know you blokes can be desperate, but fighting over an imaginary girlfriend? That's a right laugh."

She giggled just as she said she would, and before he could stop himself, Remus' temper boiled over.

"Can't you say five words without insulting someone first?" He growled. "Is this why you don't have any friends?!"

Trish stepped away immediately. The harsh scolding had evaporated her usual grin, and she looked suddenly very small. "Wow. Didnae mean to offend ye so bad."

Fuck. Remus huffed, hands clenched at his sides. "I'm—"

"Don't bother," she murmured. Then she spun around and she was gone, back the way she'd come. Remus felt like an instant idiot. He didn't like being unkind, it was just Yaxley and Sirius and Marlene and *everyone else all at once!* … Goddammit.

"Where'd you piss off to then?" James asked, when Remus drifted

blindly back into the dining room. He realised then that Sirius had told him to wait, but the walls of the science classroom had begun to close in, and now the dining hall was doing the same. It was like he was suffocating.

“Fag break,” Sirius said, unceremoniously appearing behind him. Remus just about jumped again, and Sirius muttered a quick apology before leaning in.

“I need to talk to you.”

Remus’ stomach plummeted. This was it, it was all over. Yaxley had seen and was probably on his way to tell everyone and their mother as they spoke. Remus felt like a colossal idiot—all that work just for one measly bout of snogging in an empty classroom? Oh *why* couldn’t he have just waited?

“Gonna take Moony to the nurse,” Sirius told their friends. A lie.

“Not feeling well, Moony?” Peter called. “You do look a bit pale.”

“Is it a fever?” Lily asked. Remus couldn’t reply fast enough, too stuck on the concern in their eyes.

Don’t look at me. Don’t look at me.

James was already standing up from the table, bag in hand. “I’ll come,” he said. “See if we can get the tosser feeling fit again.”

Sirius shook his head. “Nah, don’t worry yourself, Potter. I got it.”

“But if Moony’s sick then—”

“I said I got it!”

The look James gave Sirius was more than offended, it was pure hurt. All the rest of them shared a glance, even the girls, but Remus couldn’t take it either.

Don’t look at me!

“Whatever you say, Black,” James huffed, dropping his bag back down on the seat. Sirius held his best friend’s gaze a moment longer, but in the end he just turned Remus around and ushered him out of the cafeteria.

“I’m alright,” Remus said, when they’d made it back outside. The sun

was setting now, turning the sky a deep blue like a thunderstorm. Sirius didn't reply, only clutched more tightly onto his arm. Was he just expecting him to lose it right there? Maybe.

"Sirius," he repeated dumbly, "I'm alright. I don't need the nurse."

"I know," Sirius ground out; "Fuck off while I try to keep it together some, will you?"

Oh. Remus swallowed thickly. Why didn't it occur to him that Sirius could also be upset? Scared, even? *Idiot.*

They didn't talk after that, not until they'd made it back to Godric and the door was shut tightly behind them. For a moment Remus was at a loss; he didn't know what to do, or whether he should touch Sirius or not. But thankfully, Sirius made the decision for him. He came up from behind, wrapping his arms around Remus and burying his face in his back.

"He didn't see anything," Sirius breathed; "Yaxley didn't see."

Remus almost came apart from relief. He spun around, forcing Sirius' arms off of him just long enough to hug him back. "I'm sorry," he whimpered. "It was my fault, I got reckless."

"It's not your fault," Sirius sniffed, pulling his face away from Remus' shoulder. "It's just fucked—all of it. I hate this. I hate hiding."

"I know… I know you're unhappy."

Then, Sirius looked at him. His eyes were stormy. Upset.

"Unhappy?" He echoed. "When did I ever say I was unhappy?"

"You didn't have to. I know it's hard—being with me and not telling anyone."

"Well, shit, yeah. But how could you think that—" Sirius drew up short. "You insensitive bastard. You think I wanted this? You think I was waiting for the day we'd get caught?"

Remus' lips parted in shock, then; "N-No!"

"Liar. You've been thinking it all this time, haven't you?"

"No, I haven't! I just thought I fucked us over—that it was all my fault. I know it's important to you that we acknowledge each other,

and that not telling our friends is the exact opposite of that. But I… I *can't*. It's different with Marlene, and two months is just too short… I'm sorry, Sirius."

Sirius softened then, and began smoothing the wrinkles out of Remus' shirt as though he couldn't think of anything else to do. "I don't always want you feeling sorry, you stupid twat. And I'm not delusional either. I was scared too, Moony. You think I haven't dealt with this same shit before?"

Remus set his jaw. "You mean Miles."

"I'm not comparing you to him," Sirius said quickly. "But I know when I've fucked up too. And there's no way I could possibly want some dickhead like Corban Yaxley knowing our business."

"But you want other people to know."

"I want *our* people to know. And I want them to know when *we* decide to tell them—you *and* me. I know I fucked up before, pushing you, but I just think you've built up this idea of me in your head, Moons. That I'm some super-queer who can handle everyone knowing, when I'm not. I was scared today, you know. Fucking terrified, actually. But that didn't mean I was going to run from you."

"Me neither," Remus murmured. "Never from you. I just... I'm not as tough as you are."

Sirius sighed heavily. "I'm not tough."

"You are."

"No, I'm not... And I don't need you to come out for me either."

"You… You don't?"

"No, I don't. I… I did wrong by you—trying to force it. I gave you an ultimatum without hearing you out first. But I don't want to lose you, so I think it's enough just to have you like this."

Remus could not believe his ears. For so long he'd thought the *only* thing Sirius wanted was to come out, and now…

"What about James? The others?"

Sirius pressed his lips together, looking anywhere but at Remus. Finally he turned back to his bed and sagged down onto its edge, head

in his hands.

“Alphard was queer, you know. It’s why he was kicked out of the family.”

“… oh. I... didn't know.”

“Obviously... but I can still remember the day it happened. He used to come to every family gathering alone—never had a girlfriend, always refused to take a wife. There were rumours of course, but the family was able to cull them for the most part. Then one day, on my dad’s birthday, he brought a ‘friend’ with him. His name was Elton, and Elton was queer—everyone could see it. He wore a velvet suit with a giant flower in his lapel and called everyone 'darling'. I didn’t really connect the dots until after Alphard died, but I remember after the funeral, Elton came to the house to pass along a few things and Mum spat at his feet.”

Sirius looked up at him finally, and took a long, shaky breath.

“If my grandfather hadn’t already died and named Alphard his successor, then Uncle Al would’ve lost everything. So you see, Moons, I *get* it. I know it’s hard, and I’m over it. Truly. All I need is you by my side. *You.* Just, Remus Lupin—full stop."

"It's the same for me," Remus swore. "Just you."

Just Sirius, Sirius, Sirius.

"Good," Sirius nodded. "Then it doesn’t matter, ‘cause I’m happy either way. And I’ll allow others to go on thinking that you’re just biding your time until Christmas, when you can see your beloved ‘Farrah’ and make furious heterosexual love to her. But in the meantime, I want you all to myself, no matter what Potter’s got to say about it.”

Remus tried for a meek smile; “I only get a pass for an imaginary fiancée, huh?”

“I know, I’m so generous. What can I say?” Sirius licked his lips. "C'mere."

He pulled Remus down towards himself, and the moment they were eye to eye, they were kissing. It was easier like this. The words 'kiss and make up' had never truly meant something before them. It was easier just to hold each other and whisper their comforts back and forth in the dark. Remus loved Sirius for all his vibrancy, but he knew

his touch and taste when that eventually faded and all they were left with was the understanding that life was hard, and the only people in their corner were themselves.

“So what are we gonna say to the others?” Remus asked after, once they’d had time to dry their eyes and kiss each other silly.

“We’ll tell them you weren’t feeling well, just like we said.”

“And James? He seemed upset. I know he's noticed something's up.”

“So I’ll come up with another excuse to get him off my back,” Sirius shrugged. “Always do. We can tell him I’m failing some class, or that you’re failing and I’m tutoring you.”

“Neither of us would fail a class.”

“Okay, stingy. Then I’ll tell him you’re helping me work through some stuff—or me, you. Anything.”

“If you’re sure…”

Sirius nodded very firmly. “I’m certain. It’s Prongs—he’ll understand. Trust me.”

Remus wanted to believe him, but as good, and kind, and genuine as James Potter was, there was always a limit.

Their friends returned later on, each of them sporting a dour look. Peter was normal enough, but James did not say anything to either of them for several minutes, and when Sirius began providing his excuses, just as he’d said he would, it became very clear that James wasn’t about to let them get away with it again.

“No, I do *not* understand!” He growled. “You two have been fucking off for a while now, and it's time Pete and I got the truth! Now what’s going on—is it something to do with your parents?”

Sirius gave a great groan. “UGH! Come off it, Potter! I already told you, it’s nothing to worry about!”

James began to sputter; “What— *How?!* Nothing to worry about—are you fucking joking me? It’s like you’ve gone off the handle, Black! I don’t even know who you are anymore! You and Moony!”

“Leave Moony out of this!”

“How could I? I barely see him anymore! He’s always off with you doing—” Suddenly James surged toward the bed, grabbing Sirius’ coat and shoving one hand into his pocket. “A-HA!” He declared, waving Sirius’ cigarettes around in the air. “This is all you do now! Sneak around with Moony and smoke fucking fags until the cows come home! At this rate you’re gonna sound like a busted hoover by the time you’re twenty-five!”

Sirius snatched the cigarettes back viciously. “At least I won’t sound like a whinging hose-bag!”

“Hose-bag?! I’m just trying to be present in your life! I want to help or —or listen, whatever you need!”

“Alright, then listen to this—I don’t need a bloody babysitter!”

“Do you two really have to argue in our bedroom?” Peter groaned. “Isn’t there someplace else you can have this out? Moony has a fever and I’m trying to—”

“ ‘SHUT UP, PETE’!” Both boys yelled.

“God,” Peter grumbled, turning back to Remus on his bed. “I hate it when those two fight. It’s like spitting at your own reflection.”

Across from him, Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d never even seen the pair of best friends yell at each other so maliciously. Sure, James and Sirius had had the occasional spat or two, they were only human—but fighting? Unheard of. It was more like, if Remus and Sirius were ever Remus *and* Sirius, then those two were *JamesandSirius*. It was why the Potters were perhaps the only adults Sirius had entirely trusted—they were, for all intents and purposes, an extension of James himself. And there was no one Sirius trusted more than James. Perhaps it was why it had hurt James so much when Sirius had stopped telling him everything.

“You’ve checked out,” he pushed further; “It’s like you don’t even want to be here anymore. You just want to fuck off and not talk to anyone. The only time we can get your attention is at bloody practice, and even then it’s like your brain’s on the fucking moon! Why don’t you come back to earth for a little bit and sit with us normal folk!”

The word ‘normal’ had struck a tender chord with Remus, and he could tell from Sirius’ reaction that it’d done the same for him. “You’re mental,” he snarled. “Me and Moony have just been hanging out like always. You and Wormtail have girlfriends, maybe you’ve just

been spending too much time with them and haven't noticed!"

"That's bullshit and you know it!"

"Yeah? Maybe it is! And maybe —*just maybe* —there are some things that I don't feel like talking about! Why don't *you* try worrying about your own bloody business for once, Potter?"

"You are my business! You're my best friend!"

"Maybe I shouldn't be!"

James started, brown eyes turning to saucers behind his glasses. "Well —Well, fine then!"

"Fine!"

Looking more affronted than Remus had ever seen him, James turned to Peter and grabbed him by the arm. "Come on, Pete. I think it's time we leave, since we're clearly not wanted here!"

"What'd I do? It's almost curfew!" Peter tried to moan, but James had already dragged him from his bed to the door, which he slammed after himself.

"About time! Could use a bloody breather!" Sirius shouted. He threw a pillow at the door, but that was hardly enough. Looking about ready to implode, Sirius spun around and kicked the hutch at the end of James' bed *hard.* An immediate regret.

"FUCK!" He wailed, holding his foot.

Remus hurried up behind him. "Are you alright?"

"That bastard!" Sirius grunted, waving Remus off. "Who does he think he is? Acting like he's owed the skeleton key to my entire bloody life. I'm glad he's gone off—good riddance!"

"You can't actually mean that, Sirius."

"Sure I do. If he wants to act like a massive arsehole then he can do it as someone else's best friend."

Remus sighed. "Look, it's been a shit day. I think we just all need to calm down a bit."

"You calm down. I need a fucking cigarette." Storming over to his

bedside hutch, Sirius threw open a drawer and began rifling through it. Thinking it better to just let him have his fit, Remus wandered over to the hutch himself and leaned over it to open the window.

“I just don’t know where he gets off acting like that,” Sirius continued, holding a lit cigarette between two fingers. He pushed the stereo aside, until it was teetering precariously over one edge, and raised himself up onto the hutch so he and Remus were eye to eye.

“He just doesn’t understand,” Remus said. *It's not his fault.*

“He looks down on me. He thinks I’m broken—that my family shattered everything, and now he’s the doll mender who’s come along to fix me.”

“No, Sirius. Don’t think like that.”

“Well, I can’t help it, can I?” Sirius snapped. “Everything's that’s happened and I still can’t even begin to scratch the surface of all the fucking bullshit! If he knew about us, then he’d ask about everything else and I don’t know if I want him to know! As far as he and Wormtail are concerned, I was just shipped off the summer and disowned, but there’s more isn’t there?! And I’m not— *I’m not just gonna tell him about us so he can feel better!”*

“Hey.” Putting his hands on either side of Sirius, Remus leaned in until their foreheads were pressed together. “I hear you. I’m here.”

Sirius exhaled, then nuzzled Remus softly. “It’s just shit,” he breathed, turning away to tap the cigarette ash out on the windowsill. “His family took me in, and now I, what—have to feel obligated to tell him everything? It’s like, I’m grateful—I *am* —but this ain’t like telling him my mum’s the mental one. That's different. This time, it’s something wrong with me.”

“Nothing,” Remus swore; “is wrong with you. Didn’t you hear yourself before? We’re just figuring it out, that’s all! And James doesn’t know a thing, so… don’t blame him for being ignorant. He can’t help it this time.”

“And here I thought I was going to be the sensible one today.”

“I think you’ll find I can be sensibly-unsensible at all times, Sirius Black.”

A smile flickered at the corner of Sirius’ mouth and little by little,

Remus could sense his anger crumbling away. He went to draw his hand back inside—to put the cig out or take a drag—but knocked his wrist on the edge of the window, fumbling and dropping it into empty air. Sighing after the wasted cigarette, Sirius turned back to him and gave him a long look.

“Don’t worry,” Remus said, trying for a smile. “I think it’s time we cut back anyway.”

Sirius glowered. “Fuck off,” he said, then he cupped Remus round the jaw and pressed their mouths together.

> > >

Remus melted. He knew instantly that this wouldn’t be the kind of kiss that filled him with butterflies—it would be the sort that left him bruised and raw, like a stone fresh from the fire. It went like their make-up kisses often went, furious and raced, as though they were two drivers grappling for the wheel. Sirius would pull him this way, but Remus would lean the other, each of them pushing the boundaries and testing to see what would make the other burn up fastest. He had no idea how long they had before the others returned, but that was nothing new. All Remus knew was that he wanted Sirius, and it was enough.

Pulling Sirius from the hutch, Remus turned them around and dropped him on the bed, clambering over top as Sirius grabbed hold of his neck and drew them back together. There was usually a process to their hookups, but this time all bets were off. Sirius’ trousers came off first, then Remus’ belt and shirt, revealing the chain necklace he’d worn since the day Sirius had given it to him. It had tarnished a bit since then, and had almost broken by clinging fingers on more than one occasion, but he refused to part with it nor the cheap pick dangling from its end. It felt like a culmination of them, patched together strangely but fitting none-the-less.

Remus pushed Sirius back into his pillows, squeezing him over his ribs and drawing his hands down to the narrow divots of his waist as he slid up between his thighs, trailing kisses along the sensitive skin there. Sirius—never one to be shy—knotted his fingers in the already mussed curls on the top of Remus’ head and pulled him in close, a shuddered breath already tracing his pouty mouth. So much of being together felt confusing, unsure, but this—this he could do. It was the

easiest thing in existence, being with him and forgetting for a moment that they were not the only two people in the entire world.

When he'd run out of thigh to kiss, Remus moved to the other, moving his lips along until Sirius was trembling and practically cursing his name. Then he reached his middle, blew a cheeky breeze across his last kiss, and took Sirius in his hand, matching all the rest with a welcoming swallow of Sirius' heat.

"Oh Moony," Sirius moaned, pausing to clamp his teeth down over his lip, *"fuck."*

Remus could have bottled the sound. He pressed deeper, keenly aware that the stereo had stopped somewhere between then and the hutch, and the only echo was that of Sirius' voice—perfect pitch even as he came unravelled in his hands.

Remus had already learned to read the clues. Sirius pulled tighter on his hair every time he found that rhythm that drove him the most insane. His thighs twitched in anticipation when he lost it and shuddered when he found it again. He pulled up and down when he needed it deeper and tightened his grip when faster was the answer, and Remus, who needed all of it, was more than happy to yield. He squeezed each pale thigh with his forearms, leaving fingerprints that would be bruises by the time they were reaching for each other again. They were that burning stone—so on fire he could smell it.

Actually smell it. Something was burning.

And it wasn't the ashtray.

Remus pulled back, making Sirius drop his head back into the pillows with a frustrated whine.

"Do you smell that?" He asked.

"No!"

Sirius pulled his hair tightly, making Remus wince, but he definitely smelt something. He glanced up, scanning the room. "Something's burning."

"Burning?! If you try telling me that you're having a stroke to get out of finishing, I might actually kill you."

He looked up—at the stereo, half afraid one of the cords had short-

circuited—and that's when he spotted the smoke, *outside.*

"Sirius!" Remus chirped, launching up from the bed and leaning over the bush. Thick grey smoke was wafting up from the ground, flooding into their dorm room and leaving him coughing. The bushes lining the dorm's exterior below had definitely caught fire, licking soot up Godric's brick wall—the interruption of the century.

"Fuck! Close the window!" Sirius cried, leaping up next to them as they hurried to shove the window pane down, both in equal states of undress.

"You don't think…" Remus started, eyeing the ashtray as they bent over the hutch.

"Nah…" Sirius scoffed, before exchanging a glance.

Inexplicably, Remus started to snicker, egged on by the clouds of smoke that floated up outside the window. "You are a true agent of chaos, Sirius Black."

Sirius tipped his head back and laughed, bold and beautiful. "Good thing I have you to bail me out every time, Remus Lupin," he told him, leaning forward and pressing a finger into Remus' mouth. Remus sucked it, before biting down with a single suggestive look, and Sirius grabbed him by the face again, pulling them together and back onto the bed. Remus let him, settling back down between the covers and reaching for Sirius' warmth.

Surely arson could spare a few more minutes.

Chapter End Notes

> Canonically Alphard died when Sirius was around seventeen, but for my story purposes he died much earlier.
>
> Obviously I know our boys aren't doing too well on the communication front, but things are messy. On the bright side, next chapter is Halloween, 1977! See you then xx

Chapter 77: Halloween, 1977

Chapter Summary

Halloween, in which James and Sirius work through some issues, Remus hooks up with a ghost, the girls play the long-game, and Peter looks for his missing eyebrow.

Chapter Notes

CW: 'F' slur used in smoking context, mild sexual content (mostly snogging, but skip past "> > >" to "< < <" if anything more makes you uncomfy.)

I was directed to this beautiful fan-art on tumblr by user @green-lights-33 and I felt the need to share :') greenlights, please message me if you want the link taken down!

And just a note for becca,,, it's not a toilet this time, babes xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I drank the potion she offered me,
I found myself on the floor;
Then I looked in those big green eyes,
And I wondered what I'd came there for;

She's just a devil woman,
With evil on her mind;
Beware the devil woman,
She's gonna get you!

- "Devil Woman" Cliff Richard, 1976

Monday 31st October 1977

Despite earlier plans and agreed-upon festivities, Halloween was looking to be a rather drab affair where the Marauders were concerned. It didn't really matter that the girls had all but made them take a blood oath that there would be no tricks or traps that year; Sirius and James were still not on talking terms, and without *JamesandSirius* there was little to be done in the way of pranking. For

the first time since that summer, Remus found himself as their go between, tip-toeing around James and all but pretending that he didn't exist in front of Sirius. In comparison, Peter got off easy. He'd managed to declare himself Switzerland, which was just Peter for 'I'm with James'. Sirius didn't seem to care—he had Remus, and their relationship was much more intimate and therefore worth much more, even if no one else knew it. James and Peter might have known one another since they were in nappies, but they'd never discussed the historical discourse that existed between mods and rockers while lying arse-naked in bed with the Doors playing in the background.

"You'd totally be a mod," Sirius said, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

"I would not!"

"You would! I'd be a rocker, and you'd be a mod. And every night I'd ride my motorbike over to your house and kiss you under the cover of darkness, out of sight from all your mod-mates, lest they find out and gut me."

"A regular Romeo and Juliet, I see."

Sirius grinned, and then leaned over to kiss him for real. "There. Now you're catching on."

As wonderful as it was to have Sirius all to himself, Remus was worried. He tried imagining how James might have reacted if Sirius had told him the truth about their relationship; would he be relieved? More hurt that they hadn't trusted him in the first place? Or would he be disgusted? Not even Sirius had the answer. It was the same reason he'd never told anyone about Miles.

It's not what he'll say. It's what he won't *say.*

Remus carried the thought with him everywhere. It was almost gratifying to finally put words to the fear he'd been experiencing ever since that man had glared at him in the bookshop, but he couldn't say them aloud either, so what was the point?

Sirius never brought up the Potters again, nor whatever it was that he seemed to think he 'owed' to James. It seemed to become an out-of-sight, out-of-mind sort of thing; if he didn't talk about it, then he could avoid thinking about it, and if he didn't think about it, then it didn't exist. Remus never had it that easy, but he knew Sirius was hurting.

“We should start looking at flats soon,” he’d said, when they’d vacated the dorm long enough for James and Peter to have a turn. “I’ll be eighteen soon. That’s old enough to rent. We’ll just get a place on our own. Anywhere you want.”

“How about East Finchley?” Remus suggested. Sirius had glared at him, then looked away.

“Can’t go back there. *He* lives there.”

“You know that this fight isn’t going to last forever, right? Eventually you’re going to get tired of all this and be best friends again.”

“Oh yeah? Try me. I’ve the memory of an elephant.”

“And the stubbornness of a mule.”

Sirius didn’t seem to find this analogy entirely disagreeable, but he’d refused to talk on the subject of James for the rest of the day. Remus knew what it was that he was seeing—an overbearing friend who thought of him for only his faults and weaknesses—but that was not what Remus saw. The reality was that James Potter was jealous, and jealousy to him was probably a very new thing. Since he was eight years-old, James had only ever had Sirius at his side. He had the *bestest* best friend anyone could ask for so why bother with something as redundant as envy? It’d been easy to assume, what with his generally happy childhood, that he was without faults entirely, but that was simply not true. For all intents and purposes, James Potter had everything, and when one was used to having everything, losing even a bit of it tended to feel catastrophic.

The spat made living within the same five by five space much harder than usual. Any time all four of them were in the same place the air began to feel distinctly stifling, but James had made it a mission to spend as little time around Sirius as possible. He accompanied Lily to the library in the mornings, and made sure to sit at a different table for every meal. At night he camped in the girls’ room, which came as an initial shock to everyone.

"The lengths you two will go to avoid apologising, honestly," Lily huffed, when they'd all met for that Sunday's mass.

"I don't owe *him* anything," Sirius scoffed.

"Oh yeah, nothing at all! Not like I was your best friend or anything," James sneered. "Guess that's what I get for being concerned."

"Try being concerned for yourself for once!"

"A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back," Marlene ground out, with heavy bags beneath her eyes. "Proverbs, chapter twenty-nine, verse eleven."

"Hear that, Potter? That's bible-thumper for get a life."

"Hey Marlene, got any quotes about being a massive twat?"

On the bright side, James' abdication of their bedroom and all things Sirius Black meant that Remus got his boyfriend's full and undivided attention. With one less roommate to worry about, the two of them had even more opportunities to do the unthinkable in the comfort of their own beds. They spent the weekend sleeping in and during the afternoons when Peter was off with Moira, they had each other. *Again and again.* When James ditched them to camp out in the girls' room for the third night in a row, Sirius had snuck over and slipped in behind Remus' curtains with him, where he stayed for most of the night. Remus wasn't worried, Peter was a heavy enough sleeper.

"You have to take him back," Marlene said, come Monday morning. It was finally Halloween and McGonagall had cancelled the following day's lessons to allow them to recover from whatever hijinks they were bound to get up to come nightfall. That year, it was Godric hosting the party, and even without its two most infamous pranksters out on the prowl, things were bound to get messy.

"It's been awful," Marlene continued, busy untangling the paper streamers they'd nicked from the art room. "He snores and Lily refuses to stick her fingers up his nose to get him to shut up. Next time I'm just gonna suffocate him with a pillow."

"James is nothing," Remus said, untangling the other end; "You should hear Peter."

"Yeah, well my snoring's still better than hearing you moan and whinge all night," Peter scoffed from behind the couch, where he was painting a life-sized Headless Horseman across a paper banner. "You actually sound as though you're in pain sometimes. Like someone's choking you in your sleep."

With a sputter, Sirius released one of the balloons he was blowing up and it zoomed across the room, smacking into the common room's grandfather clock with a great *thwack!* Two couches over, several ninth year boys they'd recruited to help tittered and let go of their

own balloons, creating a whizzing flurry of colourful rubber. Watching, Remus couldn't help but grimace. Perhaps Peter wasn't such a heavy sleeper after all.

On their other side, Mary uncapped a metal thermos and poured a suspicious amount of clear liquid into the jar of mixer she was currently concocting. Lottie was next to her, furiously stuffing orange slices into a jug of her own. It appeared to be some sort of cider, but judging from the vodka to juice ratio, they were all in for it.

"Remus' sleep-moaning aside," Mary began; "You guys have got your costumes all sorted for tonight, yes?"

Remus nodded. "Think so."

"You still doing The Beatles?" Marlene asked.

At that, Remus deferred to Sirius, who was stubbornly stretching out a fresh balloon. "Of course, you think we slaved over those 'Sergeant Pepper' costumes for nothing?"

"You got the sewing club to make those," Peter pointed out, "and they still look like one of my mum's nighties."

"Stuff it, Wormtail, you're wearing the dress."

Peter shrugged and popped to his feet with the freshly painted banner in hand. "Whatever. I get to be Ringo."

"I think they're going to look pretty great on stage," Lottie complimented, tossing an orange rind forward and succeeding in getting it down the back of Peter's shirt. The 'stage' in question was really more of a roped off corner of the common room, which they'd cleared out to allow space for their instruments. It'd certainly been an onerous task to lug Peter's drum kit all the way from the Bellchant building, but as Remus glanced at the little set up, complete with amps and all, he felt a bit giddy. They'd all agreed upon sticking to cover songs, too nervous to play anything of their own creation, but they'd already spent weeks practising. It was bound to be great, so long as James and Sirius got their shit together long enough to slog through a single song.

As if on cue, James and Lily strode into the common room, carrying a box of extra decorations between them. Lily was already wearing her Wonder Woman costume, but had added a pair of trackie bottoms underneath to keep warm.

"It looks fantastic in here!" She cheered, as she and James set the box down next to one of the sofas.

"It was all Marlene," Peter called. "She's been bossing us around for hours."

Marlene raised her arms; "Your guys' idea of decorating is slapping a few streamers on the wall and calling it a day. Someone had to step in."

“Still, you guys really did do a great job,” James commended, stopping to admire the streamers she and Remus were currently hanging over the doorway.

“Yeah, no thanks to you,” Sirius quipped, appearing through archway with a stereo speaker in both hands.

“We brought your fake spiders, didn’t we?” James scowled after him. "Bloody had to dig for them in that theatre room."

"Yeah, and it only took you an entire hour."

"For your information—there was also an emergency dorm monitor meeting... Apparently McGonagall thinks we’re planning something.”

“Well, she’s right about that,” Remus said, jumping down from the ottoman he’d been standing on. “What’d she have to say? She's not shutting us down is she?”

The corner of James’ mouth quirked upwards. “Just don’t break anything.”

They knocked fists, and Remus did his best to ignore the look of irritation that Sirius was giving them. Across the room, Lily pulled her nose back from Mary's cider with a grimace.

“Oh my god. What did you guys put in this stuff—*bleach?”*

“Don’t be such a fuddy-duddy,” Mary told her. “It’s Halloween, and since we're decidedly *not* headed into the woods this year, I figure it's only right that we get absolutely trollied. Lot, did you remember to grab that bottle of Cointreau?”

“Left it in the room,” Lottie said, nibbling on an orange slice. “I’ll run and fetch it.”

As Lottie disappeared out into the hall, a group of sixth form girls

from the baking club arrived, carrying with them tray after tray of baked goods. Lily and James directed them into the kitchenette like the helpful dorm monitors they were, and Remus took the opportunity to slip over to the far side of the room, where Sirius was currently hooking up the stereo. He wasn't going to mention anything to do with James, but unfortunately Marlene had followed him, and was determined to say her piece.

"I really think you need to cool it," she told Sirius, as he continued plugging cable after cable into the right slots. "It's been three days."

"Christ, why's everyone acting like it's the end of the world?" Sirius snapped. "Can't Potter and I have it out every once in a while?"

"I'm not saying you have to suddenly give up the ghost, you prat, but how're you supposed to play at the party tonight if you're still all up in arms?"

"I don't have to like him to play with him, McKinnon. Just look at Pink Floyd."

Marlene sighed and looked to Remus for support, but he had nothing, and eventually she left them to their plugs and records. It was still early in the day, and after a weekend of hassle Remus didn't much feel like playing mediator anymore, but he'd have been lying if he said he weren't worried for the evening's show. It was their first time playing in front of a real group of people rather than just each other, and with two of their members so horribly off-kilter, it was beginning to look like Marauders was headed the way of every other dwindling pipe dream of the 1970s.

With no small amount of teamwork, they'd managed to hang most of the rubber spiders from the ceiling by the time Lottie returned. She flounced back into the common room with her bottle of Cointreau in one hand and a well-chuffed smile on her face, as though she'd just won some sort of prize.

"Remus," she called. "There’s someone at the door looking for you.”

“Who?” He asked, climbing down from a precarious tower of ottomans. She shrugged, hooking a finger into her mouth as she stepped back out into the hall, and Remus reluctantly followed her out, stopping only to throw a cotton cobweb over Sirius’ hair. There he found her waiting in the dorm's entry way, standing next to a broad-shouldered guy Remus had never seen before. He was wearing a heavy work trench and matching boots, with a five o'clock shadow

that couldn't have belonged to any sort of sixth form student, let alone someone from their well-to-do college. Just peaking out of the collar of his jacket, Remus could spot a tattoo in the shape of a swallow. It felt like hardcore stuff, and he was reminded of Doss.

“Here he is, the man of the hour,” Lottie said, presenting Remus to the stranger. He offered his hand when Remus approached, and Remus took it, though sceptical.

“Uh, hey. Can I help you?”

“I think ye mean, 'can ye help me',” the stranger said, in a thick Scottish accent. “My cousin Trish tellt me ye were lookin’ for a bagman. The name’s Clyde.”

Remus could hardly believe his ears. “Trish sent you?”

“She told me, aye.”

“And uh—how… How’d you get onto school grounds?”

“I do the deliveries,” Clyde said, jutting a thumb over his shoulder to where a large lorry was indeed parked out front of the dorm. “Trish tellt me tah keep edgy for a 'Remus Lupin'. Said I'd ken it was 'im when I found mesell staring at a guy that looks like a nose taped tah a fence post. Guessing that's you?”

Lottie gave a little giggle, and Remus managed to swallow his shock. “Er—yeah, I’m Lupin. And you’re definitely Trish’s cousin, alright.”

Clyde nodded. "Charlotte here's been telling me about you and yer mates. Said you got most o' yer stuff from Xeno, richt? He was your guy for everything?"

Remus looked to Lottie, who covered her mouth shyly. "Guess Charlotte *has* been busy."

"Aye well, I was Xeno's source anyway. You fandans been keeping the local circuit in business for years."

"Oh shit." Remus glanced around cautiously. "So you'll cut us in then?"

"He's thinking about it," Lottie mused. "Though I doubt he would've came all this way just to turn you down, Remus."

"I might have something oan me. Whit are ye using it fer?"

“It's Halloween, what else? We're throwing a party right here in the dorm."

" 'n whit's yer costume?"

"It's a surprise. If you want to know you'll have to come."

Clyde looked no less than pleased by the idea. He spared Remus a glance, before nodding his head in Lottie's direction. "She your girl?”

“Oh no." Lottie shook her head. "I consider myself more of a baby-sitter, where this one's concerned."

“Hm. Tall baby.”

“A bit too tall if you ask me. I tend to like my men about—” Lottie drew her hand up slowly, stopping just ahead of Clyde’s forehead; “Yeah, right there looks about good.”

“N’ere I thought all those Hawkings girls were wi’out any sense o’humour at all.”

“It’s dangerous to lump women together, you know. We start to realise how unfunny you blokes are.”

Remus raised a brow in judgement. Luckily Lottie caught the look and quickly raised her hands in surrender.

“Alright, I’m going. Mary'll still be waiting on her liquid courage anyway." She raised the Cointreau in accord and began backing up toward the common room. "Catch you later, Highlander."

"Definitely," Clyde replied, looking smug. Remus cleared his throat after, only mildly uncomfortable.

"So, uh—don't take this the wrong way, but you're a lot more... forthcoming than most of the other dealers I know."

"Ken many 'a us, do ye?"

“You'd be surprised."

“I trust Trish," the bagman said. "She wouldn’t send some jobbie my wey.”

“Cool. You got anything on you now then?”

“Always keep some hash in the truck—but ya didn’t hear that from me. Might have something else too if you’re guid fur it.”

“Can you get us more booze?”

“Aye, definitely.”

“And you can keep it coming after Halloween?”

“Offer’s guid til’ June s’long as you are.”

Remus quirked a smile. “Yeah, sounds ace. And if you can deliver like this we’ll make it worth your while.”

“Got a list?”

As Remus began shuffling through his pockets for a pen, Clyde’s gaze drifted up over his shoulder, toward the common room.

“And a’… yer bonnie, blondie friend—she single then?”

Later that evening, with enough hash and booze stowed away to choke a horse, Remus came out of the bathroom dressed head-to-toe in scintillating McCartney blue. The trousers were about six inches too short around the ankles, and his typically unthreatening biceps felt about ready to burst the fabric along the seams, but the get-up had been a favour of the sewing club, made mostly for their show anyway. Hopefully come midnight when everyone was well and truly bladdered, he could abandon the outfit for something more comfortable.

"You look fucking amazing!" Sirius crooned, the moment he'd gotten a look at him. Remus wasn't so sure he agreed, but he didn't object when Sirius began scribbling a rather unconvincing moustache across his upper lip using an eyeliner he’d “borrowed” from Mary.

“You’d probably be able to grow this yourself if you stopped shaving,” he suggested, holding Remus still by the chin. Trying not to smile, Remus batted at one of the shoulder tassels on Sirius’ equally-tacky costume. Though, the Lennon tea-shades were really selling the look.

“You saying I should grow a beard now?”

“I'm not saying you should come out as a member of ZZ Top, but you might look cute with a little lampshade on your top lip.”

“Maybe you should try it," Remus said, admiring the fake handlebars

drawn across Sirius' mouth.

“Nah,” Sirius said, capping the liner; “ ‘fraid I’ll look like my dad. You’re lucky you don’t look much like yours.”

Remus nodded meekly. “Mm…”

Sirius turned away and came back with two glasses with a shot of vodka for them both. “Cheers,” he said, but before Sirius could down the shot, Remus placed his hand over the cup.

“It’s Halloween."

"I'm aware?"

"Tonight's the show. You know what that means.”

“Ugh. Moony—”

“You’ve got to talk to James, Sirius. Even if you don't make up tonight, it'll be your birthday in a few days—do you really want to spend it without James?"

"I've got you!"

"Okay, maybe *I* want to spend your birthday with James."

Sirius scoffed and took the shot without him. After he'd grimaced and recovered, he set the glass aside and straightened out his military dress.

“I don't care about my bloody birthday, Moons. Like I keep telling the rest of 'em, it’s not that big of a deal. If Evans can be pissed at him for a whole year, I don’t see why a few days is so diabolical for me. And besides, what would I even tell him? I can’t say anything about us—not that I want to—and he doesn’t believe me when I say it’s anything else."

"You really don't want to tell him about us?"

"Do you?"

Remus bit his lip. "I asked you first..."

Sirius gave him a very hard look, but then shook his head. "If I did tell him, it should be on my own terms, shouldn't it? And I—well, I don't want to tell him my biggest secret when we're... like this." Sirius voice

grew fainter; "What if it... *makes it worse."*

Remus didn't really have an answer; he'd been thinking the same thing ever since the two of them had blown up on each other, but he was relieved to hear that Sirius wasn't thinking in extremes.

"Anyway," he huffed, "he's just being paranoid."

"He misses you," Remus said. "And I think you miss him too."

"It's been three days. I don't need to miss him."

He shrugged, haplessly. "Alright. But I know us spending so much time together has James worried. I think he feels as though he's losing his best friend."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Remember how you felt when I was dating Marlene? 'Cause I certainly remember how it felt watching you date Chastity."

Sirius scowled off to the side like he often did when he knew he'd lost an argument. "I never got jealous when he started bunking off with Evans."

"James has liked Lily since year seven. I'd say you got a bit more time to get used to it."

"Fuck you for always being right."

"Easy." Remus leaned in, brushing the hair from Sirius' face and kissing the corner of his mouth. "Just try saying something before you're too off your trolley to walk straight."

As if to spite him, Sirius stole Remus' shot and downed that too before kissing him back. He felt the vodka burn his lips, but kissing Sirius always felt a bit like fire.

"REMUS! SIRUS!" Peter barked through the bedroom door, hammering it with his fist; "Something's wrong with the stereo! Can one of you come down already and fix it?"

"You go?" Remus asked, putting his hands together piously; "Gotta use the loo."

"Alright, sure. I'll catch you downstairs, rock star." Backing up, Sirius gave him one more once-over before smirking devilishly. "Oh, and

Moons? Don't look now, but I can see your nob through those trousers."

"You never did!" Remus gasped, but Sirius had already gone—slipping out into the hall with a laugh.

Once he'd made sure that he was adequately covered—*"Knew he was lying..."*—Remus made his way downstairs to dorm's ground floor, where the party was already in full-swing. Kids were arriving in droves, carrying booze and pumpkins, and all wearing a hotchpotch of costumes scrounged together from whatever they could find when so far from home. Peter Frampton was blaring across the room from the stereo, and the entire room was alight. Soon they'd either be cheering for them or booing them off stage, but that was the least of Remus' worries anyway. On his way to get himself a drink, he heard familiar shouting from the kitchenette and followed the noise. There he found his boyfriend staring James down, a small crowd of curious students encircling them. Only Lily dared get closer, and was twisting back and forth between them, looking heated in her Lynda Carter get-up.

"Come on, you two, can't this be over with already? Just apologise to one another!"

Both boys ignored her, too viciously scorned to be of sound mind and reasoning.

“You’re a right twat, you know that?” Sirius hissed.

“I just assumed it wouldn’t be happening,” James shot back. “You know, since we’re *not friends* anymore.”

“Not even five minutes,” Remus sighed, already shoving his way through the crowd.

"Alright, that's enough. I thought we were here to party?" He grabbed Sirius' shoulder to pull him back, but Sirius dug his heels in. He had a point to prove, it seemed.

“Look at him!” He growled. “Can’t even commit to a fucking outfit!”

James crossed his arms. “I said I’d still play.”

“And how would that look, huh? Three Beatles and a—whatever the fuck that is?!”

Remus took a moment to look James up and down. He was not

wearing his George Harrison/Sergeant Pepper get-up, and instead had changed into a... businessman?

“It’s Clark Kent, obviously,” James snapped, aggressively pointing at his glasses. He pulled his shirt back to reveal a crudely drawn 'S' for 'Superman' on his vest beneath, but Sirius remained unconvinced.

“You look more like you’re on your way to a fucking cubicle at your nine-to-five,” he lashed.

“Thought it was all about the music, Black. Or was that something you made up too?”

“Oh, fuck you!”

Chitters went up from the other kids and Lily waved her Lasso of Truth between them threateningly.

“Enough! God, I still don’t understand what this stupid fight is over!”

“ ‘ASK HIM’!”

“Hey, hey!” Mary trilled cheerily, shoving her way into the crowded room. Like Remus and Sirius, she was dressed up in shiny regalia, though her costume was an ode to Cher and featured an entire swan's worth of feathers rather than golden epaulettes. “When’s that show supposed to start?” She asked. “Lottie’s been telling people on their way in—they’re all excited to see Hawkings’ very own Marauders!”

“We’re coming,” James grunted, eyeing Sirius up scathingly. Sirius returned the look, tenfold.

“Guess it’s a good thing we changed the name to a ‘concept’ after all, Potter, since you don’t look like much of a ‘Marauder’ to me.”

“Let’s just get on with it, choir boy,” James replied cuttingly.

Looking indignant, Sirius spun on his heel and marched out, leaving James to glance sorely at a disapproving Lily and follow him.

“Was it something I said?” Mary asked after they’d gone.

Remus sighed. “I really wish it was, Mary.”

And then, because it was Mary, she handed him a drink.

“Bottoms up, darling. Night’s young yet.”

With a small smile, Remus accepted and knocked the side of his paper cup against hers before downing the entire thing. Afterwards he followed her out into the hallway, which was even more crowded than before. There they happened across Jillian and her new beau, Roy, who were both done up in matching sailor outfits. She waved, drink in hand, but simply passed him by on her way out of the common room.

“Solved that problem, did you?” Mary teased, wrapping an arm around his waist.

“Yes, despite what others might have to say, I’m not entirely hopeless.”

She threw her head back to laugh as they emerged into the bustling common room and a few of the silky feathers she’d clipped into her hair went up his nose. Remus sneezed, toppling sideways gracefully in the process, and just before Mary could reach out and help steady him he knocked into someone—nearly upsetting their drink.

“Oh shit, my bad.”

Trish turned around. “Na harm done—*oh.”*

Remus straightened up, suddenly very sorry. He and Trish hadn't spoken since that day he'd snapped at her outside the science building. He still felt bad, but between the *JamesandSirius* debacle, he'd yet to find time to apologise.

“Er—hi…” he said, while Trish pursed her lips, looking like she'd prefer to be anywhere else.

"Hi..."

Uninterested in their sombre affair, Mary tapped Remus on the shoulder. “Stefan D’Arcy is giving me the eye,” she announced; “This’ll only take a few. Meet you by the stage.”

She kissed his cheek and just like that was off—leaving him to his awkward fate.

“Whit are ye wearing?” Trish asked eventually.

“I’m supposed to be Paul McCartney,” he said, feeling stupid in the head-to-toe, iridescent polyester. “And you’re…”

Trish looked down at herself. She was wearing what appeared to be a

white bed sheet and had wrapped a wreath around her head made out of real leaves. Over her chest was a red stain that looked a lot like cranberry juice. “I’m Julius Caesar,” she said. “After he got ‘imself stabbed, that is.”

“Cool! Nice... execution."

"Was that supposed tae be a pun?"

"No! I just meant—you know—the blood... You must really like history.”

"Oh," she looked down at herself and shrugged. “Not really. Just ken the feeling o' bein' stabbed in the back, is all.”

Remus Lupin, curse your big, fat gob.

At his silence, Trish turned to go, but Remus got ahead of her first. “Hey, I just wanted to say thanks!" He chirped. "Clyde came by today —helped us pull the rest 'a this together. You didn’t have to pass my name onto him, but you did, so—thanks.”

“No need tae thank me, Clyde was already making the deliveries."

“I know, but I was right awful to you. So you can…er—You can hit me if you want! I’d deserve it.”

She squinted at him. “Hit you for what?”

“For what I said,” he winced again. “It was gross—terrible. You caught me at a bad time, but I was still a right arsehole. I didn’t mean what I said. I'm real sorry.”

“Aye, you were an arse.”

“Yeah, so you can hit me—to make up for it.”

“That sounds like a cheap way tae make yerself feel better, not me.”

“Ha… maybe you’re right.”

Trish exhaled, shoulders relaxing as her usual frisky attitude returned. “Aw, Loonary, dinnae fash yerself. I wasn’t all that bothered by what ye said. You really think some walkin’ hooter on a stick can hurt my feelings? Not half-likely.”

Somehow the jab made Remus feel a bit better. “Do you really think

my nose is that big?"

"It ain't small."

He smiled. "Well, thanks anyway. You're a fucking cool one, Trish."

"I know." Trish held out her hand, and Remus made to smack it fondly, but she pulled back at the last second and socked him in the stomach.

"Yer right, Remington, that did make me feel better. Good luck on stage, by th'wey. Should be worth a good laugh."

She left him behind, which was well deserved, and after a long moment of rubbing his ribs and smiling to himself, Remus made his way across the common room toward their little fenced off corner. Peter was already set up behind his drum kit. Moira was in his lap and Peter had his arms around her, using her hands to gently beat at the snare and cymbals as she giggled. James was standing next to them, sullenly fiddling with his guitar as he murmured back and forth with Lily. Sirius remained firmly on the other side, fiddling with the knobs on their amplifiers just to keep his hands busy.

"Where'd you disappear to?" Sirius asked when he approached.

"Sorry. Got caught chatting up Trish."

"Trish...? Oh—you mean that prefect. Peppermint Patty or whatever."

"Be nice. It's just Trish—you're Patty, 'Pattycake'." Remus pulled their set list out of his pocket and slapping it down over one of the amps.

"Ready to get this over with then?" James asked, strolling forward and picking up the plug for his amp.

"Try being a little less excited, why don't you?" Sirius replied sarcastically.

Resisting a groan, Remus strolled back to the wall behind Peter's drum kit and picked up his bass. After a quick kiss, Moira fled her boyfriend's lap and Peter leaned over.

"They still…?"

"Yup."

"*Fan*-tastic."

Up ahead, Sirius shoved James away from him and spun the microphone around in the air. A light screech of feedback echoed, making James and everyone up front flinch, but Sirius didn't so much as bat an eye. He cleared his throat and somewhere across the room, Mary cut the music.

"Oi, alright, so you all know us, but for tonight we ain't any ol' individuals —we're Marauders."

The crowd's response wasn't any more enthusiastic than Sirius' introduction. Kids shuffled about, but no one seemed to know what to say or how to act. Most of them had probably never been to a concert in their life.

"We're gonna be playing a few songs for ya. Y ou might know 'em, so try and sing along if you want, and er—happy Halloween, I guess."

"Could you be any duller?" James scoffed, prompting Sirius to flip him off about ten millimetres away from the end of his nose. The gesture got a few people up front to laugh, but the joke was short-lived, and Remus found himself praying that they just made it through the set unscathed.

"This is 'Communication Breakdown'," Sirius rumbled into the mike, and a moment later James had kicked off his fervent guitar riff. A few heads started to bob, and then it was Peter's turn. He came in with a crash, stumbling along until he matched James somewhat in rhythm, but Remus was so shocked by the initial disarray that he'd missed his own count by four bars. Cursing, he jumped in away, but by then the first verse had come and gone and Sirius had missed it.

"You gonna sing or not?" James called.

"Maybe I'll sing when you start sounding half-decent!"

Remus felt his his fingers begin to freeze up with apprehension. It was one of the most difficult songs they knew and it always took them a few moments to find each other in the rhythm, but they'd never been off in actual communication too. Already the song was proving an insurmountable challenge, and they were only thirty seconds in.

Please, you fucking toffs, he silently begged, *get through it!*

But there was no need to worry after James. Whether he saw the music as Sirius' challenge or as a whirlwind of thrashing colours inside his mind, he spun around to Peter's drum kit and stepped up to him

with his guitar until they were playing side by side and matching frazzled rhythms. The gesture seemed to comfort Peter, who took a breath and finally started over at the beginning of the next bar. The moment he heard the drums level-out, Remus was able to find himself again in tempo, and he looked to desperately Sirius, who'd been observing them all from the front while swinging his microphone around lackadaisically.

"Right!" Sirius called, catching the mike out of the air. "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Oh thank fuck.

As Sirius spun to face the front, igniting a few cheers, Remus finally exhaled. The longest intro in "Communication Breakdown" history, and just like that they were really playing.

"Hey girl, stop what you're doin'!
Hey girl, you'll drive me to ruin!"

Sirius might've sang with the same bluesy twang as Plant, but a bleating statue he was not. He gathered the microphone chord around himself so that he could skirt around the front of the stage, getting right up with the kids who stood to watch.

"I don't know what it is I like about you, but I like it a lot,
Won't you let me hold you—let me feel your lovin' touch!"

Maybe it was their initial flop, or even the song itself, but whatever it is, most of the Hawkings' crowd remained rooted to the spot. They didn't know what they should be cheering for—the singing or the music? Both seemed so at odds. Sirius flitted around James and his guitar like he were an electric fence, both of them playing chicken with one another.

"Communication breakdown, it's always the same!
Havin' a nervous breakdown, drive me insane!"

James didn't so much as glance at Sirius, no matter how well he sang; instead he kept his head trained downwards, furiously ripping at his

guitar. Thank god for Mary and Lottie, who pushed their way to the front and began to cheer as Sirius wailed into the mike. Their enthusiasm began to drum up some support, but the song ended to paltry applause. They stuck with it though, and though it took two more songs for most people to get into it, by the middle of their set, the nerves had gone and the room was actually moving.

Remus had initially thought going for a virtually unknown Sex Pistols single was a mistake (Mary had called “Pretty Vacant” an ‘assault on the eardrums’ the first time she’d heard it) but the lyrics were easy for others to pick out and easier still to scream while drunk, which Sirius certainly did. Halfway through, he whipped off his Lennon tea-shades and threw them into the crowd. Even James had begun to perk up. He hadn’t the experience of seeing the punk band live like them, but it was his favourite song in the set, and he came alive alongside the words;

‘We’re so pretty, oh so pretty! We’re va—CUNT!’

It was the excitement and rush of the music that made James into a true guitarist. He hit each bar with such liveliness that even Sirius was intoxicated by it. At one point Lily appeared off to the side of the crowd and James leaned towards her, accepting a kiss over top of the guitar that had everyone screaming. The moment the song ended Lottie held out a drink to Sirius, which he downed instantly and threw back into the crowd. The crowd of kids went wild, bits of costumes flying through the air as they cheered.

“Come on, Sirius!” Mary begged from the front row. One song—*just one!”*

With an exaggerated sigh, Sirius rolled his head to the rest of them, smirking pertly. They all knew exactly what Mary meant—she and the girls had been begging for it since they’d found out about their plans to play in the first place—and though they’d denied secretly practising it... there really was an ABBA song for everything.

Cheekily, Peter shrugged and kicked off on the drums, and Sirius spun back around, barking into the microphone;

“ROCK ME—! Give me that kick now!
Rock me, show me that trick now!
Roll me, you can do magic!
BABY—! And I can’t get enough of it!"

Every girl in the room screamed at the top of her lungs, each belting out the lyrics like it was their final confession. Remus nearly lost it and James absolutely did—bent over his guitar and laughing until it was finally his turn to play. There was very little to do in the song as a bassist, which meant Remus got to watch as the room came undone. It was intoxicating, and it wasn't just the drink. Music did that to a person; it made them forget their worst worries—even the sort that had them more angry with their best friend than they'd ever been in all of their seventeen years.

Remus could hardly believe it.

Before his very eyes, Sirius and James leaned into one another and head-banged in time with Peter's drums. No one would've been able to tell that they'd hating each other's guts only moments before—it wasn't about that. It was about the music.

Real, fucking music.

Sirius sang his heart out of course, leaving James' side only to weave between the other kids until he'd nearly tripped a dozen people with the microphone cord.

"Don't stop the rocking—don't stop the rocking!" He crowed; *"I say don't stop the rocking!"*— and James was with him the entire way. A whole three days of fighting, and Remus knew they'd be okay the moment they bent their heads together and began singing into the same mike. They were a band again. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs.

Marauders.

All four of them were practically heaving by the time they'd finished the set. Sweat dripped down Remus' back in his vibrant, poorly-designed costume, and he'd never felt more exhilarated. Their concert of no more than a hundred kids had gone amazingly, or as Peter called it the moment they'd stepped away from their instruments—*bitchin'*.

While his friends and classmates pat him on the back for good show, Sirius appeared at Remus' elbow, his renegade-grey eyes alight.

"Moony, can I bum your smokes? Prongs and I—we're gonna go have a chat."

Remus handed the carton over immediately. "Cheers, love."

The ‘love’ had slipped out, leaving him embarrassed, but Sirius just squeezed his hand over the cigarettes and was off. Watching him go, Remus couldn’t help but wish he would be there, just to know exactly what was said and how Sirius was going to explain himself, but then it wouldn’t be the talk they needed—and worried or not, they needed *JamesandSirius*.

After the show and his friends' assumed reconciliation, Remus resolved himself to spend the rest of the evening getting royally pissed. It turned out that Clyde had indeed accepted Lottie’s invitation after all, and not only that—had brought several of his favourite village rabble with him. One of the lads had brought a funnel that was probably intended for car repair, but was passed around so everyone could guzzle as much beer as humanly possible. Remus himself spent more than a couple rounds down on his knees, while others wailed at him;

'Drink! Drink! Drink!'

As his head and stomach swam with dutch courage, countless people appeared to congratulate him on the show, ripping air-guitars in front of him and all but insisting on an encore. Dodging their praise and requests, he shared a spliff or two or three with Trish, not caring that he was double-dipping and would be absolutely wrecked in the morning. He was a Beatle for the night—a rock star, and rock stars didn’t sit around worrying about shitty things like stupid fights with friends and their sexuality. Rock stars drank and fucked everything in sight and paid for the consequences with a company credit card, and when that was maxed they simply got another.

Remus wanted to be maxed.

At some point he ended up on a couch with Lily, who left a large smudge of red lipstick along his shirt as she tucked her head under his chin. Someone had put on a Dusty Springfield album, but there was so much clamour that they could barely hear it.

“They’ve been gone for so long!” Lily complained, on her third glass of what Lottie was calling a ‘down and dirty martini’.

“Fuckers took my fags too,” Remus grumbled, though he’d already been offered by more than his fair share from other friendlies.

“How are James and I supposed to be *together* if we’re always apart?”

“They ditched us,” he agreed.

Lily shot up on the couch. “Maybe *we* should be together! I mean where is James? GONE!”

“You’re right! Sirius ain’t here either!”

“Well, fuck ‘em! *OH—!* We should get married!”

“Yeah!” Remus snorted. “I’d marry you!”

“I’d marry you too!” Lily shrieked, then whipped her head around; *“MARY!* Come marry us!”

Mary appeared out of the haze, a single hand of judgement set on her bedazzled hip. With the other she plucked Lily’s plastic drink cup out of her hand. “And just how many of these have you had, Lillian Evans?”

“Only a couple!” Lily pouted, reaching for it.

“*Ahem.* Are you forgetting something? You need to sober up if you want to make it to the *end of the night.”*

Mary said this last bit rather pointedly, but Remus was too busy laughing at her sudden abstemious attitude. “Since when do you lambaste others for getting pissed, Mary?”

“I’m only lambasting Lily. You, on the other hand, have my complete permission to keep on chugging.”

Properly sloshed, Remus raised an arm and pumped it like a train whistle; *“Chu-chu.”*

“Mary, we need you to marry us,” Lily whined, tugging on her friend’s wrist. “Remus proposed.”

“Oh did he, now? And where’s the ring?”

“Must’ve forgot it at home,” Remus sighed, patting his chest and current lack of pockets.

“Darn,” Mary tsked, snapping her fingers. “Remus, dear, why don’t you go get yourself another drink while I help Lily plan her vows. It’s Halloween—we can marry you at the witching hour.”

“That’s a *fantastic* idea!” Lily cackled. “Someone get the camera!”

Unable to see a flaw in Mary’s plan, Remus popped up from the couch

and saluted the girls before ambling his way back to the kitchenette. They'd moved all of the drink and food in there after a group of kids had claimed the common room table for beer curling, but he happened to know of a single bottle of gin he'd tucked out of sight in the corner of the highest shelf. Excited by the idea, Remus didn't even notice the arm that reached out of the dorm supply cupboard until it had already grabbed him and hauled him inside.

"What the f—!"

Sirius had Remus pressed up against the cupboard wall in a second, hot breath filling his mouth as they kissed, fingers pressing up into each other's hair. A bucket clanged around their feet and there was a clatter as they knocked over a stack of brooms, making them both yelp and then laugh. It was dark, with only the light from outside spilling around the cracks in the door, but when Sirius pulled away Remus could see a dark smudge of his eyeliner-moustache on the other boy's upper lip.

"You're fucking mental—where have you been all this time?" Remus demanded, head swimming.

"With James," Sirius said, kissing him again.

"And?!" Remus managed around his lips; "How'd it go?"

"Good." There was pure bliss in Sirius' voice. *"So good."*

"What did you say?"

Sirius made a grunt of frustration and pulled back. "Well… we didn't say much actually. I raced him across the football pitch."

"You mean, you ran all the way to the field?"

"And back."

"Hold on—you didn't *talk* to each other?"

"Hard to gab when you're busy skidding over grass. See the state 'a my knees?"

Remus pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I won?" Sirius asked with a cheeky smirk.

“I know you didn’t. But I hope you actually made up, because it would be kind of ironic if our band broke up right after its first gig.”

Sirius jabbed him in the sides. “Yes, captain smart-ass, we did do *some* talking. We both apologised. There might’ve been some slight homoerotic wrestling, but that’s besides the point. I told James that…” Sirius sighed, as if he was struggling for the right words in his inebriated state; "I told him that I’m just trying to figure myself out. We talked about the school—not the queer part, but the 'therapy' and the way mum and dad had me sent off. And I... well, we both felt guilty I think. Took it out on each other. A bit hard though—I forgot how hard it was to hate the wanker.”

“So you didn’t tell him that we're…”

“That we’re totally bent for each other? No.”

Remus exhaled.

“And are you disappointed that you didn’t tell him?”

“Nah, don’t think I needed to. I think this was more about him than us anyway. He's got this chip on his shoulder—thinks he has to be perfect all the time."

"No one can be perfect all of the time.

“Gives us more time to figure our shit out.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever figure you out, Sirius.”

Sirius squinted at him playfully. “You seem nervous, Moony.”

“I’m not nervous,” Remus said, entirely nervous. “I’m happy for you. You and James… you’re totally brothers. I’ve never known two better friends.”

Sirius simpered shyly, trailing a finger along the thin fabric hiding Remus’ collarbone. “Wanna know something, Moons?”

“What, Padfoot?”

“I like you… *sooooo* much.”

Sirius sniggered like a school girl and Remus’ need to pin him against the closest available surface surged—so he did just that, flipping them around so Sirius’ back was to the cupboard wall.

“Oh! I like it when you take charge,” Sirius preened. “Such a thug.”

“Please shut up.”

"Yes, sir."

> > >

Reaching down, Remus snaked an arm under Sirius’ thighs and lifted him completely off the ground, pinning him between himself and the wall as Sirius clung to his shoulders and wrapped his legs around his narrow waist. They stifled each other, tongue on tongue, grinding together and placing sloppy, drunken kisses across the lips and jaws while fisting their clothes to draw the other even closer. Sirius’ kisses still burned, but in that way that sent fire from Remus' lips down to his core and further still. He could feel the pronounced shape of Sirius’ prick through the flimsy polyester trousers and for a moment Remus imagined how the shiny yellow fabric would simply tear apart with the weakest bit of pressure. Then they could have at it right there, be damned everyone else. Remus almost did it too—he was already reaching around Sirius, his hands slipping past the too-tight elastic.

< < <

But then the cupboard’s doorknob rattled.

Springing apart, Remus half-dropped Sirius, who caught himself on a low shelf and knocked down a pile of clean linens in the process.

“Door won’t open…” Someone slurred on the other side, hiccupping several times. “Need a—*hic!*—buckeeeet…!”

“That door sticks sometimes,” another voice said. “Just gotta wiggle it a bit.”

Nearly screaming, Remus wrapped his hand around the doorknob and held on for dear life. Behind him, Sirius was untangling himself from the sheets, stifling his laughter behind one hand.

“This is not funny!” Remus hissed, dropping his weight into his knees to hold on as the door rattled and moaned viciously.

“It’s more even stuck than before now—*hic!”* The first voice whined.

“Someone must be inside—busy snogging!”

A thumping noise came next, like a fist on the other side of the wood.

"COME ON OUT, YA RANDY TARTS!"

Remus looked around for another exit—a grate they could pry off the wall and crawl into like rats in a sewer—but sadly it was just a broom cupboard.

“What are we gonna do?!”

“Relaaax,” Sirius whispered, pulling a watch from his pocket—James’ watch. He squinted down at it, before his face split into a grin. “Any second now.”

The doorknob strained under Remus’ grip, sliding with the sweat of his palms. Any second now—and they were going to be caught!

“Sirius—!”

"Wait for it..."

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"SIRIUS!"

"Three... two...!"

Remus couldn't help it; he held his breath, and a second later the deafening noise blew through the entire dorm;

BANG!

The doorknob was released instantly as another bang ricocheted across wood-planned walls, then another, and another—endless booms, back to back to back.

BANG—BANG—BANG—BANG!

Each blast was accompanied by the elated shrieking of kids and a rattling hiss, like fireworks going off, and Remus realised with a start that that was exactly what it was. He whirled on Sirius, who was beside himself with excitement.

“Prongs and I may have stopped to have a little chat with Little Bob on our way back,” he said candidly. “I really think he’s outdone himself this time.”

As more explosions echoed from outside, Remus let out a long moan of relief and peeked out into the hall. It was empty save a few kids, all

of which were racing off to get a look at whatever was causing the noise.

“You slip out first,” Sirius told him, reaching for one of the bed sheets.

“What about you?”

Smirking, Sirius pulled the white sheet over his head and waved his hands at him in an attempt to look spooky.

“OooOooh! I’ll come out afteeerrr! No one’ll knooow it’s meeee!”

Batting him away, Remus puckered over a smile and escaped out into the hall as more explosions sounded off. He followed the crowd into the common room, where everyone was scattered around the front windows, watching as a group of boys stood around outside, setting off crackers and homemade roman candles like utter lunatics. It was a wonder Sirius wasn’t already among them.

“Remus!” Marlene hollered, getting his attention from across the room. She and Nicole were tucked up on one of the window ledges, the light from outside making their hair flash a new colour every time a cracker blew off. “I hear you and Lily are getting married!” Marlene teased loudly. “Have you found your dress yet?"

"You can always borrow mine!" Nicole offered, gesturing to her Bride of Frankenstein costume. Marlene howled, and then sat up again eagerly.

"OOH! OOH! Can I be the best man?”

“You’re already my best man!” Remus declared, fighting through the crowd to get to her and wrapping an arm around Marlene’s neck, grinding his knuckles lightly into the top of her head. She wailed and fought him off with a sharp right-hook right to the shoulder.

“Did you guys set this up?” Nicole asked, jutting a thumb at the fireworks.

“Not me—James and Sirius.”

“Those idiots,” Marlene laughed. “Always putting on a show.”

“Always.”

“Speaking of show—you guys gonna do an encore?” Nicole pressed.

Immediately one of the kids to their right struck up a chant; *“Encore! Encore!”*

“You should, Remus!” Jillian gushed, appearing at his side with Roy.

“But I’ve lost my band! I don’t know where they are!”

“I see Peter!” Marlene called, pointing; “Pete! You up for an encore?”

Blinking incoherently in their direction, Peter waved his beer overhead in drunken agreement, and several more kids turned to cheer as a firework loud enough to rattle Godric’s windows went off outside. They were positively too pissed to get through a single song intact, but that didn’t seem to matter much to the other kids that took up the chant, screaming over the thunderous bangs.

“ENCORE! ENCORE! ENCORE!”

Remus whirled on Marlene and Nicole. “Look what you’ve done.”

“It’s called peer pressure!” Nicole grinned. Marlene opened her mouth to add something, but suddenly perked up, eyes trained over Remus’ shoulder in question. Following her odd look, he spun around to find a sheet-clad ghost standing before him. He almost said Sirius’ name in a scoff, but was instantly thankful he didn’t as the ghost swooped in and captured his mouth in a kiss right through the sheet.

The sounds of surprise and delight from the kids around them was louder than the fireworks themselves. All demands for an encore were immediately silenced, but Sirius didn’t bother sticking around to take it all in. Just like that, he was off—sweeping out of the common room like an actual spirit in the night.

“Remus, who the hell was that?” Jillian screeched, sounding both scandalised and impressed.

“I—I don’t know!”

“AFTER IT!” Nicole shouted, leaping off her window sill with Marlene hot on her heels, racing in the direction Sirius had gone. Several watching kids followed, mostly girls, and several cries of *‘CATCH THAT GHOST’* could be heard over the fireworks as they stormed out of the dorm.

“Black, you better fucking run,” Remus murmured to himself, beginning to crack up just as James’ dropped an arm around his

shoulder. He realised with delight that James was now wearing his Sergeant Pepper outfit, complete with an iconic eyeliner moustache of his own.

“That was fucking legendary, mate!” James cheered. “Who was it?”

“Dunno. Good kisser though.”

“Hell, Moony! Okay, you heard ‘em though, right? How d’ya feel about an encore?”

“You gotta find Sirius first,” he cackled.

“Sirius! Okay! I’ll find him!” James clapped him firmly on the back, too drunk to know his own strength, and Remus grunted. “And hey—sorry I was such a cunt before, but I get it now! Totally! And it’s cool! Love that Sirius—that Padfoot!”

James’ words touched something within Remus. “I love him too, Prongs.”

“Be right back then! Let’s rock!”

As James shambled away with a goofy grin on his face, Remus felt over the moon. Like he could laugh so hard he might cry. *Love that Sirius.*

“Remus, over here,” Lily called sweetly, appearing by his elbow with Lottie and Mary on either side of her. Each girl was smiling, and if he were more sober, he might have realised that they were knowing smiles—the kind that got you into trouble and still expected a thank-you in return.

“How are you feeling, deary?” Lottie asked.

Love that Sirius.

“Great—brilliant! You?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Mary answered with a smirk. “Now, on a scale of one to ten, how drunk would you say you are?”

He looked up first, then down. The room spun. “Twenty-two.”

“Wonderful, let’s cheers to that!” Lily said, pressing another glass of tequila into his hand. He downed it—because why not—and the girls cheered, taking his arm on each side.

“Come with us?”

“Sure, but James wants to do an encore,” Remus told her, slurring a bit.

Lottie plucked the glass from his hand. “Don’t worry, you’ll be back in no time,” she promised. “You just leave it all to us. *Ohhh Clyde..."*

* * *

Tuesday 1st November 1977

Even hungover, Remus was a light sleeper. He couldn’t even remember making it back to their room the night before, but someone had drawn his curtains for him and left a bottle of water and a fresh set of pyjamas at the foot of his bed, which he thought was extremely kind. Probably Lily then, Lily was kind.

A wave of nausea hit him, and Remus turned over against his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel it already—a legendary hangover. The kind that left you dazed and confused for days afterwards. The sweats would come first, then the bile would creep up the back of your throat, just threatening to spill over. *Oh god*—someone drown him in the Dubh now.

As he focused on not vomiting over his own sheets, Remus distantly became aware of a whirring coming from across the room. It was the sound of the stereo coming to life and sorting through a tape. The noise felt like a jackhammer against Remus’ brain, and he was tempted to sit up in bed and tear a strip off of Sirius for even considering music so early, but before he could, the tape started and the entire room was immediately accosted by disco pop at full volume.

‘HONEY HONEY, HOW HE THRILLS ME, A-HA! HONEY HONEY! HONEY HONEY, NEARLY KILLS ME, A-HA! HONEY HONEY!’

“SIRIUS!” James hollered; “TURN OFF THE BLOODY MUSIC!”

“It’s not me!”

Remus rolled over in his bed, hands over his ears. “SIRIUS, SHUT IT

OFF NOW!"

"I didn't do it!" A pause, then; *"WHAT THE FUCK*— WHO CHAINED ME TO THE FUCKING BED?!"

There was a sudden screech—Peter—and Remus shot up in bed, ripping his curtains open. He regretted it instantly.

Icy water crashed down on him from above like a slab of cement, making him seize up and nearly tumble off the edge of the bed. Utterly stunned and unable to pick his jaw up from off the floor, Remus stared out at their bedroom. It was obvious—they'd been pranked. In true parent-trap fashion, someone had turned their room into one giant spider web, weaving string and twine around every available surface and making it impossible to take even half a step without getting tangled up in it. Because that wasn't enough, they'd also hung a bucket over his bed and tied a fishing line to his curtains so he'd be soaked the moment he pulled them open. Across from him, Peter's curtains were already open, but instead of a fair-haired boy, Remus found only a poor replica of a plucked chicken. Peter was covered head-to-toe in feathers and his ankles had been tied to the footboard.

His first thought was Barty—*had Regulus finally stooped to real tricks?* But then he spotted it; a single pink bra left atop the stereo like a calling card.

"What the fuck happened?!" Peter demanded over the blaring music. Apart from the feathers, he also had what looked to be bits of tape stuck to his forehead. Remus realised with horror that they were Mary's wax strips.

James, decidedly free of any binds and not at risk of being soaked, leapt up from bed and began fighting his way through the maze of webbing to reach the stereo, which cut-out right after *'YOU'RE A LOVE MACHINE!'*

Huffing with relief and still fighting the mess of string, he turned around and Remus' eyes bulged.

"Oh my god, Potter, your *hair."*

"What?" James' hands flew up to his head. He relaxed when he realised he was not bald, but it wasn't the lack of hair that had shocked Remus. It was the single white streak of blonde now zipping off the front of James' forehead, off-setting his wild, black waves like

the pattern of a skunk.

“What—What is it?” James demanded again. *“Oh my god*—where are my glasses?”

As James whipped around to look for them, Sirius gave a cry from behind his bed curtains. He was the only one with them still closed, and Remus had to fight to get to him through the knots of string and twine hung up everywhere, all while dripping water all across the floor. Half-afraid and half-excited for what he might find, Remus pulled back the heavy red curtains and clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Don’t you *dare* laugh,” Sirius threatened.

Remus pressed his lips together, but he couldn’t help it. Sirius had one wrist cuffed to his headboard with fluffy pink handcuffs and was wearing only his boxer shorts and a second lacy black bra. One of his legs had been shaved bare as well, but the real cherry on top was the words ‘mummy issues’, which had been written across his forehead in thick black marker.

"Holy shit..."

“Just get me out of here!” Sirius raged, rattling his little cuff against the headboard.

“I’m all wet though.”

“Remus-*fucking*-Lupin, if you don’t get over here *RIGHT NOW—!”*

Smirking, Remus peeled back his soaked t-shirt and climbed onto the bed, straddling Sirius and trying to tug at the flimsy cuffs. “We can probably just break them,” he said, giving Sirius’ wrist a few sharp tugs.

“Fuck—*ow!* It was definitely the girls,” Sirius hissed. “Payback for last year.”

“It’s good payback—you should see your forehead. You've been christened.”

Sirius clapped his free hand over his ‘mummy issues’. “They got you too!”

Looking down, Remus spotted the letters ‘LE’ drawn on the left side of

his chest inside a small heart. It stumped him, but before he could wonder for too long, James let out another cry. He'd found his glasses —left innocently on his bedside and slathered in a thick layer of honey.

"Monsters!" James wailed. "Absolute she-devils!"

"Looks like the razor came for you too, Potter," Sirius said.

James instantly looked down at himself. His right leg was as bare as a baby's bottom.

"Oh my GOD!"

"Think of how good they'll look on the pitch," Remus offered. "You'll be so aerodynamic."

"HA!" Sirius cackled, as James started toward them through the web, looking about ready to strangle his friends himself. A sudden crash from across the room stopped him, and they all spun around to look. Peter had freed himself from his footboard, only to tangle himself up in the strings next to the bed, scrambling around on the floor like a trapped animal.

"Just kill meeeee!" He bawled, one of the wax strips clutched in his hand, his left eyebrow decidedly gone from his forehead.

* * *

A half an hour later...

Being pranked after a night of heavy drinking seemed to function a lot like getting scared while having the hiccups. The girls' trick had frightened the hangover right out of them, and once they'd managed to wrestle down all of the string and mopped up the water, Remus almost felt human again. The others might have been able to see more of the humour in it, had most of the jokes not carried such lasting effects. James' hair had indeed been dyed, and along with their matching lack of leg-hair, Sirius had to wear the remaining half of the handcuffs down to breakfast like a fuzzy bracelet. Peter refused to try and take off the other wax strip, fearing the loss of both of his eyebrows, and no matter how much soap he used, Remus couldn't get the little heart to come off his chest. He'd rubbed until the skin felt raw, but the marker they'd used on him was apparently made with

stronger stuff than whatever they'd used to advertise Sirius' 'issues'. However, he did note with some satisfaction that Sirius' forehead still faintly gave him away.

When they finally dragged themselves into the hall and toward their usual table, they found all four girls sitting around with breakfast trays in front of them, looking startlingly fine and not hungover at all.

"There officers!" Sirius barked, pointing viciously; "There's the guilty slags!"

"Oh my god," Marlene gasped. A moment passed as the girls took in the sight of them, before they all burst into laughter.

"Yeah, yeah, yack it up," Remus huffed.

"No, this is amazing!" Mary guffawed, smacking her hands on the table top as the boys joined them. "You guys look *amazing."*

"You're all evil!" Peter seethed. "Look what you've done to my eyebrows!"

"What eyebrows?" Lottie teased. Peter gave her a sharp jab to the shoulder for it, which she returned, twice as hard. "Oh stop fussing—you can just draw them back on, Picasso."

"I'm surprised you didn't steal all our bloody trousers or something," James said. "What, not creative enough for you?"

Lily set down her tea, smirking. "Too much work."

"But you'd dye my *hair?!"*

At that the girls started laughing again, this time joined by several kids from neighbouring tables.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Sirius demanded, waving his handcuff in the air.

"Ask one of the kitchen ladies for some lard," Marlene shrugged.

"If I were you, Black, I'd count myself lucky that I didn't get the rest of my hair shaved off," Lily added sweetly.

"You—!"

Before Sirius could finish, Mary pulled a lolly from her pocket and

ripped the wrapping off, shoving it into his mouth. “You’re so much prettier with your mouth shut, love,” she cooed, making Marlene snort into her glass of water.

“Cow,” Sirius mumbled around the sweet.

Remus shook his head hopelessly. “Did you bloody roofie us or something?”

“Absolutely not—you were just *that* pissed,” Mary said. “Practically begged for that tattoo, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry—the what?”

"Oh, haven’t you seen it yet?” Lottie asked innocently. “Clyde did such a good job.”

Stunned, Remus touched a hand to his chest. It twinged.

“You mean you actually *tattooed* Moony?!” Peter cried.

As if others kids weren't already staring, the dining hall went completely silent, and several more jaws dropped open. Feeling suddenly haggard again, Remus lowered his head slightly.

“Thanks for that, Pete. I can hear it now—‘heard he got it in *prison’.”*

“You said it didn’t even hurt,” Marlene blagged quietly; “Actually, your exact words were that it felt quite good. You were totally relaxed.”

“What a bloody masochist,” Sirius snorted.

“Oh, fuck off, Mr. ‘Mummy Issues’.”

He got the bird for that one, and Remus looked back across the table at the girls.

“But I don't get it, what does ‘LE’ even mean?”

“Oh? You mean you didn’t realise?” Lottie hummed.

Slyly, each of the girls looked to Lily, who was back to blushing into her tea.

“It stands for ‘Lily Evans’ of course.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a SUPER fun chapter for me, so I'm shamelessly going to plug my tumblr here. I answer curious questions and post incoming chapter hints upon request. Send me a msg even if you just want to talk about HP in general, I'm always around! <3

I hope you'll understand why Remus (and we, by extension) could not be present for James and Sirius' chat. It's important to realise that we are merely but the omnipresent observer looming over Remus' shoulder, and he cannot be around for every pivotal character moment that exists. I have an idea of what was said between the two boys, and perhaps I'll post a snippet of it on my tumblr or something when I get the time. We shall have to see <3

Songs sung by the band this chapter:
“Communication Breakdown” Led Zeppelin, 1969.
“Pretty Vacant” The Sex Pistols, 1977.
“Rock Me” ABBA, 1975.
And later we feature; ‘Honey Honey’ ABBA, 1974.

Chapter 78: Champions, Heroes, and Everyone In Between

Chapter Summary

It's Sirius' eighteenth birthday, and Remus has a surprise.

Chapter Notes

Okay uhhhhmmmm sooooo today is actually the fic's 1 year anniversary on Ao3, and some lovely anons/friends on tumblr convinced me to post this week's chapter early. I don't feel all that bad, since it's more of a short and sweet thing, but I really hope you enjoy. Thank you for all of the love and care you've shown me and this fic for the last year. Your kindness means the world.

Here's to one amazing year, and hopefully the next <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If I was a sculptor, ha,
But then again, no,
Or a man who makes potions in a travelling show;
I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do,
My gift is my song, and this one's for you…

- "Your Song" Elton John, 1970

On the morning of his eighteen birthday, Sirius got two phone calls. One from Mr. Potter's lawyer (until then Remus hadn't been fully aware that lawyers needed their own lawyers in the first place) and one from his parents. Relief came when he picked up the receiver and found that it was not the stern, haunting voices of Walburga and Orion Black, but rather, the warm, jewel-toned accents of the Potters, calling to wish their second son the bestest of birthdays.

Sirius did not bother to hide his tears this time.

Really, they should've known when the call came straight to the dormitory that evening. The Blacks never called their line directly. Remus let Sirius have his moment with his family—joined by James as they shouted happily into the phone loud enough that they could be

heard all the way in the common room. The rest of their friends were slouched around on the couches in front of the fire, sharing popcorn while Peter tried his best to sort out the TV James had managed to nick as dorm head for the special occasion. They had to negotiate terms outlining the sworn lack of alcohol just to get it, but considering most of the school was still reeling from Halloween, nobody seemed to mind much.

“Blasted piece of—” Peter grunted, smacking the top of the telly as it continued to fizzle with static. “Knew we should’ve grabbed the other HMV model.”

“What time is the show supposed to be on?” Lottie asked over a yawn.

“Seven,” Remus answered, slouched down very comfortably between Mary and Marlene. He was excited—they never got to watch the *Pops* on the night it showed, since televisions weren’t allowed in the dorms on school nights. Better yet, every single one of them had a hat to throw into the ring; Queen was showing it’s newest single, leaving Remus positively giddy in his seat, and ABBA and Bowie were playing as well. It was sure to be a stacked performance.

“Should you be smoking that inside? You’re still a prefect during off-hours, you know,” Lily said from a couch over, glancing pointedly at the cigarette in Remus’ hand.

“Unless you’re trading places with me tomorrow as Regulus Black’s baby-sitter, you can sit with the smoke, Evans.”

“You’ll never get over that.”

“It’s training for the future. I’m practising holding a grudge.”

“You’re practising being a *nob.”*

Remus smiled to himself and took another drag before Mary leaned over to pluck it from his fingers.

“Speaking of Regulus,” she started, taking a drag; “I wonder how he’s taking all of this. Sirius being practically adopted by the Potters and all that.”

They all looked at Remus pointedly.

“I don’t know, okay?” He huffed. “We only have to do prefects’ stuff

alone together a few times a month and he usually just refuses to speak to me."

"What is it you're doing tomorrow?" Marlene asked, tucking her toes up under his thigh. Marlene's feet were always as cold as Lake Dubh.

"Music class," Remus answered, unenthusiastically.

"Like teach?"

"Mhm. Primary music teacher took ill, and Sheila's got choir practice. She asked if Regulus and I would do it instead. It was either that or gym class with the sixth years."

"That's brilliant though!" Lily applauded. "I bet you'll be a great teacher."

Remus didn't bother discouraging her, but it was hard not to think about the sour face Regulus had put on when they'd been asked to step in. So far neither of them had managed to say a kind word to one another, though Remus hardly thought it his fault. He'd tried apologising to Regulus, but the younger boy stood firm in his resentment. Remus had even tried putting himself into his shoes for a bit—even if he and Sirius were constant adversaries, he couldn't imagine losing your only brother to some other family felt very nice—but Regulus wouldn't have it.

Just keep your big nose out of my business, he'd said, the last time they'd been paired up for duties. And Remus had immediately resolved himself to do just that. If Regulus was going to stay such a sour sod, then he could do it on his own.

"I hope we're not late!" Sirius cried, appearing behind the rest of them. James followed a second laster, drumming his hands along the sofa back on either side of Remus' head in excitement. Sirius was still sniffling a bit, but he quickly wiped his cheeks and no one tried shaming him for it.

"How'd it go then?" Mary asked happily. "You filthy rich again?"

"Positively *mucky,"* Sirius teased. Remus went to grab his cigarette back from Mary, but Sirius swung in, stealing it first.

"Monty's lawyer said I could access the funds as soon as we get back to London," he said. "It's all mine baby. Full pay-out."

"And what is the first thing you're going to buy, now that you're rolling in it?" Asked Lottie.

"I know," Remus replied snidely, but Sirius had already given him a knowing look.

"The first thing I'm gonna do when we leave school is buy us a great big flat in the middle of the city, that way we can peddle our music all day and all night. And then, I'm upgrading the stereo—and *then!* ... A motorbike."

"A *motorbike?"* Marlene exclaimed.

"Not this again," Peter groaned, still buried amongst the telly's wiring.

"He's been obsessed for weeks," Remus surmised, when the girls all turn to look at him. "Ever since Effie sent him that copy of the NME with a photo of Marc Bolan on the cover, riding some fancy bike."

"It was a Benelli seven-fifty, Moons! That's six-cylinders!"

"Marc Bolan," Mary echoed; "Ain't that the singer that just died?"

"No!" Sirius barked, waving his arms around. "I'll have no talk of Marc Bolan's death on my birthday! I'd much rather imagine him alive and poncy, as per usual—with me, myself, and I happy in my brand new flat, thank you very much."

"Good luck with that," Lily sniggered. "With the way you play music, I'll bet you'll have neighbours pounding on your front door within hours."

"I welcome the challenge! Perhaps they'll learn to appreciate the music of our generation," Sirius said, giving James a high-five of camaraderie.

"And what if they just complain?" Lottie sneered.

"Then I'll buy their flat too. Then you girls can move in!"

"In that case I'll be the one complaining," Marlene said, just as Peter gave a great *'A-HA!'* and the television's screen cleared to reveal *The Top of the Pops'* logo.

"It's starting!" Lottie trilled, as Peter dove into the cushions in front, nearly upsetting one of the bowls of popcorn.

“Oh, shit—Moons!” James called right after. He jut his finger toward the dorm’s hallway. “Almost forgot, a call’s waiting for you.”

“Tomny?” He asked, suddenly hopeful.

“Uh-uh. Giles, I think.”

Remus settled back into the couch. “Oh, well don’t worry about it.”

“Shouldn’t you get it?” Marlene asked him.

“Nah, not interested. Been avoiding their calls. It’s just Dad wanting to preach about my marks anyway.”

“Smart move,” Sirius said, as James came around the side of the sofa and slid in next to Lily. Playfully, she reached up and twirled the strip of blonde in James’ hair around her finger, giggling when he kissed her wrist. James, ever the most-gracious prankster, had been the first to admit that he’d come around to the skunk-like appearance, even if his mum was likely to flay his arse when he got home. He was less impressed by Remus' new tattoo, but that could be said for most of them. Only Sirius had been excited by it—Sirius, who felt the need to drown himself in every societal-taboo he could get his hands on. Between talk of motorbikes and tattoos, Remus was starting to wonder what the odds were of Sirius moving to London and joining a gang, same as Tom.

Taking a moment to streak forward and toss the smoked cigarette into one of the other fireplaces, Sirius returned to the sofa and leaned over its back, trying to squeeze his arms in between Mary and Remus’ shoulders.

"C'moooan, Macdonald, budge up a bit!”

“You budge up, I'm comfortable,” Mary grumbled, busy watching the show’s host.

“It’s my birthday, you heartless hag.”

“Then sit in Remus’ lap or something.”

Appearing enticed by the idea, Sirius shot Remus a cheeky look before leaning forward, scooping Mary up around the middle and manoeuvring her onto his own lap as she shrieked in surprise. It was enough room for all of them that way, and Remus could feel Sirius pressed up against him from ankle to shoulder. If their friends weren't

so close by, he'd have been tempted to do something about it.

“You’re impossibly cheeky,” Mary chastised, flicking Sirius in the nose as he kept hold of her around the waist.

“It’s why you love me,” Sirius said smugly, settling back into the sofa. As Mary shook her head and reached over to the popcorn bowl in James’ lap, Remus spared a glance to his right, gingerly, and found Sirius watching him.

"What?"

The show’s credits rolled and the girls all began to cheer at the flash of ABBA’s name. Still looking cheeky, Sirius leaned in.

“You haven’t given me anything for my birthday,” he whispered playfully.

“Gotta be alone first."

Sirius’ eyes flashed hungrily. *‘You’re filthy’* he mouthed, making Remus raise his eyebrows suggestively.

Suddenly a face appeared between them—Davey Gudgeon—and Remus nearly leapt a foot off the couch.

“Wicked! You guys got the telly in. Who they showing tonight?” The other boy asked, elbows propped up on the couch back.

“No one you—” James started, before Lily shoved a fistful of popcorn into his mouth.

“Queen, Bowie, ELO, Smokie,” Remus recited.

“And ABBA,” Lottie added.

“Champ!” Davey declared, before smacking Sirius on the shoulder. "Hey, heard it was your birthday, mate! Your guys' show on Halloween was ace too, by the way. Even you, Potter. Didn't know you and Pettigrew joined the group."

"Thanks, Gudgeon," James replied dully, mouth still full of popcorn.

In the end, Davey's entrance marked the first of many, and by the time they got to Queen’s promo, they’d been joined by a small army of kids. Word tended to get around fast when there was a telly available outside of weekends, and plenty of technologically-starved students

from other Houses piled in, practically sitting on top of one another just for a chance to get a glimpse at the tiny screen. When Mercury's eyeliner-clad image appeared, Sirius grabbed Remus around the shoulders and shook him in glee as everyone cheered and sang along.

"Turn it up, Pete!" Sirius cried.

The song was brilliant—a real stadium anthem. It touched that part of Remus deep inside that felt just like that little washout from Blackheath, the one desperate to fit in wherever he could. He wasn't sure how he felt about Mercury's choice of spandex, but it was cool enough to leave Sirius enraptured.

"Just look how his mouth moves!" he crowed. "Man, if I could sing like that..."

Remus didn't say it, at the risk of embarrassment, but he thought that if Sirius wanted to, he could've sung *just* like that. And apparently he wasn't the only one. All around them kids leaned in to smack Sirius on the shoulders in eager praise, joining in when he began to belt out the lyrics with soppy dedication.

"We are the champions! We are the champiooons! No time for looosers—!
'Cause we are the champiooooons—! Of the woooorld!"

It was pure adrenaline—it was why Remus loved Queen. And then Bowie came on, and he knew instantly why Sirius loved him. It was the title track from his latest album, *Heroes,* which they must have listened to half a million times already, but seeing it performed live—there was nothing like it. As the Starman's gentle tenor spread out from the telly's speakers, James hushed the common room. Instantly every kid became slack-jawed with awe, and Sirius went instantly still. He was gone for it, a total fan. Watching him watch Bowie was like watching an artist marvel at his favourite masterpiece, and when Bowie hit his falsetto Remus was rewarded for his dedication when he felt Sirius shiver against his shoulder.

'And the shame was on the other side,
Oh, we can beat them forever and ever,
Then we could be heroes just for one day!'

Heroes. He liked the song. It was his favourite, he decided. But compared to the thrill he got from watching Sirius, it was all rather null. Slipping his hand down between them and the couch, Remus

chanced the moment where he could hold Sirius' hand and feel the strength of his emotions in the gentle tremor of his fingers. This was what they were, what they were determined to be.

Champions and Heroes.

"I wonder what that felt like," Sirius whispered, turning his face into Remus' shoulder so his lips brushed him as he spoke; "To be there. To sing like that."

As the song came to a close, replaced by the loud bleating of Showaddywaddy and the other kids around the common room, Remus leaned into Sirius' ear, hidden out of sight by the high-backed sofa and Mary's hair.

"You'll know," he told him, "one day."

He left the barest breath of a kiss on Sirius' cheek and very quickly pulled back, refusing to meet his gaze for the rest of the song. It was embarrassment, but Sirius quelled all of it when licked his finger and stuck it in his ear in retaliation.

"I can't believe that's the single they chose to show on television," Sirius said, once they'd all sat through ABBA's promo and the show had ended. " 'What's the name of the game?' Try, 'he's just not that interested, doll'."

Mary spun around in Sirius' lap and smacked his shoulder. "I swear, you're the most unromantic musician I've ever met."

"You say that as if you've actually met other musicians."

She hit him again.

James hopped up from the couch. "Can you stop being a tosser long enough to sing or are we gonna have to start recruiting?"

A gasp went up from all of the girls, as well as several others.

"You mean you're singing tonight?" Lily asked.

Sirius glanced at Remus and gave a nonchalant shrug. "We got to talking yesterday—as we were cleaning up our *dorm room,* I might add —thought it was kind of a shame we didn't end up singing any of our own songs at the party."

"Nooo—*actually?"* Mary spun around on Sirius' lap again, nearly

falling off the couch. “You mean you’re finally going to play something original?”

“Just one song,” Remus interjected sheepishly. “It’s Sirius’ birthday, so Sirius’ song.”

“I think you’ll like it,” Peter promised, hopping up and scuttling over the corner of the common room. Everyone turned around to watch as he dragged the sheet off of his drum kit, which they’d neglected to drag back to the music room for that very reason.

"Pardon me, love," Sirius said, before promptly flipping Mary off of his lap. She didn't even complain—too excited—and as the girls turned around on the sofa to watch, the four of them piled onto their instruments, flicking on the amps and testing each cord. It was a small crowd, made up of mostly Godric boys, but it was enough to leave Sirius looking giddy as he took up his microphone.

" 'ello, 'ello," he murmured, tapping the head until feedback echoed throughout the room.

"Yes, who's is it?" One of the boys chanted back, making everyone laugh. Sirius too, until he was practically shouting into the mike again.

“Oh, I almost forgot! Evans, you brought that camera 'a yours, right?”

Perking up, Lily nodded and reached over the side of the sofa for her bag. From there Remus got to watch as she pulled out her polaroid camera, cradled in its dingy leather case that was peeling at the corners. A hand-me-down from Petunia, she'd once told him.

“You want me to take photos while you play?” She offered, checking the film.

“Yes," Sirius drawled; "but I figured that now that I’m officially rolling in it on my own, I should send word back to Bath. Mum and Dad ought to know I'm doing alright for myself, yeah?”

“You mean to your *parents*-parents?” Remus asked gingerly.

“Precisely.” With a devious grin, Sirius grasped the mike and leaned in toward Lily as she held her camera up to her eye. “ ‘Toujours pur’ this, bitch,” he said, before licking the microphone and flipping the camera the bird. The entire room sniggered, and even Lily smirked as she snapped the photo.

“Like a real rock star,” Mary laughed.

“You’re cleaning that microphone,” Peter called after.

Sirius grinned, taking the photo from Lily and pocketing it. “Whatever you say, Wormy. Now you lot ready?”

The room cheered; *‘Yeah!’*

“You don’t sound ready! I said—*Are you ready?!”*

“YEAH!”

“Alright then! This one’s called—”

James interrupted Sirius with a cheeky lick on the guitar, ripping up and down the strings and making everyone grin excitedly. “This is ‘Downtown Girls’!” He shouted.

“What the tosser said,” Sirius grinned. “Pete, be a dear and count us in.”

* * *

They were true to their word and only played the one song—except the girls liked it so much that they demanded that they play it twice more. They sounded better sober, but it wore on the nerves a lot more. By the end Remus’ fingers were tingling. Playing in front of others always brought a rush, but even he had to admit that there was just *something* about listening to people cheer for their own music. Lyrics and notes they’d created out of thin air—their art! It was validating somehow, like; *Yeah, I did that! I did it with my friends—my band. Together.*

A part of him wished he’d had enough courage to play the song he’d written for Sirius in front of everyone, but he hated his singing voice and was too worried about tripping up around the guitar. So he waited until late that night, when everyone else had gone to bed. By the time he was creeping back across their bedroom it was nearly midnight, a few precious minutes until it wasn’t Sirius’ birthday at all anymore. He wasn’t the least bit tired, and he knew Sirius wouldn’t be either, not after the looks they’d been giving each other all evening.

Sirius was slipping out from behind his curtains before Remus even

made it to the foot of the bed, smile glowing in the blue light of the moon. While he grabbed a spare blanket, Remus nabbed Andy's guitar case, enjoying the look of confusion that flitted across Sirius' features. Together they slipped out of their bedroom, back down to the abandoned common room, where Sirius could finally moan and groan without anyone around to overhear.

"Fuck winter," he hissed, shivering in front of the hearth as he prodded the fire back to life. Once they had a decent flame going, he joined Remus back on the couch, draping a wool blanket across their laps for extra warmth. Remus sighed happily, busy tracing patterns along Sirius' ankle beneath the blanket. He'd left enough space between them just in case anyone wandered downstairs for a midnight snack, but their legs were tangled together, filling the space between them.

"This is nice," he said.

"Mhm. You sure you're not too tired though?" Sirius asked teasingly. "I know you have to be up early tomorrow."

"It's music class with a bunch of nine year-olds, not exams. I'll be fine."

"I meant spending time with my brother," Sirius snorted. "Takes years off your life, that one."

"Regulus is bearable," Remus said, rubbing Sirius' ankle beneath the blanket. "Have you thought about trying to talk to him at all?"

"He wouldn't give me the time of day anyway."

"Won't know unless you try."

Sirius nodded glumly. "Probably my job, right? Being the older brother and all that. I think I'm just bitter. It's like—I see him and all I can think about is the damage. How fucked up we both are. And then he talks like he hates me and I know that the damage doesn't even mean anything. It just means we're wrecked. That we've lost."

"Not lost," Remus said. "Maybe it just means that you could be better."

Sirius' eyes flickered to him, glowing in the light of the fire. "I think about him. I do—all of the time... but I don't know how to talk to him."

“Start with that then. Just be honest. Whenever you’re ready.”

Sirius took a deep breath. “Thanks, Moons. You always know just what to say. And you’re there for me, I don't think I've ever told you what that means.”

“You don't have to. I know."

They shared a small smile, and the tension broke a moment later, when Sirius sat up straighter on the couch and clapped his hands together. “Alright. You gonna tell me what this ‘surprise’ is now, or am I gonna have to guess? Because I’m *guessing* that it has something to do with Andy’s Gibson.”

“You’d be guessing right,” Remus said, glancing at the guitar they’d left sitting on the floor.

“Alright.” Sirius leaned down to pick up the acoustic. “What am I playing?”

“Well, actually…” Smiling shyly, Remus reached across the sofa and plucked the guitar from his boyfriend’s hands, setting it across his own lap.

“No way,” Sirius laughed. “You? Really?”

Remus shrugged. “I might’ve been doing some practising with James.”

“Colour me bloody… For me?”

He nodded, sheepish.

“Wow,” Sirius breathed. “What a great gift—never thought you’d look so sexy holding my guitar. Like a naked chick on a motorbike.”

“You’re so stupid.”

Sirius clapped his hands together once more in glee. “Well, fine then—go on! Don’t make me wait all night!”

Clearing his throat, Remus set his fingers on the strings. He hesitated, wondering why it was harder to play in front of Sirius than an entire common room of kids, and Sirius reached across and slid a comforting hand across his arm.

“Hey, it’s just me.”

Sirius' touch gave Remus goosebumps, which he had to shake off to keep going. "Alright," he said; "but remember, I'm not a singer."

Sirius only smiled at him.

Straightening up, Remus took a deep breath and began to play. It was a slow melody, one of the ballads Sirius was always saying he'd be famous for one day, but he was too nervous to play any faster anyway.

Just do it, he told himself; *Over the waterfall.*

"Hey, I bet you've heard the rumours,
You can only guess which ones of them are true;
But I've always liked how you talk of future
Yeah, I'd go anywhere if you asked me to."

He hit the bridge, and sparing a glance up at Sirius' handsome face, Remus found a grin waiting for him.

"Beautiful," Sirius gasped. "Christ..."

Keep going, he thought to himself. *Don't stop now.*

"You say want a nice place with enough space,
So we can sit and watch the sun rise and fall;
And talk about what comes next,
With you I'd do it all."

Sirius' lips parted. It was awe. Remus had to look down at the guitar to keep playing.

"And there's that future, always haunting,
Hangin' just out of our reach;
But if you had told me that you saw it,
I wouldn't second guess your speech;

And I can only have you if you love me,
So tell me now, please don't taunt me;
'Cause I won't reach for that future,
If it don't include you and me;

How nice a future like that could be…"

He looked up again, voice filtering out; *"How nice it could be…"* and all it took was Sirius' grey eyes, ignited orange by the fireside for his fingers to slip clumsily on the strings. Slouching forward with relief, Remus laughed inexplicably. He was almost wheezing, and when his nose whistled with a snort, Sirius laughed along with him.

"There's more," he fumbled, "but that's the first bit. It'll probably sound better when you sing it."

"No, it's brilliant," Sirius told him. "Brilliant like you."

Sirius leaned in to kiss him, and Remus glanced at the doorway, just in case. Cheekily, Sirius pinched his chin in one hand.

"If you're that worried, we could always go back into the cupboard."

Remus sagged again, exasperated and in love, and took Sirius' hand, placing a kiss on his palm before yanking the woollen blanket up over their heads. Hidden away, he could still see the glow of the fire peeking through the holes in its weaving, scattering little stars of orange light across Sirius' face. It reminded him instantly of that final day in his bedroom on the Lupin Estate, where he got to watch the sun rise and fall on Sirius.

"I want to hear the rest," Sirius told him. "When you're ready."

Oh yes.

"So bring me back to July," Remus murmured; "Warm and rich with soft orange skies…"

Sirius began tracing a finger along Remus' jaw. "Is that the next line?"

"No, it's something else," he whispered, closing the space between them and kissing his love tenderly.

"Happy birthday, Sirius."

* * *

Friday 4th November 1977

Remus wasn't used to arriving first. Normally, Regulus was on the premises ages before he'd even considered how long it was going to take him to walk from point A to point B. This time though, Remus found himself waiting for his partner outside the colourful Hufflepuff building, fingers itching for a smoke. The eastern half of campus, kept for the primaries, was completely akin to its western brick and mortar counterpart, except that the pavement was constantly covered in colourful chalk drawings and everything was built to be no higher than Remus' shoulder.

He was starting to wonder if he'd finally reached the day that Regulus Black had skived off from his prefect duties when the youngest Black brother came stomping up the pavement, his violin case tucked under one arm and a stack of music sheets held precariously in the other.

"Unlike you to be running late," Remus teased lightly. "Class doesn't start for another ten minutes."

"Photocopier jammed," Regulus huffed, missing the joke.

Adjusting Sirius' acoustic on his shoulder, Remus opened the door for him and eyed the sheet music as Regulus passed. The staves looked a lot like what James would call "mouse tracks", endless signatures, ties, and looping notes.

"You're not gonna try and teach them that, are you?" He asked warily, following the other boy down the hall.

"It's only the chorus portion of 'Für Elise'. Some of Beethoven's simplest stuff."

"They're nine."

"I was playing this at five."

"Do you know how insufferable you sound?"

Regulus rolled his eyes. "We're here to teach them, aren't we? We don't even need a piano for this."

Remus gestured about the hallway, at its array of colourful student cubbies and the tiny wellies that sat beneath each. "Yes well, I don't know about you, but I don't exactly see many Stradivarius violas sitting around. We're just supposed to be supervising the class—you

know, let them bang their drums for an hour and then go home."

"You mean you're okay with just making noise and leaving it at that? Some musician."

"Whatever," Remus scoffed. "Do what you want, I'm not going to fight with you."

Regulus turned his nose up. "Suits me just fine, you can sit in the corner and watch. Maybe you'll actually learn something."

Remus didn't get the chance to fire back a retort; ahead of them, a door opened and a stout woman slipped out, slamming the door after herself. She straightened up when she spotted them, adjusting her blouse. There was a smear of paint on her cheek.

"Ah! Are you two the prefect students they sent over for music period?"

"Yes…?" Remus answered, regretfully.

"Oh good!" She plastered a smile on her face and surged towards them, blazing right past. "I'm just the secretary—and you're just in time for my tea break. The kids have been darling angels today. They've already got their instruments out—I'm sure a few stern words will have them in tip-top shape. Have fun with the lesson, see you in an hour!"

Before they could so much as say something, the secretary was halfway down the hall, waving as she turned a corner and disappeared out of sight.

"Is she allowed to do that?" Remus asked. "Just... leave?"

"C'mon," Regulus just grumbled; "Before they set the curtains on fire or something."

Following each other down the hall, they opened the door and strode inside. The kids were clearly surprised to see them; as the chatter came to an abrupt halt, twenty pairs of eyes turned on them in question, various instruments and noise-makers already in hand. No sooner had Remus shut the door behind himself did he have a child before him. The boy was rather chubby around the middle, with a whip of wheat-blonde hair on top of his head, and he was looking at Remus like he'd just arrived on a spaceship and demanded to be taken to his 'leader'.

“Er—hey man.”

“You’re not Mrs. Bean,” the boy said indignantly.

“Nope, I’m not.”

“Where’s Mrs. Bean?”

“Off for the day,” Regulus answered cuttingly. Holding his violin aloft as though afraid their tiny hands might obliterate it with the slightest touch, he weaved through the kids’ seats until he’d made it to the front band stand of the music classroom.

“I’m Mr. Bl—” Regulus flinched as one of the kids blew horribly on a recorder. He glared at the boy until he looked next to tears, and then cleared his throat again. “I’m Mr. Black. Lupin here, and I have been appointed as your music instructors for the afternoon.”

“You’re really tall,” a girl up the front shouted at Remus.

“Do you talk out of turn in front of Mrs. Bean?” Regulus asked her.

“You’re really short,” the girl shot back, making Remus snort and therefore allowing the entire class to descend into a furious giggle-fit.

"Five-foot-nine is *not* short."

Remus resisted the urge to burst out laughing. If only Sirius could hear how alike they truly sounded.

“Rich kids, eh, Reg? Can’t live with ‘em, can’t teach ‘em.”

Regulus ignored him, clearing his throat furiously and holding up his stack of music sheets, which he kept rearranging into different orders. “We’re here to *learn.* I’ve brought with me a piece even a stray dog could learn to play. Now does anyone recognise these staves?”

A paper ball flew through the air and smacked Regulus in the side of the head. His eyes widened, and Remus watched as his face turned a raging red.

“Who threw that?”

The kids burst into laughter.

Before Regulus could lose his mind entirely, Remus intercepted, stepping in front of the band stand and leaning over it. “Reg, they’re

kids. I'm pretty sure they can smell fear. Don't let them get to you."

"They aren't!"

"Then maybe try levelling-out some, okay?" Gingerly, Remus took a step back and faced the class, awkwardly clearing his own throat. "Okay, well, can anyone tell me what you were last practising with Mrs. Bean?"

One of the girls held up a hand, her clarinet balanced precariously in her lap; "We were practising 'Daisies in the Meadow'."

"Christ," Regulus said under his breath.

" 'Daisies in the Meadow'," Remus mused, slouching back on an empty desk in the corner of the classroom, "sounds quite captivating, don't you agree, Mr. Black?"

Regulus gave him a sharp side-eye and came around the front of the band stand. "Alright, fine. Who's got the sheet music?"

There was a bit of rustling, and one of the kids from the flutes section handed him a doodle-encrusted paper. The song was apparently not up to par with Regulus' expectations, as his shoulders sank in disappointment while he passed the tablature back to the fifth year.

"Fine, whatever, let's hear it then. Trumpets, give me an E flat."

Rather than the correct note, Regulus was promptly answered when one of the students gave a horrible fart, letting it rip across the classroom as all the kids shrieked in horror and delight.

"Sounded more like a low-G to me," Remus cackled.

Regulus rounded on him. "You're supposed to be helping me!"

"I'm sitting in the corner like you told me to! Maybe if you asked nicely…"

"Not on your life, Loony."

Remus shrugged and leaned down, popping the clasps on Andy's guitar case and pulling out the beaten-up acoustic. It was certainly well-loved (Sirius had let Peter sketch flowers along the side of his body ages ago and the strap was fraying at both ends) but Remus set it across his lap anyway and tucked a pick between his teeth as he fiddled with the tuning. When he looked up he found nearly every set

of eyes on him, kids craning their necks to get a look at the guitar. Even Regulus had paused, eyeing the instrument the way he always did when Remus brought it around. It was hard sometimes to remember that he was Andy's cousin too.

Remus pulled the pick from his lips and scanned the room. "How long have you guys been practising 'Daisies in the Meadow'?"

"Since September," one of the kids called.

"Bloody hell," Regulus muttered.

"He said a bad word!"

Remus stood up from his corner desk, throwing the guitar strap over his shoulder. "Okay, who here actually likes 'Daisies in the Meadow'?"

None of the kids raised their hands.

"Well, who *likes* listening to music?"

Hands shot skyward.

"That's what I thought. See, Mr. Black and I really love music, and if you keep up with it long enough, one day you'll be able to play whatever you want, whenever you want. Like—" He hit the first several notes of "Smoke On the Water", because he knew it would make Regulus pucker, and not a single laugh or childish shriek interrupted him; "Like that. But really, I'm just an amateur—you should hear Mr. Black. He's practically a virtuoso."

Remus looked back at Regulus, who suddenly appeared rather nervous to be put on the spot. The kids leaned forward in their seats, utterly hooked.

"It's nothing," Regulus stammered. "Anyone can play a few basic notes."

"Really? Hm. Well, no need to be humble now." Smirking, Remus stood up and addressed the room. "I want to hear Mr. Black play, how 'bout you guys?"

The nods were slower, but eventually kids were calling out faintly. Remus thought of Sirius, who would never have accepted such a lacklustre response. "I can't really hear you," he started again, "I said, I want to hear Mr. Black play, now how about you?!"

The chorus came more fervently, and Regulus looked about ready to cave in on himself.

“Well, Reg? You heard ‘em,” Remus smiled.

Tapping his fingers against his palms nervously, Regulus finally relented. He reached for his violin case, withdrawing a beautiful violin the colour of mahogany wood and burnt sugar. It was a magnificent instrument; it would’ve been such a shame to have ended up at the bottom of the lake. When he pulled out the matching bow, a little girl from the brass section held up her hand.

“Er—yes, what’s your name?” Remus asked.

“Charlotte."

“One of my best friends is named Charlotte," Remus said. "What’s your question?”

“It’s not a question,” the girl murmured. "I just wanted to know if Mr. Black knew ‘Swan Lake’.”

He turned to Regulus. “Do you?”

“Obviously,” Regulus said flatly. He might’ve called it too simple, or too beneath his station, had Charlotte not been instantly smiling from ear-to-ear.

Pushing his dark hair out of his face, Regulus took up his spot at the front of the class, carefully tucking his violin beneath that primly-chiselled chin. When he set his bow against the strings, it became clear that all of the nerves had drained from him. When he played his eyes were closed; drifting. Remus wondered what he pictured.

The piece was perfection, naturally. Regulus played the theme’s introduction with flawless precision, stopping just before the crescendo as though he knew the exact way to edge his desperate audience into needing more. None of the kids booed him, they were too much in awe. Remus too.

“Fantastic,” he smiled, clapping and earning Regulus an ovation he sheepishly accepted. “Wouldn’t it be cool to just be able to *do* that?” Remus asked the class. “Should *we* do that—just pick a song and play it?”

There was a rallying cry of agreement and he wracked his brain for

something age-appropriate to play. It had to be easy, since they had no time and no sheet music, but when the idea came to him, it was brilliant.

As Regulus set his violin down, Remus leaned in, whispering his idea into his ear.

“How is that any better than bloody ‘Daisies in the Meadow’?” Regulus demanded immediately.

“It’s *fun,* Reg. It’s a song they’ll know, and we only have to do the chorus.”

“Go on then. Since you’re so clearly enjoying yourself.”

Remus couldn’t deny it. He’d scoffed at Lily when she’d said he would make a good teacher, having no real experience with kids, but it’d been a while since he’d felt so needlessly silly, and he wanted to make the most of it. The kids would like it, he was sure, but he still needed Regulus’ help.

“C’mon, you’re the protégé—I know you know how to play more that just that violin. And you know how to translate all the notes! I can’t do it without you...”

Regulus’ steel-grey eyes widened a bit, and he looked back to his violin. “Do you at least know how to play it on that dingy guitar of yours? I'm not teaching you too.”

“Hell yeah, I do,” Remus grinned, before grabbing a scrap piece of paper off the teacher’s podium and hastily scribbling out a stave of notes for Regulus to see. He sighed, grumpy for the sake of being grumpy, but took the sheet and turned around to tackle the task at hand. After that it was easy. Remus took the percussion section, while Regulus weaved between the rows of kids, correcting the way they held their instruments and helping them fumble through the correct notes. They’d toned the level of difficulty down a bit more—until it was only the most basic sounds—but eventually after much squeaking and squawking, they had music.

“Okay!” Remus declared, clapping his hands to draw the kids’ attention back to the front of the room. “I actually feel really confident about this, how ‘bout you, Mr. Black?”

“Time will tell, I guess,” Regulus answered, picking up the conductor’s baton.

Remus turned back to the class. “Remember, we don’t need it to be perfect. Noise—music—it’s all a matter of opinion.”

“Or taste,” Regulus muttered.

A girl named Angeline raised his hand. “Can we sing along?”

“Of course! In fact I expect it—from you too, Mr. Black!”

“Yeah, fat chance.”

The kids laughed, and Remus did too, but Regulus just rapped the baton against the podium, clearing his throat.

“And a one, and a two—”

The rallying noise that exploded was nothing like the song they’d just spent the better half of the hour practising. Regulus shivered all over in revulsion, and instantly Remus held up a hand, half-laughing as the hooting trumpets and blaring trombones came to a shrieking halt.

“Maybe we shouldn’t count in,” he offered.

Instead of fighting him, Regulus nodded. “Anything’s better than that.”

“But it was a great start!” Remus trilled quickly, as all the kids stared up at them. “How about we try something else?” Slowly, he started snapping his fingers along with the beat, humming as well. Twenty tiny heads bobbed after him, fingers twitching around their instruments.

“Add in the timpani,” Regulus advised.

Remus nodded, and pointed to the percussion section. “Douglas, he means the really big drum just there. Can you beat it along with my snapping, like we practised?”

The nine year-old nodded and took up his mallet, banging along spectacularly.

“Now cymbals on count four,” Regulus said. “You there—”

“Marley,” Remus offered.

“Marley,” Regulus tried again, “use your pedals to—”

Before he'd even finished, the little girl was clapping away, a huge smile on her face.

"There, that sounds great!" Remus cried.

Regulus had placed a hand over his mouth thoughtfully, staring down the expectant class like Sheila during one of their own lessons. "I want to hear clarinets now, four G notes, high-A, and four D."

There were only two clarinets in the class, and both tripped up their high-A, but Remus high-fived the kids when they were finished. One by one they went through every section as a class, adding them together until finally they had something that was more akin to music than noise.

"This is fantastic," he said when they'd finished, eagerly scooping up his guitar and standing at the front of the class. "What do you guys say we run through it together?"

As the kids trilled enthusiastically, Remus elbowed Regulus. "You gonna play with us? Only if it's not too hard for you, that is."

Arching a brow, Regulus picked up his violin, and together they faced the class.

"I hope those of you who can will sing with me," Remus said, before smiling. "One, two, three—*Weeeeee… all live in a yellow submarine! A yellow submarine, yellow submarine!"*

And just like that the class was playing. Those who could sing, did, and Remus wasn't the least bit ashamed. He spent so much of his time playing the pessimistic, hesitant asshole, that right then it didn't matter if he was embarrassed or not. He was just an idiot making noise.

"We all live in a yellow submarine! A yellow submarine, yellow submarine!"

The cymbals clashed until their ears twinged—the drums drummed until the floor shook. There was more squeaking and squawking than ever but they were all squeaking and squawking together. It wasn't magnificent—wasn't even that good, but they were nine and happy and making noise; what else could you ask from such small, eager musicians?

"This is going to be stuck in my head until I'm ninety!" Regulus

shouted at him without missing a beat.

“Then you’ll have lived a full life!” Remus added; *“—A yellow submarine, yellow submarine…!”*

They played and played until the secretary finally reappeared, looking distinctly less rumpled but exceedingly shocked to find that they’d managed to get the kids to sit still long enough for an entire lesson.

“Well, aren’t I just chuffed to bits!” She preened. “You two are miracle workers! They should have you back here every week.”

Remus laughed nervously and quickly tucked Andy’s guitar away as the secretary began setting the kids to clean-up. Taking a moment to watch them stack chairs and band stands, he crept over to Regulus’ side as he gathered the music sheets he’d brought with him back into a pile. “Sorry we never got to play any Beethoven, but you have to admit, it was pretty brilliant.”

“It was terrible,” Regulus answered lightly.

“Okay, we’ll compromise—it was ‘brilliantly terrible’.”

He might’ve been seeing things—a side effect of staying up the entire night before with Sirius—but for the briefest moment Regulus actually smiled, dropping his head down and shaking it lightly. Not a dismissal—a friendly exasperation. Somehow, it was refreshing to see.

As Regulus tried to hide his pleased indifference, Charlotte appeared beside him, tugging on his Salazar-green jumper and making him whirl around to face her.

“Is it hard to play the violin?” She asked, all big brown eyes.

“Of cour—” Regulus caught himself, swallowing tensely. “Not… if you’re willing to put the work in. It’s hard work.”

“If I work hard, will you come teach us again?”

Regulus didn’t seem to know what to say to that. It took him several moments to manage; “Uhm… sure.”

Charlotte nodded eagerly and spun on her heel to join her classmates, while Remus just watched in amusement, slinging his guitar up over his shoulder. Regulus caught the look grimly.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“You were thinking it!”

“A violin master *and* a mind reader—is there anything you can’t do?”

Scoffing—albeit more light-heartedly—Regulus picked up his violin and together they said goodbye to the class and the secretary, making their way out into the hall.

“You talk differently with children,” Regulus said eventually, as they passed row after row of colourful cubbies.

“Yeah well, kids can be trusted. They’re honest, and you never have to wonder what they’re thinking. They’re better people than most adults.”

Regulus was quiet, and eventually they emerged on the outside of the building, both blinded by the light of the midday sun. Remus had assumed that with the lesson over, Regulus would leave him there without so much as a goodbye, but he was surprised when he looked back to find him standing there, nervously digging the toe of his shoe into the pavement.

"That was... fun, right?"

Regulus grunted back, still not looking at him. Remus squinted his eyes, considering his options. He could just leave, but then...

Goddammit.

“Reg, if I were to ask you if you actually liked music, what would you say?”

“That I do,” Regulus replied, snapping his head up without a hint's hesitation.

“Alright, why?”

“Why do *you?”*

“Because it’s something I can do with my friends," he answered. "And because it helps turn everything else off.”

Regulus made a face, and Remus rushed to extrapolate;

“I just mean that when I’m playing, I don’t have to worry about

anything else.”

“You’re not worried about sounding awful?”

“Oh, I’m worried,” he laughed; “but there are worse things than sounding awful.”

Regulus paused and then stepped past him. He strode forward a bit, like he meant to leave him there after all, before turning around abruptly and giving Remus a hard look.

“I like jazz.”

The confession surprised Remus, to say the least. “I like jazz too. Do you have a favourite?”

“Miles Davis.”

“He’s amazing. You have good taste. Is there… anything else you want me to know about you?”

Regulus hesitated, but then; “I don’t like being called ‘Reg’.”

Remus’ lips parted for a moment, before he nodded. “Okay, what do you want me to call you then?”

“Just Regulus.”

“Well, alright then. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Regulus Black." Feeling a bit stupid, he held out his hand. "I’m Remus."

He'd really only expected Regulus to scoff and turn away, but Remus should've known better.

Never underestimate a Black.

He watched as Regulus came forward, tucking his sheet music under one arm and taking a deep breath. Then he reached out and took Remus' hand, and giving it the barest squeeze.

“Pleasure to meet you too, Remus Lupin.”

Happily, Remus squeezed back.

Chapter End Notes

Songs: "We Are the Champions" by Queen, 1977 & "Heroes" by

David Bowie, 1977. Both are links to 'Top of the Pops' videos that would've been shown on Sirius' actual eighteenth birthday <3

Edit: Next chapter, April 22nd. xx babes

Chapter 79: The Long Week

Chapter Summary

> Mid-November, and it's as though the entire school is in a tizzy. Remus assumes he's made it through relatively unscathed, but life has a way of keeping things interesting.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Fat chapter, with smoking and brief allusions to violence and sexual content.
>
> So... got this out a bit late, but better late than never. Also, some of you will see that I did let "Almost Famous" inspire me a little bit with that one 'Rolling Stone' scene, hehe. Happy reading x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You want me to hit you with a stick,
But all I've got's a guitar pick;
Huh, baby, you're so vicious…

- "Vicious" Lou Reed, 1972

Tuesday 14th November 1977

"It's no use! Mock exams are right around the corner and I can't retain any of it. I might as well give up now…" With a heavy moan, Lily pressed her forehead onto her open law textbook, stifling all chances of studying. Another library goer shushed her, and she lifted her head just long enough to shoot them a nasty glare.

"Five minutes ago you were just lecturing us on the importance of flash cards," Marlene replied dully. Across the table, Remus cracked a small smile. Lily's habit of switching between stark reinforcement and utter despair was entertaining to say the least.

"Seven years," the red-head whimpered; "Seven years at this godforsaken school and I haven't learned enough to fill a thimble."

"It's only November," Remus reminded her. "I'm sure you'll reach

thimble capacity before uni applications are due."

"No!" She practically shrieked. "Applications *have* to be in before Christmas. Otherwise, you might as well throw them in the bin. We're already considered too far away to attend interviews—we have to impress on paper or we haven't got a chance."

"If you actually plan to apply, that is," Marlene remarked, eyeing Remus pointedly.

She was right of course. As busy as he was between their exams, musical affairs, and *Sirius* affairs, Remus was not worried. He had no plans to apply for university. He was going to be in a band.

"Shhhh!"

Madam Pince appeared next to their table, scowling venomously, and all three of them cowered until she'd finally moved on.

"I've only got practice until six," Marlene whispered. "We could study again afterwards. Lupin, you want in?"

Remus shook his head. "Can't, got plans. Band stuff."

It wasn't a total lie. The night before, all four Marauders had agreed that it was finally time to nail down exactly what it was they were going to say to get their families to agree to a life of pursuing music. James planned on pitching the idea as a gap year; they'd take a single year off and if nothing came of Marauders, then he'd go to uni and make something out of himself. Remus had initially thought it a bit of a gamble—a year was mere plonk change in the record industry—but James didn't appear worried. In fact, out of all of them, Peter's parents seemed to be the hardest sell. Mr. Pettigrew was a working man through and through, and although he'd been behind a desk at his newspaper company for many years now, he'd been preaching the value of a hard day's work for as long as his children could remember.

Sirius had it a bit easier. Though he'd received no word as to whether or not he'd been officially disowned by his family, he still wanted to appease the Potters—but then again, no one was going to blame him for following music. He was a prodigy. And as for Remus, well… he was never going to accomplish what Lyall Lupin wanted of him anyway. He just hoped Giles took the news alright. It was enough for Remus just to lounge around in surreptitious bliss, which he did on the floor of their dorm room, gorging on tarts sent by Effie and

listening to Dr. Hook play off the stereo.

'We take all kinds of pills, that give us all kind of thrills,
But the thrill we've never known;
Is the thrill that'll getcha when you get your picture,
On the cover of the Rollin' Stone…'

Next to him, Remus watched as Peter licked the jam from his fingers while pouring over his open notebook. Homework aside, the other boy had written and rewritten his 'gap year' pitch about twelve times, though Remus doubted it was bound to get any better. If they didn't have this in the bag by now, then Marauders wasn't going to get anywhere.

"You're so lucky, Remus," Peter said, when he'd caught him staring.

"He's lucky his dad don't give a shit about him?" Sirius replied dryly, trying and failing to roll a spliff on the back of his Latin text.

"*No.* He's lucky he don't have to hear him bleat about it at all hours. My dad's called three times this week just to ask me about my maths."

"Mine did too," Remus said, taking the spliff from Sirius and easily finishing up the sides for him. "I just never picked up."

James nudged Peter with his foot. "I guess that's the difference, hey Pete?"

"Go on, yack it up. Not all of us can play the delinquent where our parents are concerned. I stop picking up and the next thing I know, Dad'll have me pulling twelve hour shifts in the printer's basement."

"Could be worse," Sirius reasoned, taking back the finished spliff; "You could be designated mail room bitch."

They all shared a shameless chuckle, while Peter huffed and reached for another tart.

"Just you wait," Sirius urged him; "this is gonna be fucking brilliant. A whole year off, with nothing to do but make music. And then once we've cut a demo, we can send it out to all the biggest reps in the country and wait for the offers to start pouring in."

"Come on," James said, "that's a bit far-fetched, even for you."

"Yeah, no way it's gonna be that easy," Peter chipped in. "Besides, *most* of us are still learning our damn instruments."

"Who gives a shit about that? None of the Pistols could play their instruments, and they got a deal before they'd even added 'Sex' to the name."

Remus, already rolling a second spliff for himself, shot Sirius a brazen look. "Yeah, well I don't want to be like the Sex Pistols," he said. "I want to be better."

"Obviously," Sirius crooned. "We're gonna blow that prissy 'New Wave British Heavy Metal' out of the water! I'm talking billboards as big as the buildings they're printed on. Our faces plastered along Piccadilly Circus and Times Square! 'Top of the Pops', 'American Bandstand', and then some."

"And what shall we do in-between all of that?" James asked. "Toothpaste adverts?"

"If it fits your fancy." Smirking, Sirius raised the spliff to his lips but paused at the last second and reached for the stereo's volume dial. The next thing they knew, the speakers were blaring, and he was singing along.

" 'We got all the friends that money can buy, so we never have to be alone. And we keep gettin' richer but we can't get our picture—!'"

Unable to help himself, Remus belted out; *" 'On the cover of the Rollin' Stone!'"*

"Fuck yeah," Sirius cried. "That's it!"

A second later and James and Peter had jumped to their feet. *"Wanna see my picture on the cover!'"*

Sirius joined them; *" 'Wanna buy five copies for my mother!'"*

" 'Wanna see my smilin' face—ON THE COVER OF THE ROLLIN' STONE!' "

They all laughed and shoved each other, which was just brotherhood for love and endearment, and just like that it wasn't about exams or parents or money anymore, it was just about the music. As the song ended and James went to change the tape, Sirius crouched down ahead of Remus and set the spliff between his lips.

“Whaddya say, Moons?” He mumbled around the filter; “Feel like being on the cover of ‘Rolling Stone’?”

Remus raised his zippo, lighting the tip of Sirius’ spliff and grinning at him over the flame.

“Sounds good to me.”

Sirius breathed in, and when he was done, turned the joint around for Remus to smoke right off of his fingers. And Remus did so, wishing horribly that it were Sirius’ lips he were feeling instead.

They’d been better lately, about including their friends in whatever relationship they sought to maintain. Every secret escapade was strategically planned, and they’d learned not to be greedy. James was showing no further signs of jealousy and Peter seemed to be blissfully unaware, as per usual, but aside from that, their continued efforts had resulted in a growing lack of sleep. Remus had always been a shit sleeper, but now that things were good again, he and Sirius were spending all of their late hours sneaking into each other’s beds—anything just to have a moment alone. When he did manage some shut-eye, Remus practically slept with his songbook under his pillow—poised for any idea that might happen to come along at the most inopportune moment. Though, it had the added benefit of keeping any and all sticky fingers at bay. Sirius was a real curtain twitcher when it came to songwriting, and despite serenading him on his birthday, Remus wasn't sure he was quite ready to give up all of his secrets just yet.

Perhaps the lack of personal time might've been cause for alarm once, but now that they were all well and truly on the same page (or as close as they could get whilst remaining in the closet—*revere the closet)* Remus wasn’t all that worried. If the youngest Black brother’s recent lack of total aversion for him was anything to go by, then he’d even managed to make a breakthrough where Regulus was concerned. *Yes,* life was good. Not even Snape had come within twenty feet of them since the bucket incident, which left only one visible downside.

It was time to say goodbye to the East End. For good. There was no place for him there anymore, save maybe Tomny's love. Remus had realised it sometime in early November, after another chat with his oldest friend had taken a glum turn. They hadn’t fought or anything of the like, but he could tell by the way Tomny talked that things were still not ideal. And it was the same thing later that night. After the spliffs and jam tarts, Remus had slunk down to the ground floor to

ring him, and was greeted with a Tomny that sounded as ragged and worn as an old tire.

“Things are jus’ busy nowadays,” he said. “And you know me—hate the cold. Can't never stop fuckin' coughin'. But don’t worry yerself, Lu. S'normal.”

“And Lee? How's he?” Remus had asked, once he’d plucked up the courage to say his name.

“Lee is… Well. Lee’s Lee. You know ‘im.”

Not anymore.

He told himself to get over it. Remus had never had a brother, but he had Tomny. And that was enough. He just hoped that Lee and the other boys would find some way to be happy.

“It won’t last,” Sirius told him afterwards. He'd taken up a spot on the bottom of the stairs, but they were alone in the hallway, and rather than being annoyed that Sirius had followed him downstairs despite his wishes, Remus found that he was grateful. He glanced back at his boyfriend, setting the phone back on its hook.

“What won’t?”

“The feeling… like they’re forgetting you. It’ll fade. I promise.”

“And if it don’t?”

Sirius stood, smiling quietly. He pattered over in naught but his socks and grabbed Remus by the belt loops, tugging them together.

“You worry too much.”

Remus arched a brow. “And you don’t worry *enough.”*

“Yeah, you’re right. But that's what makes us work. We balance each other. Like a jack and coke.”

“You couldn't have tried for a music reference? Lennon and McCartney...?”

“Mm… in that case, I’d say more like Jagger and Richards.” Sirius smirked, and then glanced around to make sure they were really alone. He kissed him then, briskly and with that perfect Sirius mouth that Remus dreamed of every night. It was almost funny—the idea

that something as tumultuous as their relationship could bring balance. He loved all parts of Sirius, even the insane, unreasonable half of him that was always getting them into trouble. He never knew what to expect or when he should be expecting it, but that was half the fun; if not all the more reason to worry.

Hard to worry when you were dead asleep, though.

BEEP—BEEP—BEEP!

Morning had come, and Remus lifted a heavy eyelid, letting out a long groan.He could still feel the faint effects of the whisky bottle James had unceremoniously opened upon his and Sirius' return to the dorm room. Things often went that way whenever one of them was feeling sorry for themselves.

BEEP—BEEP—BEEP!

"Potteeeer," he moaned through his bed curtains; "Turn off the bleedin' alarm, you great git! Not everyone likes goes for five-AM runs…"

"It's six-thirty," James fired back, before the alarm was mercifully silenced.

Like most mornings, Remus turned over and collapsed back into his pillow for a few more precious moments of sleep. Distantly, past the cover of his bed curtains, he could hear the sounds of his friend as he puttered about the room. Remus could picture it perfectly; a creature of habit, James would first pop his joints with a stretch, then put on his glasses and head into the bathroom. (He also kissed the photo of Lily good morning too, but they weren't supposed to talk about *that.)*

Once he'd pretend to run a comb through his hair, James would reappear and stop to open Peter's curtains the tiniest bit, cooing a gentle good morning at him. (He never tried this with Remus, for good reason.) He would end his rounds with Sirius, though his greeting was usually more along the lines of *'up and at 'em, you handsome prig'* and not at all like—

"Sirius? ... Where'd you bloody go?"

Shit.

Remus' eyes flew open. There he found Sirius draped gorgeously out on the bed beside him, hair splayed and perfect mouth parted in sleep. They'd finally done it then—one of their secret late-night trysts had

turned into Sirius accidentally falling asleep in his bed.

"Pete, seen Sirius have you?"

"How could I?" Peter bleated. "I just woke up."

Horrified, Remus shoved his boyfriend furiously. *“Get up! Sirius, get up!”*

“Ngh… fuck off, Moons… I’m still—”

There were footsteps, and Remus clapped a hand down over Sirius’ mouth. Instantly the other boy’s eyes shot open and he grappled for his wrist as Remus furiously held a finger to his mouth to shush him. Sirius hadn’t the time to be confused, as a second later James was thumping the outside of the curtains.

“Moony, you seen Pads? He’s not in his bed.”

Ever-so-slowly, Remus withdrew his hand from his boyfriend’s mouth and pulled the blanket up over their bodies. Meanwhile, Sirius replaced the hand with his own, covering a smile so instant it might have been contagious had Remus not so badly wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

“M–Must have gone down to the common room early,” he managed.

“The common room? But he never goes down there this early. He say something?”

“Yeah. He... He said he had a stomach ache!”

"He did?"

"Yup! Must've went out for some air."

“Hm.”

James didn't sound convinced, and Remus was about to throw out another excuse when Sirius pinched his side, drawing an involuntary yelp from him.

“Whoops."

“You little—”

“You okay in there, Remus?” James called.

“Fine!”

Sirius pinched him again, but Remus swallowed the yelp, turning to smack him in the arm. *“Stop that!”*

“Ow… Stop what?”

“You know, you should really open these curtains of yours sometime,” James carried on. “You’ll get rickets if you don’t see the sun every now and then. Here, let me—”

Before his friend could throw them wide, Remus grabbed hold of the curtains desperately and shouted the only thing he could think of to deter him;

“JAMES! I’VE GOT A BONER!”

There was a beat of silence, and then finally the floorboards creaked. James slowly backing away.

“Oh! Okay, cool. I’ll—er—I’ll just leave you alone for a bit then… Go get some tea, or… cool…”

Remus fought a shudder, but a short second passed and the bedroom door had closed behind James with a distinct click.

“I’m up too!” Peter called a second later, obviously nursing the rude awakening. “And I’m *totally* just going to have a shower… YEP! Just gonna step out for a bit and—heh… *leave you be…”*

More hurried footsteps, and the bathroom door had shut. Immediately Sirius, who had been biting his lip to stave off a laugh, burst into a great guffaw. Remus had to smack him again to shut him up, and by then he was near-on ready to implode from the humiliation of it all.

“Shut up, wanker!" He hissed. "Peter’s still technically in here!”

“Okay, so he’s still in here. But do you want me to do something about *that?”*

Remus peeked down at his lap. An idiot he may be, but a liar he was not.

“We *can’t,”* he whispered, even more embarrassed by his early morning standing ovation. “There isn't enough time. I'll just have a cold shower or something.”

The shower turned on, and Sirius smirked. “With what shower, Moony? Now c'mon, don't be a fuddy-duddy. I only need a few minutes anyway.”

Carefully undoing the drawstring of his pyjama pants, Sirius slid a hand up Remus’ hip. With the other he pulled the cloth trousers down, and Remus could feel himself crumbling.

“You’re evil,” he breathed, his voice hitching as his head fell back. “Ugh—*Fucking hell...”*

“Mmm… I love it when you talk dirty.”

“Stupid... ugh—prat.”

“That’s it, now call me a filthy wanker. That one *really* gets me going.”

Remus wanted to push him away, but suddenly all he could concentrate on were the knots in the wood on the roof of his bed and the trail of kisses Sirius was leaving along his abdomen. He let his arms drag downwards, across Sirius' shoulders and the roughly-patched skin on his scarred, right-hand shoulder. Then he felt Sirius' tongue and prayed to God that their friends had the good sense to stay away for a bit longer.

He’d kicked Sirius out of his bed afterwards, feeling both satisfied and slightly guilty for the lack of reciprocation, and eventually they’d all made their way down to the dining hall. It was obvious that James didn’t believe the lie that Sirius had somehow slipped past him in the common room, but he was too busy grinning at Remus over breakfast to be all that bothered.

"So Moony, did you manage to play the pink fretboard in peace this morning?"

"Oh yeah, he really beat the bishop dead, alright," Sirius sniggered. "It was a one-string banjo jubilee. Johnson out to play!"

"How would you know?" Remus snapped. "You weren't there—*were you?"*

Sirius puckered into his coffee, but thankfully James had always been a bit of a snoop whenever it came to his best friend.

"Yeah, where did you go this morning?" He asked. Sirius shrugged, and thankfully Lily was there to shut the conversation for them.

“That's enough, leave Remus and his 'Johnson' alone. We're eating breakfast," she said, busy pouring syrup onto her plate of pikelets. "Are you guys at least excited for the village trip this weekend?"

She's asked her question, but Remus wasn’t really paying attention—he and Sirius had begun a game of footsies beneath the table and he was winning, but his attention was quickly grabbed when Peter began to whinge.

“I *would be,* if Lupin weren’t so stingy!”

Remus rolled his eyes, knowing instantly what Peter meant. “Come off it already, Pete, I told you I’m not doing it.”

“But I tried again last night and I couldn’t write a thing!” Peter protested. “It’s like a mental block, I need your help!”

“Are you trying to write a song or something, Wormy?” James asked eagerly.

“No, it’s for English. Flitwick’s got us all writing bloody love poems and I can’t do it. But it’s worth a quarter of our final mark! Might not sting as much either, except for the fact that Moony’s had his done for days now, and the stupid sod still won’t show me!”

"I'm not sure calling me stupid is gonna get me to come around any faster, Pete."

"Have a heart, Moons," James said, as he and Peter tilted their heads together to share a pout. Remus ignored it, busy picking at his food, and then suddenly Sirius was nudging him with his elbow. His tone was musing—*delighted.*

“You wrote a love poem?”

Oh, here we go.

“Shut it. It's for *class*, and like I already said, I’m not doing your homework for you, Pete, I’ve enough of my own!” Huffing, Remus went to pick up his teacup before lowering it with another lash; “I mean, really—why’d you even take English Lit if you hate it so much?”

“It was either that or public speaking. And I would’ve failed out of Physics!" Peter whined. "Now will you help me or not?”

"I already said no!"

"I know, but I've a feeling you don't quite mean it, so how 'bout this—I'll bring you tea in bed for a week—two weeks, even! Plus, I won't tell anyone you woke up with a stalk-on!"

Remus scowled, while Lily covered her mouth to hide her smile and James and Sirius began to snigger. A second later, the other girls had strolled up to the table with their breakfast trays in hand.

"What's this about Remus and a stalk-on?" Mary asked innocently.

"Thanks for that, Pete," Remus grumbled, grabbing his school bag and tray of dirty dishes and standing up from the table. As he went to leave, Peter clapped his hands together to beg.

"Okay, so I'll write it on my own, but will you at least let me read yours first? Just as inspiration—I promise not to copy!"

"No, not a chance. Get one 'a those other dickheads to help you."

Peter looked desperately at James, who quickly shook his head and swallowed a bite of pikelet. "Sorry, mate. Got no experience with poetry. And my lyrics are still a bit... well."

"Sirius?!"

"Hm. Not sure you can afford my writer's fee, Pettigrew."

Defeated, Peter moaned and dropped his head on the table. Satisfied that his stubbornness had won out, Remus shouldered his school bag without a hint of mercy and left to drop off his empty tray. After stopping to rinse each dish in the student sinks, he gently patted his hands dry and reached for his bag. Inside the innermost pocket, he found the scrap of notepaper he'd torn from its book the day before and gently unfolded it, resisting a grimace. Even as he read the poem over he hated it, but he couldn't stop thinking of Peter and his whining;

At least let me read yours?

Absolutely not. There was no way Remus Lupin was ever going to let that poem see the light of day. He didn't even want to hand it in for marks. It was soppy and embarrassing—exactly the thing he'd feared it would become when their professor had assigned it after weeks of dissecting the romantic blathering of the likes of Burns and Yeats.

“A love poem,” Professor Flitwick had lectured, *“should not just be a declaration of intimacy, but a summative assessment of it. What makes love different from any other emotion? From anger or sadness? Love is like an ode to any subject, but what makes* your *chosen subject worthy of such devotion?”*

Remus didn’t much care for poetry himself, but it wasn’t all rubbish. Many of the same techniques went into song writing, but whereas a song could convey a multitude of different emotions, like anger and lust, poetry so often felt bland and boring. A love poem felt twice that. But he’d written it anyway—in a fit of late-late hysteria in which his only thoughts and ideas were made up of Sirius. It was corny and mostly gibberish, but at least some parts of it were truthful.

How wonderful it would be
To one day feel your love and care
On a public street

Buy a two tickets for a show
Midday matinee
And sit in your sweet company

There I imagine how it might be
To run my fingers through your hair
Absent of this body

Now I say,
Everything I will have ever wrote
Would be worth nothing
Without you there to read it back to me.

Bloody Sirius. Of course he’d written the poem to be about him. And that was precisely why no one else would ever see it.

“Hey, hey,” Sirius said, appearing beside Remus as though the fates had summoned him. As Sirius dropped his tray into the sink, Remus frantically shoved the poem away and wiped a hand across each cheek to stifle the blush that he could feel spreading up over his neck and ears.

“H–Hey,” he answered awkwardly. “What d’you have first block?”

“Latin. You?”

“History.”

“Great. Let’s skive off.”

Seemingly recovered, Remus scoffed and grabbed his bag. “I’m not skipping History.”

“Why not? It’s just History. You’re great at History!”

“I’m great at History because I actually go to class. Not all of us are blessed with the innate talent to do absolutely nothing and still come out on top. Which you might not, if you *never go."*

“But all I’ve got going on is revision, so there’s no point in *me* going.”

“Ah, yes. Because revision is completely useless when it comes to A-Levels.”

“Audentes fortuna iuvat—fortune favours the bold, Lupin*,”* Sirius recited, as though speaking a dead language was as easy as blowing his nose. He leaned in after, pressing up on his toes so he could look Remus in the eye. “So… you wanna tell me about this poem of yours now?”

“Piss off.” Remus splashed him with dishwater, and Sirius leapt away, more amused than upset.

“Evil,” he muttered, dabbing at the water stains on his shirt. “But actually though—can I see it?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“You *know* why, Sirius.”

“Ooh. Does that mean you actually wrote it about me?”

Unable to take any more, Remus turned and began marching for the doors. Sirius followed, naturally, skirting around him like an excited puppy.

"So you did write it about me!"

"Shut up and get out of my way already," He snapped. When Sirius didn't, Remus went around him instead, dodging incoming students and trying not to look anyone in the eye. Sirius followed, naturally,

and prodded him sharply on the arm.

"You don't sound very convincing, Lupin."

"Bugger off. I can actually feel your ego inflating."

“Don’t be like that," Sirius laughed; "If it’s a love poem written about me, then at least give us a read.”

“I told you already, piss off.”

“Come *onnn.”*

"No, I—"

Just as he was about to reach the dining hall's doors, Sirius snatched his bag off of his shoulder and began rifling around inside.

“Now where is the little devil?" He trilled. "You have it on you now, right?”

“Jesus—stop it!”

Remus ripped the bag away and furiously zipped up its top, while Sirius snorted and stuffed both hands into his trouser pockets.

"Ugh! You're such a dickhead!"

"Yeah alright, m'sorry. Shouldn't have grabbed—call it an impulse." Sirius leaned in, voice sing-song; "But if you won’t show me your poem, the least you can do is skip with me.”

He batted his eyelashes, and Remus resisted the urge to punch him in the arm.

"No, I'm busy. You've pissed me off."

"I always piss you off. It's a special talent."

"I’ve a quiz today.”

“Even better! Binns’ quizzes are shite anyway.”

Remus stopped to look at him. It was early; the dining room was still busy with other kids, but no one was paying attention, despite the fact that Sirius was looking as handsome as ever. Swooping hair, a dimple on each cheek and smiling teeth more perfect than any Brit deserved.

Genes—genetics—the grace of God—whatever it was, it wasn't fair. He had the kind of looks that stopped strangers in their tracks, and for some reason, all he wanted was to spend time with Remus. *Him—Remus Lupin.*

Christ.

“I’m not skipping class," Remus grunted.

“Aw, but—”

“But… I’ll meet you for my next free period.”

Sirius' face lit up.

“… Astronomy building?”

“If you’re so inclined.”

“Mhm,” he hummed quietly—delighted once more; “Yeah, I’m inclined now, but I want to be *reclined* later.”

Remus smothered a smile. “Get to fucking class, Sirius.”

"Ooh. Yes, *sir."*

With that, Sirius saluted him and slowly began backing away. He flashed a cheeky wave—all elegant fingers—and pointed at him. *You, me*—and then one very quick, *very crude* gesture involving his hand and mouth. Remus nearly floundered, but no one had noticed, and by then the bold, beautiful boy had already disappeared through the doors on his own. It struck Remus then how dating Sirius Black felt a lot like being on a rollercoaster that only went down. Down and down they plunged and even when he was begging for the simple release of an upturn—a moment when his stomach would leave his throat—he never got one. He'd never been on a rollercoaster himself, but liking Sirius was enough to put him off the idea completely. Not that he minded all that much though; the view from the top was quite nice.

Once lessons had finally ended, Remus snatched up his things and practically ran from building to building. It was almost laughable—they saw each other every day, all day! But as he rounded the side of the Astronomy building, the anticipation of seeing Sirius boiled terribly in his gut. *My boyfriend,* he anticipated, *I'm going to see my boyfriend.*

Cigarette already balanced between his teeth, he'd just arrived at the base of the Astronomy building's exterior stairs when a pathetic fit of sniffling drew his attention toward the far wall. There he found Jillian Stewart hunched over on the ground, unceremoniously crying into her knees. Silently cursing himself, Remus started a retreat, only to be caught the moment Jillian's head snapped up.

"Oh, Remus," she sniffled, "it's just you."

"Er, hey Jill. You… doing okay?"

Jillian nodded placidly, before her face split into another agonised sob. "N–No, I'm not! Roy *dumped* me!"

Remus pulled the cigarette from his mouth and clicked his tongue quietly. "Wow, that—erm… really sucks…"

"That arsehole!" She wailed, loud enough that one could've heard it from the primary campus; "All over some stupid argument too! I don't get it—it's normal for lovers to have the occasional spat. Isn't it?!"

"Uh… yes?" At least, for his and Sirius' sakes, Remus sure hoped it was.

"Yes, well that's what *I* thought!" Jillian moaned. "But the moment I try talking to him, the bloody coward runs off with his tail between his legs! Best eight weeks of his life and you wanna know how he breaks up with me? He gets Bill Crook to pass me a note in French! *FRENCH!"*

"Do you mean like the class or the language…?"

She only cried harder.

Glancing around desperately, Remus finally pulled the handkerchief James' mum had sent him from his bag. She'd monogrammed his initials onto the corner herself. It was all very Effie.

"Here," he said, squatting down in front of his sobbing classmate and holding out the hanky. Jillian took it to blow her nose and a moment later Remus offered his cigarette as well. She took it just as eagerly, leaning in to let him light the end with his zippo.

"Thanks," she mumbled sadly. "I don't normally smoke."

"I get it." With nothing else to do, Remus settled in next to her,

awkwardly patting his palms against the knees of his trousers. "Sorry things didn't work out with Roy. He sounds like a right cunt."

"Oh, he sure is," Jillian said, practically chewing the filter. It made Remus smile a little, and he plucked out a fresh cig for himself and lit up. Now it was Jillian's turn to watch him, which she did out of the corner of her eye, clumsily sucking on the end of her cigarette like a relapsed addict.

"I knew I should've picked you over him," she started, wiping her cheeks. "Guys at this school treat girls like absolute rubbish, trampling over our feelings like they're worth nothing at all. At least you never did that. You were nice."

Suddenly worried that Jillian was about to mistake his awkward friendliness for interest, Remus scrambled to correct himself;

"Jill, I'm sorry but I really don't—"

"I know," she sighed; " 'Farrah' and all that…"

He raised the cigarette to his lips, eyes on the ground. "Yeah, sorry…"

"Don't be. It was a sweet lie."

Remus sucked back sharply—straight into his lungs.

"You knew—" *cough;* "it was a—" *cough;* "lie?!"

"No... but you confirmed it just now."

Bested, Remus slumped back against the brick wall.

"I'm—*sorry,"* he wheezed. *"For lying*—to you."

Jillian shrugged shyly, taking a drag.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry too. I got it in my head that we could be something, the two of us—but no. You were nice enough about it. Just wish I'd chosen someone better than bloody Roy Nilssen." She shook her head pitifully. "I swear, I'm never dating a younger guy again. They're really all the same. Fucking Roy—did you know, he said such awful, immature things when he was angry. Immature wanker."

Remus nodded solemnly, because it felt like the right thing to do. Sirius was technically a year older than the rest of them, he recalled.

Did that make him the younger guy? Had Sirius thought about it?

“Well,” he began hesitantly, “I don’t think you should worry about what dickheads like Roy have to say. Teenage boys are pretty stupid, you know. Take it from a primary source.”

There was a moment of pause, and then Jillian rested her chin on her knees, smiling at him. “It’s hard to be a teen, isn’t it, Remus?”

“Sometimes,” he agreed. *Hard to be a teen…* Had a certain ring to it.

After a while, Remus put out his cigarette and tapped a second from the box, offering it to Jill. She declined, blowing her nose in his handkerchief once more, and just then another person rounded the side of the building. Expecting it to be Sirius, Remus set the cig between his teeth and looked up, only to find the one and only Roy Nilssen staring them down.

“Fucking finally,” the other boy huffed. “Jill—what the fuck? I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Piss off, Roy," Jillian snivelled.

"Aw, don't be like that." Roy paused, just long enough to give Remus the eye. "C’mon, we can talk about this somewhere else.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Jillian lashed, fisting the hankie and already spitting like a cat. “In fact, I don’t want to see your miserable face ever again!”

Roy gave a low groan.

“Fucking Christ—let’s not have this again, love. I'm sorry, alright? Now why don't you just stand up and give us a snog so we can move on already?”

“Snog? I wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole, Nilssen! You disgust me, and besides, Remus has helped me come to a few very un-startling revelations. The first being that *you’re* a royal arsehole!”

Remus resisted a groan. Roy turned on him, clearly vexed, and once again he found himself in the middle of another couple’s spat.

“What’s he even doing here?” The other boy snarled, thrusting a finger in Remus’ direction. “This doesn't have anything to do with him!”

“He’s comforting me! Which is exactly what you should’ve been doing,

but instead you went off with your bloody mates! Figured that meant we were done."

"It wouldn't, if you'd just give me a bloody chance to speak!"

Jillian crossed her arms haughtily. "Oh enough, Roy! You've spoken plenty and still somehow managed to say nothing at all. Call me when you finally learn that your girlfriend should come first!"

"You're mental! No real bloke would put a girl ahead of his mates all of the time!"

"Oh, I'm mental, am I?"

With an expression like fury, Jillian leapt to her feet. It was sudden enough that Roy actually flinched away, as though she might gouge his eyes out with her fingernails.

"If I'm mental, then you must be thicker than mud, Roy Nilssen, because I am never going anywhere with you ever again! You're positively the worst boyfriend I've ever had!"

Roy puffed up his chest in a sure attempt to look bigger than he was. "You're not exactly a prize yourself! I mean, how hard is it to put a little effort in every once in a while? You think you're such hot shit, but listening you drone on is like listening to my bloody mother. And no guy wants to show off a girl who can't even be bothered to shave her legs!"

"At least I have hair to shave, you prepubescent monkey!"

At her words, Roy went purple in the face.

"Fucking—whatever!" He spat. "Good luck finding someone else to put up with your shit. They'd have to be deaf to stand your yammering. And half-blind, considering—"

"Alright, I think I've heard enough now."

Remus stood, more than tired of having to listen to the pair of them argue. He just wanted to snog his boyfriend, why was everyone else so insistent on getting in the way?

"What'd you say, dick?" Roy demanded.

Well, there you go, Lupin, his nasty inner voice keened. *Sticking your nose in where it don't belong it again.*

Might as well commit then, he told it.

"You're the one being a dick, *dick."*

"Yeah? And why don't you just fuck off!"

Sighing, Remus stuck the unlit cigarette behind one ear. "Look, clearly whatever you two had going on is over, so how 'bout you save us all the trouble and fucking scram already."

"Oh I get it," Roy sneered. "This crazy bint's finally gotten you to come around, huh Lupin? You want my sloppy seconds? Fine. But I warn you, she's a shitty lay."

Jillian made a noise in the back of her throat, and suddenly Remus' patience had reached its end. With a tight-lipped smile, he raised his hands as though admitting defeat, but when Roy scoffed and turned away, Remus' hand shot out. He grabbed the other boy round the arm, throwing him up against the brick wall and pinning him there with his wrist locked behind his back. It was the same move Lee and Doss had been using on him for years, only now he was the one in control.

"There," Remus huffed. "Let's try this again, shall we?"

Roy thrashed against him immediately, like a shark caught in its net.

"Fucking—GET OFF ME!"

"No, you're gonna apologise for everything nasty word you said to her, and then *maybe* I'll think about letting you go."

"Fuck you!"

Unimpressed, Remus glanced over at Jillian. She was standing off to the side with her mouth hanging open, clearly shocked. He could've been scaring her, but either way, Remus didn't bother letting up. Roy was still writhing against him, and while his ex-girlfriend watched, Remus thrust him further against the wall, grinding his face into the rough brick.

"Apologise now. Or I'll break your arm."

He felt the other boy turn rigid, but Hawkings was a posh school, filled with posher students. If the upper-class had anything, it was pride.

"As if! You can take your bloody apology, Lupin, and shove it up your

—!"

Remus wrenched Roy's wrist higher, until it was flush with his shoulder blades and the other boy was practically shrieking in pain.

"You think I won't do it, Roy? Hell, I'll snap an ankle too. Leave you limping back to those sorry mates of yours. Now *apologise."*

"Fucking yob!" Roy screeched. He was breathing so rapidly that he was spewing the wall with spittle, nearly managing to hit Remus as well. Impatient, he gave one more jerk on his wrist, and Roy finally caved.

"Fine! Fine!" He yelped. *"I'm sorry!* I'm fucking sorry now get the hell off of me!"

"Hm," Remus hummed. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

With a satisfied grunt, he stepped backwards and released his grip on Roy's arm. He was scrambling away from them in a second, clutching his wounded wrist, cheek marred with the jagged imprint of the building's brick.

"You're in for it now, Lupin!" He swore. "I'm gonna fucking crack your skull!"

"By all means, try it."

Remus stepped forward, but the gesture alone was threat enough. Practically falling over himself to get away, Roy turned and bolted in the other direction, disappearing around the side of the Astronomy building with a final string of curses. With him gone things were finally quiet, but even Remus wasn't oblivious enough to not realise what he'd done. He'd traded Jillian's pride for his own peace of mind. Lily was totally right—he was too bloody nice.

“So…” Jillian started, once she'd finally picked her jaw up from the ground; “Does this mean you want to try for that second date now?”

Remus scrambled; *no, no, no!*

“Look, Jill—”

“Lord, Remus—I know!” She laughed. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist. That was... Well, I'll be honest—that was fucking hot."

"Please don't tell anyone, I am supposed to be a prefect after all," he

winced, more worried that the saviour stunt would get back to Sirius than anything else.

"Oh, no—never," she grinned. "It was totally cool of you, everything you said to Roy. And watching you... *oh,* but well, if you're ever interested, then we could always—"

"Jill, I'm sorry, but I can't."

Jillian bit her lip. "You can't?"

"No."

"Oh."

"It's not you," he insisted. "I just can't date anyone right now. I'm… Well, I've got a lot on my plate."

She squinted at him, then smirked again. "Would this have anything to do with that mysterious sheet-clad kisser on Halloween?"

"Uh, no… I mean—no way!"

"I knew it!" Jillian cried, calling his obvious bluff. "I knew you were sprung for someone! Who is it? Her name's not actually Farrah, right? 'Cause I had a look at our school records and the only 'Farrah' at Hawkings is Farrah Dunsmuir and she's like, eleven—"

"It's no one!"

"Oh come on, Remus! I promise not to tell!"

"Jill… *no."*

At his final word, Jillian sighed very dramatically. "Alright, fine. I suppose I already promised to stop bothering you. Just… thanks for being one of the good ones, Remus."

She hugged him, and though it was just a genial thing, Remus seized up. He'd only just raised a hand to awkwardly pat her on the back when someone pointedly cleared their throat behind them.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything..."

"Oh! Hello Sirius."

Instantly horrified, Remus wrenched his head around. There he found

Sirius standing a few feet away, arms crossed and a single perfect eyebrow raised in judgement. Just seeing him was enough to make Remus spring away as though he'd been electrocuted.

"Sirius! Oh shit... I—uhm! *This isn't—"*

"Aw, Moons, don't act so guilty," Sirius started wryly. "Someone might think you were actually up to something."

"We weren't up to anything!" He insisted straight away. "Nothing happened—or that is to say that Jill and I—uh… *We*—Christ! Well, come on then, Jill. Tell him!"

"What Remus is trying to say," Jillian said, "is we started dating again."

This time, both of Sirius' brows shot up. *"Really?"*

"NO!"

"Mhm, yes. If I recall, he even said something like 'I'd snog Jillian any day of the week'."

"Any day? Even Sundays and bank holidays?"

"Enough!" Remus wailed. "You're killing me! You're actually killing me!"

With a great giggle, Jillian turned and picked up her school coat from where she'd been sitting on it. "He's right, I'm only joking. Remus and I *were* getting cosy, but unfortunately Roy came along and ruined it. Lucky for me, Remus makes a pretty good white knight."

"Oh?" The corner of Sirius' mouth twitched. "Well, someone better catch me before I swoon."

Nothing happened, Remus mouthed desperately. Sirius gave him the up-and-down, but said nothing as Jill dusted off her coat and hung it over one arm.

"Remus got Roy to back off. Threw him around like a rag doll. You should feel sorry you missed it, it was very sexy. Thuggish in almost a gentlemanly way. Have you ever tried it, Black? Being a gentleman?"

"My, Stewart, you've certainly gotten mouthy since getting those cheese graters off your teeth."

She gave him a curtsy, and then glanced back at Remus, patting him on the arm.

“Thanks for the cigarette, Remus. You were real sweet. I’ll wash your handkerchief, but don’t think this means you’re going to get away next time. I’ll be expecting a full report on that secret girlfriend of yours, love. Ta.”

Remus resisted a groan. *If there really is a God in this world,* he thought, *He's one sadistic bastard.*

After Jillian had bid them *adieu,* Sirius trudged forward. Throughout the entire conversation with Jillian he'd appeared blithe and unbothered, but now he was looking at him sternly, and Remus knew he was in for it.

“ ‘White knight’?” He echoed. " 'Thuggish gentleman'? What'd you do, eat her entire minge in broad daylight?"

Remus grimaced. "Do you really have to be so crude?"

"What happened?"

"She was sitting there when I got here—crying! I didn't know what to do, and you sure as fuck weren't around, so I... I gave her a cigarette!"

"You gave a crying girl a cigarette?"

"What else was I supposed to do? Snog her?"

"Oh I bet you'd like me to say that, wouldn't you?"

Remus pressed his lips together guiltily, hiding a smile.

“You wouldn’t happen to want that blowjob now, would you?”

He appeared reluctant at first, but then Sirius tongued the inside of his cheek, looking like he were trying not to smile.

“How is it that everyone likes you so much?"

"I dunno. Maybe it's *my* special talent."

"... Cheeky git."

It wasn't hard to make up after the Roy incident. All Remus had to do was scamper up the metal stairwell and pop the lock to the Astronomy

building. The minute he and Sirius were inside, Jillian was forgotten, and they hid out for a long while, skipping the rest of their lessons and just enjoying each other.

“Weekend should be good,” Sirius said brightly, when they finally emerged again and made their way back toward the centre of campus for dinner. “Trip into the village and all…”

“You hear from Prongs then?”

Sirius looked smug. “Didn’t even need to give him an excuse. Said he and Lily wanted the day alone, since we’re all headed back to his for Christmas.”

“And Pete?”

“Moira’s got him locked down tight.”

Remus brushed Sirius’ pinky with his own. “Brilliant.”

Excited by the idea of their first real *uninterrupted* date since the summer, Remus began counting off all of the things he and Sirius would be able to do together. The Ramones had just released a new album, which meant that a trip to Dervish and Bangers was in order, and if they went early enough to Broomsticks they’d probably get some privacy in one of the back booths. He’d dropped quite a bit of dosh on that Bowie record back in October, but he was hoping to still have enough to have a good day in the village. Maybe he’d even take him to Madam Puttifoot’s. Wouldn’t that be a sight.

“Say," Remus started; "what do you think about... oh shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Forgot to pick up this month's stipend ages ago.” Remus stopped dead in his tracks, looking sorely back the way they’d come. “Maybe should head to the office now, the secretary's always gone before five.”

“Sure, I’ll come with,” Sirius shrugged.

And so they went together, hurrying back up the lane toward Castle Hall so as to make it on time. Remus had never really enjoyed his visits to main building, but like many of his classmates, he’d been making the trip every other week to collect his allowance. Some kids, like James and Peter, got their pocket money mailed to them in the

form of a cheque they could cash at the office or in town, but Lyall was not as trustworthy. Instead he'd arranged for a monthly stipend to be dispersed at the school's discretion. It was just a small thing—plonk change compared to most others at the school—but it was enough for Remus to buy his fags and a bottle of jack so that must've meant that the Lupin name was good for something.

"You're lucky, I was just about to step out," the secretary said, her clogs squeaking on the tile as she spun around to unlock the filing cabinet behind her desk. Remus waited patiently outside her office window, drumming his fingertips along the countertop. Sirius stood across from him, used to the affair. He'd also collected a stipend when he was on the Blacks' payroll, but that year Monty and Effie had been kindly mailing him a cheque every other week as well.

"What'd you say your surname was again, deary?" The secretary called.

"Balenciaga," Sirius answered. Remus pinched him.

"It's Lupin."

Her fingers flew across the files once more. "Hm… Seems there ain't much here."

Both boys shared a bewildered look.

"Remus Lupin?"

She plucked a paper file from the collection, folding it open. "Yes, I've got a 'Remus Lupin' here, but… Hm… Have you talked to your parents at all recently?"

"Uh…" *No.* He'd been all but ignoring every one of Giles' calls. No way he'd pick up for his father.

"I'm afraid your account's been emptied." She flashed him the stipend paper, which read with a big fat zero at the very bottom. "Could just be a mistake. I've had grandparents and the like bungle up accounts before. Would you like to ring them now, deary?"

Remus stared at Sirius again, who looked just as surprised. Lyall Lupin might not care much for sordid bookkeeping, but he did not forget to pay his bills.

The secretary came to the window, spinning a telephone around

toward them, but Remus could think of a hundred other things he'd rather do than call his father in front of her. In the end, he and Sirius backtracked down the hallway, where the building's only other wall phone hung. He punched in the numbers, and when Cartsen finally connected him to his father's office, Remus had barely gotten the words out before Lyall was dismissing him.

"Of course I emptied the account. How else was I supposed to get your attention?"

"You could've said something first!"

"When? *How?"* Lyall scoffed. "You never pick up the phone anymore, not even for Giles. I could've called your Headmistress, but you're almost eighteen. Better you learn the lesson yourself."

Remus all but strangled the phone in his grip. He could still see Sirius, but he'd wandered further down the hallway to give him some privacy.

"So what, you're just gonna cut me off?" He hissed quietly. "After all this time?"

"I'd be more inclined to reinstate the stipend should I know you'd be putting it to good use. I want to know what your plans are for university applications. Your marks were good enough to submit to Manchester—you know it's my own alma mater, and *I* know that you'd do well enough there. So, you've already begun your applications, I hope?"

"None of your *business."*

"Well, then I suppose providing extra funding for your filthy habits is also none of my business. The world is tough, Remus. You reap what you sow."

Didn't he fucking know it.

Suddenly another voice sounded in the background. Sandra.

"The car's ready, darling. We don't want to be late for dinner."

"I'll be right there, Sandra," Lyall replied curtly. "I'm just wrapping up things with the school."

"Oh, is that Remus now? How's he doing? Here, pass me the phone, I'd like

to say—”

Remus hung up.

* * *

If Remus had had it his way, none of his friends would’ve found out about his stipend, but as it was, Sirius had been there witness to the whole thing. They morning after he'd spoken with Lyall, he woke up and went about his day as normal. Later in the afternoon, they spent most of music class revising for upcoming mock exams, and afterwards Sheila had agreed to give them the rest of the block to work on their compositions. It was then that word of Remus’ sudden poverty came to light, much to his displeasure.

"Couldn't you borrow the money?" Peter reasoned. "I thought prefects got their own stipends anyway."

"Not until the end of the month," Remus grumbled. "Until then I'm flat broke."

“I don’t know what you’re still whinging for, all we spend money on is drinks and fags. And hell, I’ll lend you the cash if you really want,” Sirius said, looking bored as he picked a hangnail. Remus glared at him. Only Sirius could look bored with an electric guitar in his lap.

Next to him, James was currently fretting over a composition and how he was going to be able to properly translate it into staves for their exam. “Blimey, I knew taking music as an A-Level was a mistake."

“It wouldn’t be hard if you just learned how to read music,” Peter pointed out from behind his drum kit, frantically scribbling on a music stand of his own.

“Oi, you two,” Sirius called sharply; “Brains outta the books—we’re talking about Moony right now.”

“Huh?” James raised his head. “Oh, right. I don’t mind spotting ya, Moons.”

“Me neither. No big deal.”

Yes—big deal! Remus thought bitterly. He wasn’t about to let James and Peter pay for his date with Sirius. That would just be

embarrassing.

“I don’t want your money,” he grumbled, flipping the page in his music notes.

“And you call us proud,” Sirius blagged. “It’s just money! You’ve spotted us for fags or what-have-you plenty of times, so let us return the favour.”

“I’m fine. You don't need to pay my way.”

“Oh? And just what are you gonna do when we’re in London and I’m footing the bill then?”

“You won’t be,” Remus snapped. “I’ll get a job.”

“You? A job? You’d likely get sacked the first day for telling your boss to go play in traffic.”

“At least I’d make it past the interview, you pompous nob.”

Sirius shot him the bird, just as James chimed in;

“I think we’re all gonna have to get jobs, actually.”

“What?”

“You really think Dad’s gonna let us get away with only playing music for an entire year? No way. Pete and I were talking about it just this morning.”

Peter nodded. “My dad wants me to start at the company right after school finishes, so I’ll probably be there.”

Sirius appeared astounded. “I thought we were taking a year off! I thought it was gonna be about the music—the band! How are we gonna get a record deal or even write a single song with you kissing your dad’s boots from nine to five?”

“We’ll just have to do it *after* five,” James laughed. “Or on the weekends. Like normal people.”

“You be normal,” Sirius replied, crossing his arms. “I’m gonna be a fucking rock star and I’m gonna do it on Alphard’s dime.”

None of them had much to say to that, and it didn’t matter. The bell went and they began to pack up.

“Moony,” Peter started, creeping towards Remus as he put the Fender away. “I know you already said no, but Friday's just around the corner and I really need help with—”

“I’m not giving you the bloody poem, Wormtail.”

Peter whimpered, before putting his hands together. “Please? What if I paid you? That way I ain’t just giving you the money—it’s a genuine exchange of services! C’mon, five quid for just a little peek!”

Remus paused. Five quid wasn’t enough for a full date in the village, but it was certainly enough for cigs and a bottle of jack. He glanced at Sirius, who was talking to James and not paying attention.

“Fine,” he hissed, “but I swear, if you say anything about it to anyone —*especially* Sirius—I’ll murder you.”

“Yes, I won’t show anyone!”

“And don’t lose it! I still need to hand it in to Flitwick on Friday...”

“I’ll have it back by tomorrow, swears!”

Already regretting the decision, Remus untucked the top of his school bag and dug around inside. He handed the poem over when he found it, and Peter pressed a five pound note into his palm before crossing his heart like a promise.

“You can count on me, Moons! You’re a life-saver!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

As Peter rushed off, victorious and clearly elated, Remus was reminded that he did like helping his friends. He might cease to exist if anyone else were to read the poem, but Peter was an artist and harmless enough on his own. He may have had a big mouth, but he was still genuine. It was more than he could say for most people.

“Lupin," someone called; *"your girlfriend’s here!”*

It felt like déjà vu, but perhaps whinging to Marlene for a bit might take the edge off. At least she would understand not wanting to make Sirius pay for his own date.

With a sigh of relief, Remus turned to the front of the classroom and nearly gasped aloud when he found Jillian waiting in the doorway instead of Marlene.

“Remus!” She called, waving at him frantically. “Remus, over here!”

“They say a little competition’s good for morale,” Sirius said, appearing at his side; “But she’s really starting to tick me off.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Remus said, shouldering his bag. “I’ll meet you guys for dinner.”

"Can't. Got detention."

"For what?"

"Does it matter?" Sirius asked, before ramming his knee into Remus’ left buttock for good measure. Remus groaned, but said nothing else as he slunk across the music room.

“Jill, you’re not actually telling people we’re dating, right?” He begged quietly, once they’d stepped out into the hall.

“Don’t be silly,” she chided. “I just need to know if you’re free tomorrow afternoon.”

“Uh... Why?”

She whipped him on the arm. “I just told you not to be silly! It’s only prefect stuff. Professor McGonagall’s asked me to find a few others to help rake up the leaves in front of the Great Hall. Apparently Filch is out with a cold. Would you be interested?”

“Well I…”

“Please? Trish and I are going to do it, but it’ll take us all day with just the two of us. And it’ll get you out of office duty! Plus—” she leaned in; “Trish has weed.”

"Trish always has weed."

"Yeah... but she's promised to share!"

He wanted to say no; it was getting colder out in the afternoons and he’d planned to use his boring office hours to finish a paper, but Jillian was staring at him with those big eyes and they’d only just started to get on as friends. Remus Lupin could’ve used some good karma. At least there was going to be drugs.

“Alright.”

“Great! It’s a date—kidding.” Jillian laughed and clapped her hands together. “Actually though, you’re a lifesaver. We’ll meet you and Regulus outside the great hall at three. Ciao!”

She’d gone before he could fully realise what he’d done. *Good karma, indeed.*

“Just walk up to him,” James said, when they’d finished with music and emerged in the dining hall for supper. Peter was eating with Moira, and Sirius had detention, which left just the two of them until the girls decided to show up.

“He’s with his shitty friends though,” Remus said, eyeing Regulus up from across the room.

“He’s always with his shitty friends. Hell, from his point of view—we’re the shitty friends! So go tell him that you’ve signed him up for garden duty so we can finally eat.”

“You're mean when you're hungry."

“Fine. Guess you could always ring his dorm later and tell him then.”

Remus sighed. Somehow he doubted he’d be any more convincing over the telephone.

“Come on,” James pushed; “I’ll even go with you.”

And so, with his moral-support Potter in tow, Remus crossed the dining hall. Regulus took notice immediately, but unfortunately that also meant that the others had caught on.

“What d’you want, Loony? Trip over your own nose on the way to the toilet?” Barty taunted.

"You know, Barty," James smiled, "if you’re interested, I know this really great dentist that might be able to help you out with all of… *that.”*

“Oh yeah? Well, nice skunk stripe, Potter. Get hit by a road painter?”

James smirked, nearly going cross-eyed as he looked up at the bleached bit of fringe hanging over his glasses. It’d yet to grow out after the girl’s prank on Halloween, and probably wouldn’t for some time.

“Crouch, can you do me a favour and let the big boys talk?" Remus

drawled. “It’s about prefect stuff.”

Regulus clicked his tongue. “What'd you do now, Lupin?”

“Turns out we’re not filing paperwork tomorrow. Instead it’s you, me, a few rakes, and several thousand leaves.”

“You signed us up for garden duty?”

“Just for one day—a mere afternoon, even! Plus Jill and Trish are gonna be there too.”

The look on Regulus’ face could’ve been mistaken for horror. “You invited MacDuff?”

“Uh… Well, technically the girls invited us.”

Suddenly the other boys began to roar with laughter. Remus wasn’t sure what was so funny, until Barty clapped a hand on Regulus’ shoulder and all but told him.

“Ya hear that, Reggie? MacDuff’s called you out again. I think I hear wedding bells in the distance! *HA!”*

“Shut up, you’re being stupid!” Regulus spat, in a voice that made Remus think that the teasing was already old-hat. "And piss off, Lupin! Ain't my problem."

"Now that's a bit rude," James replied, before taking Remus by the shoulder. "It's alright, Moons, I'll help you rake the leaves."

"Ooh, watch out Reg," Yaxley sneered. "Looks like Potter's moving in on your girl."

"No, he's not! He's... As if he could steal a girl from anyone!"

James rolled his eyes. "No need to steal. But if you want the girl to like you more, Reg, you should probably try smiling every once in a while."

At that, Remus thought Regulus might just implode.

“Shut up!” He snapped. "Stop laughing! *Stop laughing!"*

But the boys did not let up. Rather, Yaxley and Travers leaned across the table, already mid-song and perfectly in sync with their ridiculous children’s rhyme;

“ ‘Reg and Trish, sittin’ in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N—’ ”

With ears as red as hot coals, Regulus shot to his feet and marched off, taking his dinner tray him. None of the others seemed bothered, they simply kept on laughing, and James and Remus had to return to their table victory-less.

“Looks like little Reg has a crush,” James said as they stood in line for supper. “Wonder if Sirius knows anything about it.”

“Doubt it. Regulus still won't talk to him. And now I'm stuck raking his share."

"No one can say you didn't try."

The next morning turned out to be a cold one, just as promised. The Marauders all bundled up before heading down to breakfast and then communion, which would’ve been a dull affair had Remus not managed to sneak a book in.

“My brother? You’re sure?” Sirius was whispering to James, as the ministers chanted their hymns.

“Went red as a tomato when Moony so much as mentioned the girl.”

Sirius nudged him. *“Psst*—Moony. Does Reg really have a thing for Penny Prefect?”

“Regulus. Their names are *Trish* and *Regulus.”*

“Yeah, them. Has he really been shacking up with the girl then?”

Remus looked up from his book. “I don’t know. I’m not a Regulus-tracker.”

“Has Trish said anything?”

“No. Not to me.”

Sirius pursed his lips. “Well. Might be good for him then. The git could use a girlfriend. Maybe he’ll finally relax some.”

A hand reached over from the pew behind them, smacking Sirius upside the head.

“Be quiet before you get in trouble,” Lily hissed, as the rest of the girls shared an amused smirk.

“I am being quiet,” Sirius replied. “In fact, no one can even—”

“Mr. Black.” Professor McGonagall had appeared at the end of their row, looking unimpressed.

“Oh, hey Minnie!”

There were several snickers from nearby kids, but McGonagall simply handed Sirius a detention slip. “That makes two for two after yesterday. Let’s not make it three,” she chided, then; “Mr. Lupin, you know the rules. Now, the book if you would.”

Remus resisted a groan, snapping his novel shut and handing it over. With it clutched tightly in one hand, the Headmistress gave them all a final warning glance before carrying back on to her seat at the front of the church.

“I hate you,” Remus muttered.

Sirius smothered a laugh.

After the service had concluded, the Marauders piled outside onto the green to compare schedules. Remus had straight lessons until mid-afternoon, but then he’d be expected to join the girls outside Castle Hall. Sirius had another detention courtesy of Professor McGonagall, and as it turned out, James' offer to help out had also turned up fruitless. He and Lily had a dorm monitor meeting, which left Remus on his own.

“Maybe I should say something to him,” Sirius pondered, while the two of them were on their way to Classics after church had let out. "Reg, I mean."

“I think that’s a sure-fire way to make sure he never speaks to you again."

“But I’m in a relationship,” Sirius contended. “I could give him some real advice. Like what to do if his partner kisses their best friend on the same day you both say ‘I love you’.”

“You’re never gonna let that go, are you?”

“No. Not until I see this Tomny guy in person and can confidently say that he’s as ugly as a tin bin.” Sirius let out a long moan, stretching his arms up above his head. “I do worry about the little wanker sometimes, you know. Couldn’t have been easy after I left, but then

again, he's always been able to tolerate it better. Who knows, maybe his life's gotten easier."

"You really think Regulus did better without you around?"

"I dunno. I would've left eventually anyway. Couldn't stay. Not after what she said…" Sirius wiped beneath his nose. "Guess he'd be fine. After all, *he* doesn't have to be worried about disappointing them as a *man."*

Feeling a bit helpless, Remus glanced around. They were in the Agrippan Block—lessons would be starting soon, but that meant that it would be only a few minutes until the second floor corridor would be completely empty…

"Come on."

Taking Sirius' sleeve, he drew him toward the stairwell, and together they followed it up.

"Are you sure?" Sirius asked, when Remus had pulled them into an empty study room. "Remember what happened with Yaxley?"

Remus held up a key. "This room's prefects only." He set it aside then, and grabbed Sirius by the tie, guiding him toward the sofa at the back of the room. There, he made Sirius sit, and crouched down, pushing his knees apart.

"Oh! *Oh…"* Sirius licked his lips, then let his head fall back, fingers already knotting in Remus' hair. "I knew it was a good idea to date a swot…"

* * *

"I swear, all men are the same," Jillian huffed. "They never know what we want, and when they do, they're still fucking terrible at it."

Trish nodded sympathetically, raising a light to the spliff Jillian had set between her teeth. They'd already been raking for an hour and had only managed a fourth of the green. None of them had objected when Jillian suggested a well-earned break, and together they'd shuffled behind the building to try out one of Trish's spliffs.

"Ye said Roy's already rebounded with someone else?" Trish

mumbled, her coat done up to her chin against the mid-November chill.

“Yes,” Jillian replied, taking a hit and passing the spliff along. “Some eleventh year named ‘Rita’. She’s the same age as his little sister too. It’s fucking gross…”

“Nasty,” Remus agreed, accepting the spliff. Jillian waited for it to come back around again to start cursing again, which she did—loudly.

“Roy can do whatever he wants, I don’t care! I told you he’s already trying to make me jealous, right? Caught him telling his mate that Rita's breasts were ‘practically perfect’—and he totally knew I was listening!”

“Whatta pig,” Trish said, busy piling leaves onto Remus’ shoulder.

“James almost cut him from the football team this year,” he added, dusting them off. “Marlene helped with try-outs and he threw this huge fit after she out-sprinted him during drills.”

Trish laughed; “A pig *and* a man-child. You said he was a weird kisser, aye?”

“God—yes! He never opened his mouth!” Jillian whined; *“Hated* tongue. It was like coaxing an eel out of its cave!”

Trish glanced at Remus, spliff tucked between two fingers. “How d’ye feel about tongue, Remington?”

“Well, I was partial to it until Jill compared it to an eel in a cave.”

“Ye hear that—LUPIN LIKES TONGUE!”

Jillian and Trish fell into one another on the grass, laughing, and Remus shook his head.

"It's not really the tongue part, it's more like—"

"Right. Should've known I'd find you here."

They yelped—all three of them—and Remus spun round to find Regulus standing behind them. He was done up in his mittens and winter coat, and was holding a rake in either hand.

"You came!" Remus exclaimed.

“Of course I came, it's prefect duty. Now how long are you three going to hide out here and slack off?”

“Aw m’on, Reginald,” Trish said, offering the spliff. “Sit down, take load off—join us. Ye might be able tae relax long enough to work that stick out of your arse.”

Rolling his eyes, Regulus came forward, tossing the rake across Remus’ lap. “You. Up. Now.”

Remus sighed lazily. “Fine, but you have to jump into the leaf pile at least once.”

“No.”

“What if I push you?”

“Then I’ll beat you with the rake.”

Remus looked back at the girls. “A few weeks ago that threat would’ve been very real. So you see, progress.”

“Stuff it, Lupin,” Regulus huffed. "Now where's Potter?"

Remus shrugged. "Couldn't come. He had a dorm meeting."

Regulus puckered, but said nothing and instead reached down to grab the back of Remus’ jacket and haul him to his feet. The girls followed, eager to have another pair of hands, and eventually they’d all settled back into their chores. Three out of four of them were nicely stoned though, which made for a grand ol’ time as far as Remus was concerned.

“Our leaf pile’s getting huge,” Jillian observed later on. She'd picked up a handful of the already-raked leaves and tossed them in the air, grinning as they fell down around them.

“Stop it,” Regulus snapped, “you’re just making more work for us.”

“You could hide in it,” Jillian whispered to Remus. “Scare the next kid that walks by.”

“You do it."

“No way, you’re way scarier.”

“Yeah, but no one’s as scary as Regulus.”

They shared a covert giggle, and while Trish returned to helping Jillian on their side, Remus shuffled over to Regulus, feeling a bit too keen.

"Hey buddy."

"Don't call me buddy."

"Sure, buddy. Only wanted to say that I'm glad you showed up. What, couldn't stay away?"

"They didn't need help in the office," Regulus replied, briskly. He didn't offer any further explanation, and Remus set his rake back to work, before eventually drifting back into the other boy's field of vision.

"So… Trish's pretty cool, huh?"

Regulus gave him a sharp look. "What do you want, Lupin?"

"Nothing! But I can tell you're a little…" He searched for the right words; *"off* … around her."

"I'm not 'off'."

"Okay, sure. But you know, I could say something to her if you wanted. She and I are kinda like that." Remus foolishly twisted two fingers together, but Regulus did not look impressed.

"Not interested."

"Ha. You sound like Lily. She was the same way before she and James started dating."

"Clearly she made a mistake then. Potter's about as intelligent as this rake."

"No need to be rude," Remus said defensively. "James thinks you're cool enough, anyway. Despite how bloody mean you are."

If Remus had been paying attention, he might've noticed the way Regulus turned his face away, hiding a blush, but as it was, he was too busy planning ridiculous schemes in his head.

"Hey, I got an idea! We're gonna get hot chocolate after this. I could distract Jill, and then you and Trish could talk—"

“I don’t need to *talk* to MacDuff!”

“So defensive.”

“So annoying!”

Remus laughed dumbly. “Is chatting just not your style then? You could always write her a note. I’m sure she’d only laugh a little. Or a poem! … I just wrote a poem. Fucking embarrassing, really—gave it to Pete the other day, but he swore not to show anyone. *Oh!* You could write her a song too! You’re good at music… Or you could always—”

A pine cone hit him upside the head, and Remus gaped as Regulus readied his fist with another.

“Are you quite finished?!”

“Yeah…”

Regulus dropped the pine cone.

“But if you really wanted—”

“Bloody—enough! Are you always this stupid when you get high?”

Remus considered. “I dunno. Sometimes I’m stupider?”

“Fitting.” Regulus set his rake to the ground again, avoiding eye contact. “Say anything to MacDuff and I’ll blind you. Besides, I’m *not* interested.”

“Really? Man… somehow I’m disappointed.”

“Good. I don’t live to please the likes of *you.* Least of all when you're failing miserably at playing match-maker.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m no match-maker,” Remus snorted. “Don’t have the grit for it. Just couldn’t help but notice that your friends were giving you a hard time. Thought you might wanna talk about it.”

“I don’t, so you can forget it. They were being stupid anyway.”

“Well, they’re pretty stupid most days, so…”

“As if you can talk."

Remus edged closer, the weed giving him confidence where there usually was none. “You and Sirius have a lot in common, you know. In a good way! … You’re both really smart.”

“My brother is not *smart,"* Regulus rebuffed. "He simply possesses above-average intelligence—which he chooses to squander on rubbish like drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. There’s a stark difference.”

“So you can call him your brother!” Remus grinned, blazing past the end bit. “Good to know you have it in you.”

The younger boy puckered. “I hate him, that doesn’t make me delusional.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t hate him.”

“Don’t tell me who I hate. I hate *you.”*

“Nah, now I know you’re lying. If you hated me you would’ve moved heaven and earth just to get McGonagall to let you switch partners. You enjoyed that music class with the kids—*annnnd,* you secretly enjoy knowing that Sirius thinks about you.”

“He doesn’t think about me.”

“Sure he does. You don’t know what he tells me in private.”

“I’m sure he tells you enough.”

Remus scratched the side of his head, reminded of the reason why so many of Sirius’ relatives went into politics. They certainly had the tongue for it.

Then an idea hit him.

“Hey, Regulus, do you want to come home with us for Christmas?”

Regulus’ eyes shot wide. “Excuse me?”

“We’re going back to James’. You could come too.”

“You want me to follow you back to… to Potters’ house?!”

“Why not?”

“I could give you a thousand reasons why not.”

“Okay… but isn’t there at least one reason *to* come? You could get away for a while. See what it’s like to be happy for a change.”

If he was more sober, Remus might’ve realised that this was not the thing to say.

“You’re all the same,” Regulus said, picking up an armful of leaves. “You think anyone who’s not you must be miserable. But I don’t need to be like my brother. I know Sirius, and the phrase ‘blood is thicker than water’ only applies when he wants it to. Now do us all a favour and stop meddling.”

Remus was at a loss. He said nothing more as Regulus strolled away from him—just watched as he tossed the leaves onto their large pile.

“Where’s MacDuff?” Regulus demanded.

Jillian hid a giggle behind her hand. “I dunno.”

“She was just here! We still have half a lawn left to rake.”

“Maybe she needed to use the lav.”

Regulus scoffed, probably well on his way to chastising his classmate for skiving off, when Trish suddenly burst forth from the pile—scattering leaves everywhere and screaming blue murder. The fright was enough to leave Regulus gasping for breath, but by then Trish was already bent over and laughing herself to tears.

“Your face!” She howled. “You should’ve seen your face!”

“You—! How dare you!"

“ ‘How dare I’? Crivvens, who are you, my gran?”

“I’m the only sane one here apparently!” Regulus shouted back. “God, it’s like taking care of children! Can’t you people do anything right?!”

“You’d be surprised, *o’ m’laird,”* Trish replied, crossing her arms over her chest. “Maybe if you came down from yer high horse every now ‘n then you’d see the world like us wee folk do.”

“And I suppose you think that’s rather smart of you!”

“Tis certainly getting under your skin well enough.”

Regulus fumed. “Why anyone would ever like you, I’ll never

understand!"

"Oi, oi," Remus called, stepping in between them. "C'mon, Reg. That's a bit uncalled for, don't you think?"

He hadn't expected the shove, but it came anyway and Remus had to stumble to avoid crashing straight into Trish.

"MY NAME IS REGULUS!"

The shout cut deep, and Remus was instantly sorry, but Regulus didn't give him time to apologise. He turned, kicking his rake out of his path, and tore off across the lawn in a fit.

"Bleedin' Christ, he's really unhinged, isn't he?" Jillian said after. "Are you alright, Remus?"

"Yeah, no harm, no foul," he huffed, stepping out of the pile of foliage and dusting the leaves off of his trousers.

"And you?" Jillian asked, wrapping an arm around Trish's shoulders. The younger girl leaned into her friend, her usual vigour depleted to nothing.

"Didnae mean to make him so mad… Sorry, guys, now we've gotta rake the rest of this ourselves."

Jillian pat her partner's head softly, like a big sister might. "Don't worry, Trishy. Regulus Black is just an old sour puss. Who'd want to be liked by a boy like him anyway?"

Remus didn't say it, but the look on Trish's face did not seem very comforted.

* * *

Friday 18th November 1977 – The Day Following…

It was only lunchtime, and Remus Lupin was not in a good mood.

Not only had Peter neglected to return his poem on time, but that morning he'd gotten roped into his second prefect project of the week. Sheila had come to him at the last second and requested that he and Regulus cover the fifth years' music class again. If it'd been anyone

else he might've said no, but Sheila had probably known that, so that's why she'd asked him. On his way over to the primary campus, Remus had been sceptical of seeing Regulus so soon after their spat. He'd considered how he might go about apologising for stepping so far over the line, but apparently he'd worried for nothing.

Regulus had not shown.

"Blimey, you look… well, fucking terrible actually," Sirius said, when Remus reappeared for lunch, indeed looking haggard and grumpy. He sat, groaning as he attempted to stretch the kinks from his neck. Luckily, James was well versed in muscle tension. He leaned over and began working the knots from Remus' shoulders with those magic fingers of his.

"Ah, thanks," Remus sighed. "Lifesaver."

James waved him off kindly, and Lily slid a cup of tea toward him. "Are you really okay, Remus? Sirius is right, you look awful."

"Do I? No wonder, I've been run ragged by a bunch of nine year-olds all morning. Now does anyone else care to tell me how bad I look?"

"Could be worse," James offered; "You could be tutoring them in maths."

"Oh yes, that's what I did," Lily finished, smiling brightly.

"Thank god for the little things…"

"Hi, Remus."

Remus turned around. The table behind theirs held a large group of girls, all of whom were looking at him with curious grins on their faces. He couldn't tell which of them had called out to him, but they seemed to be waiting for something. Bewildered, Remus flashed them a meek wave, and suddenly all of the girls squealed a bit before turning back to one another, heads tucked tightly together.

"What was that about?" Sirius murmured.

"Dunno…"

"Maybe you're getting a fan club," James teased. As he did, another girl passed by behind him.

"Hey, Remus," she called, brushing her long hair off one shoulder.

“Er… Hi.”

She didn’t stop, just carried on with a sly look on her face, but Sirius looked after her.

“That was Pepper Doyle,” he said with an air of surprise. “What’s Pepper Doyle doing saying hi to you?”

“I don’t know!” Remus insisted. “Did you guys do something while I was with the primaries?”

All of them shook their heads.

“Tell the truth!”

“They didn’t do anything,” Lily swore. “Potter was with me in Politics and… well, I can’t say for Sirius.”

Sirius scoffed; “I actually went to class today, thank you very much. Had a Latin quiz and everything. Aced it.”

“Does that mean, you carpe diem-ed the day?” James snorted.

Sirius opened his mouth to answer, but all that came out was;

“Hi, Remus.”

This time they didn’t even know which direction the hello had come from, but as they all whipped their heads around to check, Remus suddenly realised that they’d amassed an audience. Girls had crowded in like a swarm of crows—even some guys were craning their necks to get a look. Before Remus could question it, he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Andrea Sapsford. She and Remus had History together, though Andrea made a point of sitting near the front of the classroom so they’d rarely ever talked. Now she was standing beside his table, clutching a piece of paper across her stomach so tightly it looked about ready to tear in half.

“H–Hi, Remus,” she said nervously.

“Hi, Andrea. Is… that today’s homework or something?”

“Oh no, it’s…” She bit her lip, and Remus could sense all of his friends leaning in—Sirius most of all. “Well, I figured that I just had to say something. What you did was so nice and all.”

Remus looked at Sirius. He had no idea what he could’ve ever done to

Andrea Sapsford to be considered 'nice'.

“You know I’m actually sort of seeing Oliver Paice right now,” she continued, “but if you’re interested then maybe we could hang out as friends and… oh," she giggled nervously; "I dunno... See where it goes?”

She smiled after, and Remus blinked very quickly.

“I’m sorry?”

Andrea glanced down at the paper, biting her lip. “Maybe I’m jumping the gun, but no girl could resist such a sweet gesture.”

Sirius was on his feet in a second, snatching the notepaper from Andrea and looking down at it. For a moment nothing was said, but Remus knew he was in trouble the moment Sirius’ eyes widened.

“… Holy shit.”

“What?” He clambered after him. “Sirius, what is it?”

“Er—” Sirius shook his head frantically. “No... don’t think you want to see this, Moons.”

Remus felt dread wash over him. “Give it here!” He cried, as Sirius ducked around the other side of the table. On the way, James managed to snatch the paper from him and turned it over, eyes turning to saucers in shock.

“Bloody hell. Is this what I think it is?”

“Can I have that back please?” Andrea shrieked.

“Oi!” Someone else called. This time it was a guy. Remus didn't even know his name, but that didn't stop him from storming up with a paper of his own and waving it beneath his nose.

“Lupin!" He cried. "What d’you think you’re doing giving something like this to my girl?”

“Wha... What girl?”

“My girl! You trying to sweep her out from under me, you thick nob?”

“Huh?”

Andrea stepped up. “Remus, you mean you gave it to someone else too?”

“Gave what?!”

“Moons—” Sirius got between him and the angry boy. “Moons, something’s happened. It's your poem, I think it might’ve…”

Remus gaped. “My poem?”

“Are you dating someone else or are you not, Remus?” Andrea demanded.

“Yes—I mean, no!”

“Then who was this poem meant for?”

He hadn’t the time to answer; just then Mary and Lottie rushed the table. “Remus!” Mary gasped; “You must tell us—did you actually write this?”

Remus threw his arms out. *“WRITE WHAT?!”*

“The poem!” Lottie gushed. “It’s so beautiful! Like, I might actually have to fall in love with you after all!”

This got Sirius’ attention. He snatched Angry Boyfriend's paper and dashed toward the girls, taking the one from Lottie so he could compare.

“It’s the same! It’s the same, and…” a smile split Sirius’ face; “Oh Moons, I *knew* you could write poetry!”

Remus did not wait for permission. Horrified, he all but launched himself across the dining table and snatched the first paper from James’ hands, turning it over. What stared back at him was the single most embarrassing piece of work he’d ever created—*his own love poem.* And the words were not just hand-written in pencil anymore, they’d been transformed into ink. Solid, permanent, unerasable ink.

Someone had copied his poem.

No, no, no, no, no—NO!

“Fuck!” Remus cried. “Mary, where did you get this?!”

She looked affronted. “Rochelle from history gave it to me.”

“Where did *she* get it?”

“I don’t know! But tons of girls had a copy, I assumed you gave it to them.”

“Are you insane? Why would I give this to *anyone?!”*

As Mary baulked, Remus put his head in his hands. *Shit! Shit! Fucking shit!*

Across from them, Sirius covered his mouth as though he were afraid Remus might catch him laughing. “It’s not that bad, Moons,” he reasoned. “Really, it’s a good poem! A new classic, even.”

“You!” Remus lashed, seeing red. “You did this!”

Sirius dropped his arm. “Me?”

“YES! You fucking did this, didn’t you!”

“How could I have done it? You wouldn’t even let me see it until now!”

“It had to be you! It had to be because it’s *always* you, and you were the one who—!” Suddenly Remus broke off. *No,* it couldn’t have been Sirius, because Sirius wasn’t the one who… *blithering fuck.*

“Where is he?!” Remus barked, furiously scanning the room.

“ ‘Who’?!” Everyone asked at once.

“PETER! PETER PETTIGREW, WHERE ARE YOU?!”

“I’m here!” Peter strolled leisurely up to the table, lunch tray in hand. “What’s everyone shouting about?”

He glanced around, but upon finding no smiles to greet him, Peter’s good mood quickly vanished. All he needed was to see the look on Remus’ face and the paper in his hands to connect the dots.

“… Oh shit.”

“YOU!”

Remus was throwing himself on Peter in a second. The poor boy didn’t even have time to put his tray down before the entire thing plummeted to the linoleum after Remus had tackled him round his

middle and sent them both flying.

“YOU TOLD ME YOU WOULDN’T GIVE IT TO ANYONE!”

“I DIDN’T!” Peter shrieked. “I DIDN’T!”

“THEN HOW THE FUCK DID IT END UP WITH ROCHELLE FROM HISTORY?!”

“Lupin! Lupin, that’s enough!” James barked, grappling Remus around the middle and trying to haul him off. He hadn’t hit Peter yet, but they’d wrestled a good ways across the floor, drawing a crowd of at least two dozen students, all of them cradling their books and bags as they stared on in sick fascination. Beyond them, the girls urged him to stop, but Remus’ anger had tapped into an unknown strength. Shoving James off, he used his legs to pin Peter in place before bending over him like an animal readying itself for the kill.

“WHO’D YOU GIVE IT TO?!”

“No one!” Peter wailed. “I swear!”

“THEN HOW’D IT GET OUT?!”

“Someone stole it from his bag!”

The cry came from Moira, who pushed through the crowd to come to her boyfriend’s aid. She started by batting Remus with her English text, looking even more furious than he was.

“He didn’t hand out your shitty poem—someone took it!” She spat. “Now get off him, you bloody brute!”

Remus acquiesced, albeit reluctantly, and Peter slowly staggered back to his feet.

“I was gonna give it back to you, honest!” He insisted; “But then I went to check my bag this morning and it wasn’t there! I thought I’d lost it so I started tearing our room apart—but I swear, Moony, someone must’ve taken it and given it away!”

“Who would give away a fucking poem, Peter?!”

“Hah! I wonder!"

The single laugh cut through the dining hall like a knife. Remus knew who it was instantly. All he had to do was turn, and the crowd parted

around Barty like the Red Sea.

“Gotta be honest,” the nasty boy sneered, “didn’t think a single piece ‘a paper would get you so rattled, but I guess obsessing over girly stuff like this just comes with the territory, *Loony.”*

Remus was moving again. This was it—he was finally going to kill Barty Crouch.

“Woah, there!” Sirius grunted, grabbing a hold of Remus’ arm just as he raised it to give Barty the beating of his life. “Save it for the ring, big guy!”

"Get out of my way, Sirius!"

Somewhere further off, a few kids had begun chanting.

'Fight! Fight!'

"What's a'matter, Looooony?" Barty sang; "Getting a bit slow?"

Remus raged, as James grabbed his other arm and Lily even came between them.

“Remus, don’t!”

”Ooh, I’m so scared! Someone call for a teacher, Lupin’s gone rogue!”

“I’m going to murder you, you little shit!”

“Nice talk coming from a prefect!” Snape heckled, appearing on the sidelines like a leech.

“PISS OFF!”

“Remus, please calm down!” Lily begged. “It’s just one poem! I’ll bet nobody’s even seen it!”

“Don’t be too sure about that, charity girl,” Barty sniggered. The little coward had slipped several arm’s lengths away as if he could still remember the sting of Remus’ fist from the last time they’d gone toe to toe. “That bird from your piddly history class might’ve been one of the first to receive her letter, but she wasn’t the last. I should feel more at loss—best revenge ever and it wasn’t even my idea!”

Remus couldn’t believe his ears. He thought about ripping his friends off just to try and trounce Barty again, but reality had already sunk in.

All around them kids were holding books and homework papers—except they weren't papers at all. They were poems—*his poem.* At least thirty people were standing right there, reading his love poem *right in front of him.* And he couldn't do a thing to stop it.

"Don't read that!" Marlene said, coming to her senses first and ripping a paper out of the hands of the girl closest to her. Her gesture seemed to bring all of his friends to life at the same time, and the girls and Peter went about the room, taking back every copy of the poem they could get their hands on. It still wasn't enough. The dining hall was one room out of hundreds, and they numbered just eight. Remus wasn't even done processing Barty's words. *Not my idea. Not my idea.*

But whose?!

And then it hit him. Of course. Naturally. A long game—just like the girls on Halloween. Perhaps one that had never stopped.

Not my idea.

Remus turned. He found him sitting in the same spot, but this time when he looked, Regulus looked back. *This time,* Regulus Black set down his fork and folded his hands neatly in his lap, mouth forming just a single word.

Checkmate.

Chapter End Notes

Song sung is "Cover of the Rolling Stone" Dr. Hook, 1972.

& because someone on tumblr said they liked it, here is a link to a playlist inspired by Tonya. Not necessarily period-accurate, but accurate as to how I see her. Much love <3

Chapter 80: Repercussions

Chapter Summary

> Crazy girls. Magic mushrooms. Extortion. Dead bodies...? Just your average Monday, honestly.

Chapter Notes

> This felt a bit like a "transitionary" chapter. Lots of tiny moments merged into one. I hope you get a few good chuckles out of it though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What would you think if I sang out of tune?
Would you stand up and walk out on me?
Lend me your ears and I'll sing you a song,
And I'll try not to sing out of key;

Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends,
Mmm, I get high with a little help from my friends,
Ooh, I'm gonna try with a little help from my friends...

- "With a Little Help from My Friends" The Beatles, 1967

Sunday 19 th November 1977

That morning, Remus Lupin awoke to the sounds of his friends' whispering.

"What d'you think it is?"

"A dead body, probably."

"But it's broad daylight. How could you dig up a body in broad daylight?"

"I dunno. I've never actually done it myself, Wormtail."

"Reckon they were murdered?"

"Totally. Ever hear about them twelfth year kids that went missing like ten years ago? Supposedly most of 'em were found floating in the lake, but

alas, the last body was never recovered…"

"You're so full of shit, Sirius."

Remus sat up in bed, pushing his curtains aside. "What are you twats on about now?"

His friends spun around. All three Marauders were crowded around the window between James and Sirius' beds, apparently engrossed in whatever was going on outside.

"Sorry, Moons. Did we wake you?" James asked.

"Yeah." Remus paused to yawn. "But that ain't much different from any other day."

Eager as ever, Sirius bounded across the room toward him. "Come take a look! Filch's digging something up behind the dorm."

"What is it?"

"Who knows? Just come look!"

Remus let himself be pulled, blinking in the morning's bright light. He didn't have to crane his neck much to be able to see the deep pit that was now taking up much of the green space on the dorm's back lawn. He saw no sign of Filch, but every now and then a shovel would reappear, tossing dirt up onto the pit's ledge.

"Old codger must've been at it for half the night," Peter said. "The ground's almost frozen and that hole must be over ten feet deep."

"I wish I knew what he was looking for," Sirius said.

"I think your wish is about to come true, Padfoot!" James said. "Looks like Filch is done digging."

A few moments went by, and all four boys leaned in even closer, practically climbing onto Sirius' hutch and stereo to catch a glimpse. Rather unceremoniously, Filch reappeared from the pit on a wooden ladder, bringing with him a large metal canister about the size of a small dog. Sirius was instantly disappointed.

"That's it?" He moaned. "All that digging for a bloody rubbish bin?"

"It could still have a body in it!" Peter suggested.

“Oh yeah? You show me the psychopath who bumped off a sprog.”

James gave a yawn, stretching one hand up to the sky and scratching his stomach with the other. “Not very exciting, oh well. Let’s just get dressed before we’re late for church.”

“I’m gonna go grab some fresh towels for a shower since Black used them all again,” Peter said, starting for the door. He’d only been quiet for a moment before; *“Mooooony,* they’re back again.”

Remus’ stomach sank. He’d just wrestled his night shirt up over his head and when he tore it away, he found Peter standing next to their bedroom door. Pinned to the outside wood were several dozen notes, each one printed in pretty pink lettering, cut into the shape of hearts and penned for him personally. It wasn’t even that they were suddenly in love with him—they wanted to tease as much as the guys did. The only difference was how much more determined they were to get his attention.

“These bloody girls,” Sirius huffed, stepping forward and pulling one of the larger love notes down. “ ‘To Remus, I just *adored* your poem. Would you write one to me sometime? Love Audriana, Bronte House’.”

Remus marched over. “Give me that.” He tore the note in two.

“Harsh,” Sirius said, the word ‘pleased’ written all over his face. He plucked down another, but when Remus made a swipe for it, he pulled his hand away.

“Uh-uh. You’re in your casanova era now, if I didn’t get any privacy then neither do you.”

“You never wanted any. You're like a bloody exhibitionist!”

Sirius cackled, then peeled down a handful of the love notes and threw them up in the air. “Better grab a coat, Moons, looks like there’s a chance of snow.”

“Ugh!” Remus grunted, batting the notes away as they fluttered down around him. “This is so stupid. They’re doing it on purpose.”

“Obviously, but some of them are actually pretty good,” Peter said, busy sorting through a handful of notes on his own. “Like look—pretty sure this one’s quoting Shakespeare. And this one here almost makes it sound as though you’re dating her.”

“I’m not dating *any* of them,” Remus said sternly.

“Of course you aren’t, Moons,” James announced, pulling his own shirt over his head and tossing it into the laundry bin by his bed. “I think I’d know if one of my best friends was dating someone.”

Sirius snorted, and then quickly covered his face with the love note to hide it. He lasted about half a second before he was recoiling over a cough. *“Eugh!* She’s bloody perfumed it!”

Peter and James began to laugh, but Remus wasn’t feeling very jolly.

“Enough of this nonsense,” he ordered, stepping forward and shoving both of his friends aside. He ripped the love notes down with vicious speed, letting them fall to the ground like broken birds’ wings. *Majorie, Audriana, Cindy, Kelly-Anne*—all of them, broken hopes only meant to badger him. It’d been like that since Friday, an incessant string of teasing that followed him everywhere. *Literally followed.* He’d been expecting the mockery from other guys, but the girls were by far the worst. On Saturday, they’d tailed him and Sirius across the entire village as though he were John Lennon at the height of Beatlemania. It hadn’t even mattered that Remus was without a penny to his name —there was no time to spend it. They’d tried going on down to the record shop, only to be swarmed by girls clutching Rita Coolidge and Elton John albums to their chests. Now it was Sunday, and they'd be expected to brave the horde for that morning’s mass. Remus had never resented religious institutions more.

At least his actual boyfriend was taking it well, he reminded himself. It could’ve so easily become a fight, but almost predictably, Sirius thought the entire thing was hilarious. After the mess at the music shop, they spent the remained of their village trip hiding out in some farmer’s barn. Which meant they were alone at least.

“It’s like you’re already famous. Imagine how they’d react if they really knew the truth,” Sirius had mused, while lounging across a hay bale like some barn cat. Alternatively, Remus had remained camped out by the doors, peeking out to make sure they hadn’t been followed.

“Hey.”

Remus turned around. Sirius had his shirt unbuttoned to the navel, a piece of straw sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

“What are you…?”

“Hay,” Sirius said again, cheekily waving a handful of straw at him. “It’s pretty soft, you know. Maybe even soft enough to…” He turned over arching his back until he was just peeking over his shoulder at him. What came after was enough to make Remus glad he’d latched the door. Now, he was staring at Sirius and reliving the memory in his head. *You certainly can’t do* that *in London…*

“Hey. Hey, Moons?” Sirius snapped his fingers at him. “You-hoo…?”

“Yep,” Remus replied, dumbly. While he’d gotten left behind thinking of Sirius’ behind, his friends had already moved on.

“I still don’t know how they’ve been getting inside without anyone seeing,” he heard Peter murmur, as he stepped out to retrieve his towels. James had already taken the opportunity to disappear into the bathroom, leaving Remus and Sirius on their own, still buried up to their ankles in pretty pink paper.

“You’re sure we can’t bump him off?” Sirius asked.

Remus blinked, alarmed. “Who?”

“Reg, obviously.”

Oh. “We’re not bumping off your brother,” he sighed. “Besides, don’t tell me you’re already done laughing at my pain.”

“Not by half. But just because it’s funny watching you run around like a chicken with its head cut off doesn’t mean I don’t want to bury that little shit six feet under.” Sirius smirked and shut the door. “It’s like, my entire life Reg’s been on my arse for rocking the boat, and now he’s managed to get *my* boyfriend about a hundred girlfriends overnight. It’s utter blasphemy.”

“I think you’re exaggerating a bit.”

“Am I?” He bent down to pick up one of the love notes. “ ‘Cause this one says she wants to have your babies.”

Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. “I wish I’d never written that fucking poem. Letting Flitwick fail me would still be better than this.”

“Well, I dunno about that.” Turning the note over, Sirius began peeling it apart as it's sparkled seams. It had a piece of his poem glued inside. “You never really said… but I wouldn’t be all wrong if I assumed that you wrote this for me, would I?”

Remus snatched the note away. “You were never supposed to *see* it.”

“Hm. Sounds like a waste.” He leaned in, and Remus knew it was going to be a kiss.

“BLACK! You been using my toothpaste again?”

They jumped apart, turning to glare at the bathroom door.

“You said I could!”

“I know, but at least put the bloody cap back on, man!”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Idiot.” He passed Remus by, leaving a quick peck on the corner of his mouth as he went to the stereo and flicked it on. It was the Ramones album—the one James had mercifully picked up while on his date with Lily the day before. All girls aside, Remus had enjoyed himself; going around Craigtyre, pretending as though they could be on a date the same as their friends… it was nice. It made him think of summer. It made him *long.* Remus had never known what real longing was before Sirius.

He looked down at the love note in his hand. At the piece of his poem, just a scrap really, all made up of longing.

How wonderful it would be
To one day feel your love and care
On a public street

“Oi.”

Remus glanced up. Sirius was still by the stereo, a lit cigarette in one hand.

“Found the perfect place to hide the body,” he chaffed, gesturing out the open window with his thumb, toward Filch’s pit. “Just in case you’re coming around to the idea.”

“I’m still paying for your last great idea where Regulus was concerned.”

“Well, in that case, prepare to be paying for the rest of your life.” Sirius smirked at him and began scratching behind his ear. He snorted then, before unweaving a thin piece of straw from his hair. “Hey—more *hay.”*

Remus smiled—hopelessly.

"You idiot."

Sirius winked, holding the cigarette just before his lips. "Love you too."

* * *

Remus waited outside during breakfast. He did not want to deal with the chorusing *'hi, Remus'* so early in the morning. Luckily he had Sirius who was willing to brave the fight for him. He emerged through the dining hall's back doors with a buttered crumpet in one hand and a styrofoam cup of tea in the other.

"Audriana Vane practically throttled me just now. She's still trying to figure out who you wrote the poem for," he said, handing the food over. "Apparently word's out of the bag about Farrah. No one believes you saved a stunning French model from the Seine anymore, Moons."

"How will I ever recover?" Remus replied sarcastically, scarfing down the crumpet.

"Maybe we should just skip commmunion," Sirius said, watching him.

Remus was ready to agree, but just then the doors behind Sirius burst open and several girls rushed out. Among them was Audriana Vane, who saw the two of them and immediately lit up. Remus was pretty sure she hadn't even known he existed before all of the nonsense began—but then again, he'd never paid her any attention either.

"Reeeemus!" She keened. "So glad we found you, did you get our letters this morning?"

Remus sipped his tea awkwardly, resisting a grimace when it burnt his tongue.

"He got them, alright," Sirius answered instead.

"Do you want to walk over to the chapel together?" Audriana offered, while the girls behind her giggled furiously. "You can come too, Sirius."

"How generous," Sirius said. "But Lupin and I were just—"

“There you are!” It was Marlene, emerging through the doors with Nicole beside her. “C’mon, you lazy sods, we’re going to be late for church.”

As embarrassing as it was, Remus was thankful for Marlene’s interruption. She and Nicole walked them over to the school church, arm and arm with him and Sirius. Their presence alone seemed to deter the girls, who walked several paces behind and whispered to one another furiously.

“Perhaps they're thinking that you and Moony got back together, McKinnon,” Sirius said, Nicole clutched onto his other arm.

“That’d be their mistake then,” Nicole said. “And Marlene’s, considering what she’s said about how Remus used to kiss her.”

“I only said you were shy!” Marlene laughed, when Remus rounded on her.

“I don’t think he’s very shy,” Sirius smirked. “In fact, just yesterday when we were in the village—”

Nicole held up a hand. “I don’t wanna know.”

The girls left them outside the church, where they managed to find James and Peter amongst the rabble waiting to get inside. Remus hated the cold, and therefore had bundled up in several layers, but he’d also brought a book with him in hopes that it would deter anyone from talking to him. It did not.

“That a new book of poems, Lupin?” One boy called. Remus flipped him the bird.

“Hi, Remus,” another girl cooed, before she was promptly chased off by Audriana and her friends. The group had insisted on hovering nearby, and made sure to glare at any girl who dare get too close. At one point Audriana happened to catch him staring and flashed him a dazzling smile, but it was not her Remus was looking at. Just over her shoulder, Regulus Black was waiting his turn to get inside. He’d also brought a book, and though Yaxley was trying to say something to him, Regulus kept on reading—blocking him out as though it were as easy as breathing.

Annoyed, Remus turned back to his friends, determined that if Regulus could tune the world out, he could do it twice as well. Next to him, Sirius was stuck on a tangent—busy going on about the

importance of what he was calling a ‘rock and roll’ death.

“I’m just saying,” he drawled. “If we’re all gonna go out one day, we might as well make a big show of it. When’s the last time you heard of a rock star dying peacefully in his sleep? And I don’t mean from an overdose—mean, old and wrinkly, smelling of farts.”

“People die of natural causes all the time,” Peter reasoned. “Doesn’t make them boring.”

Sirius ignored him; “Ooh! How ‘bout a plane crash? You know, like Buddy Holly and Richie Valens. Think of it, they could call it ‘the day music died—*again’!”*

“How about you stop predicting our deaths and start reciting your morning prayers for once,” James replied snidely.

“Planes not your style, Potter? Okay, how ‘bout electrocution? You could just touch the mike stand with wet hands or something! Happened to the lead singer of the Yardbirds, and he got a candle-light vigil!”

James shoved Sirius away by the face, stifling the other boy’s sniggering.

“I would’ve thought it was more ‘rock and roll’ to get addicted to heroin,” Peter said, pulling up the collar of his wool coat to ward off the chill.

“No way,” Sirius scoffed. “I ain’t going out like Elvis or Morrison, choking on my own vomit on the bathroom floor. Put me on a motorbike and send me off the edge of the M25. That’s how one of the Allman Brothers died.”

“Morrison died in a bathtub,” Remus corrected, without looking up from his book.

“I thought they just found him *in* the bathtub.”

“So you think he died, got up and then got into the tub?”

“… Alright, touché, Lupin.”

Remus glanced up, feeling sly. “If you don’t like bathtubs, you could always wrap your car around a tree like Bolan.”

Sirius clapped a hand over his heart. *“Ooof.* Still too soon, Moons.

We'll see who's laughing when one of the Who up and keel over."

Remus shrugged, unbothered. To him, dossers like Pete Townshend and Keith Moon felt as close as you could get to being immortal. People would be playing their music forever. Or, people with taste, anyway.

Eventually the chapel doors opened and everyone began to file inside. Remus hung back purposely, and noted that Audriana and her girlfriends had as well. Not wanting to risk getting stuck beside them, he looked around desperately until Lily, Mary, and Lottie appeared.

"Still warding off your many admirers, Remus?" Lottie teased.

"Yes," he said through his teeth, "and if you'd help me, I'd much appreciate it."

They managed to grab their usual spot amongst the back-most pews, but it was a high demand area among the other sixth form students, and by the time Audriana had caught up to them, the pew was full. She moved on down the aisle, looking ruffled, but made sure to turn around in her seat to wave at him. Remus purposely buried his nose in his book.

"Alright, Evans?" James said, as Lily fit herself in between him and Remus.

"Alright, Potter." She smiled, and then kissed him.

"Don't I get one?" Sirius blagged. Lily scoffed at him, but kissed his cheek anyway. "Morning to you too, Remus."

"Morning."

She tapped his book. "That for class or for fun?"

"Class. We're supposed to have it read by Monday but I've been putting it off."

"Doesn't sound like you." Sirius reached over, taking the book. " 'Medea'. Oh shit, this the one we're supposed to read for Bilshin?"

Remus snatched it back, determined not to let Sirius lose him his second novel in one week. "Yes, now find your own."

Sirius shrugged indifferently. "Wasn't gonna read it anyway. Summarise it for me later?"

“No,” Remus said, knowing he would. Next to him, Mary turned around in her seat, looking distressed.

“Has anyone seen Marlene? I’m starting to get worried. This is like the second time she’s skipped church this term. That’s worrying for her, right?”

“Get your knickers out of a twist,” Lottie said; “She’s right there.” She pointed, and they all looked up to find Marlene sitting a few rows ahead with Nicole next to her.

“I don’t get it,” Mary grumbled. “Why’s she always going off with that twelfth year these days?”

“They’re friends,” Remus said quickly, sparing a tentative glance in Sirius’ direction. Apparently this was not the answer Mary was looking for. She slumped back into the pew, arms crossed over her chest. He knew Mary could be covetous when it came to her friends, but it was even more so with her bestest and oldest friend. She’d probably thought she’d never have to worry about Marlene leaving her, since she was so rarely interested in other people. Remus couldn’t find it in himself to be sympathetic; if Mary was allowed her ever-revolving group of darlings, then Marlene deserved someone that liked her that way too.

“OOOH! Look who it is!”

A voice rang out from the pew behind them. It was Michael Baelish, a thick-headed idiot who’d never gotten higher than an ‘acceptable’ on any essay he’d ever written. No one seemed all that impressed when he began making a scene, but he’d certainly gotten enough kids to turn and look.

“What’s that,” Michael taunted again; “Remus Lupin—here? *Why*… shouldn’t you be off signing your many manuscripts?”

“Do you even know what a manuscript is, Baelish?” Sirius scoffed.

Michael ignored him, turning instead to his best friend and the equally as thick, Eli Barbary. “Barbary, mate—‘shall I compare thee to a summer’s day’?” He said. “Or I know, I’ll just ask Lupin to tell you that ‘your eyes are like diamonds, your arms a brace to hold me when I feel ill’!”

“Stop! Please don’t, my heart simply cannot bear it!” Eli wailed, before getting to his feet and dramatically ‘fainting’ over Remus’ back.

“Back off, Barbary!” James barked.

“Yeah, get the fuck away from him!” Sirius grunted, as he and Remus pushed the other boy back into his own pew. Eli didn’t seem to mind much. He simply sat up and laughed along with several other kids until Sheila strolled up the row, carrying a small armful of sheet music for the choir.

“Eli, Michael,” she smiled. “I was just looking for someone to help me carry these papers. They are so dreadfully heavy. Will you join me at the front of the hall?”

Eli and Michael both looked reluctant, but all it took was a bit more prodding to get them moving. They went first up the aisle, and Sheila stopped at the end of their pew just long enough to slide a single paper from her stack and pass it along to Remus.

“I’m not your English teacher, but if I were, you’d have gotten top marks.”

Remus gaped. As she left, he turned the paper over to find a copy of his poem with the words, *‘Absolutely brilliant!’* printed along the bottom. He was horrified.

“I heard even McGonagall got a copy,” Lottie whispered. “But don’t worry. She said it was entirely inappropriate to acknowledge such admiration from a student. Think that means you’re in the clear.”

“Gee, thanks a lot, Lot.”

“You can come back to our dorm after church,” Lily offered. “Marlene’s gonna meet me there. We were gonna study.”

Remus reluctantly glanced in the direction of Audriana and her friends.

“They aren’t in our House,” Lily said, catching the look. “We’ll smuggle you back under the blanket if need be. No one’ll tease you there.”

“Okay,” Remus nodded.

“And what about us?” Sirius protested. “You’re not going to offer James and I a chance to study?”

“You know the rules, Black. Neither of you are prefects, and asking

you to study is like asking you to pull your own teeth out."

"Studying is a made-up concept. Like time. We just exist—what happens to pass through my brain and get stuck is none of my business."

"I think A-Levels would disagree."

After communion got out, Remus promptly ditched his friends to follow the girls back to their place. He was happy for the peace and quiet, but that didn't mean Sirius wasn't going to try and badger. He'd gotten around Lily's stringent House rules by standing outside the open common room window and leaning his arms against the sill. It let the cold in, but Remus couldn't resist it when he'd call him over.

"We could drown him," Sirius suggested. He was back on his rousing parenthesis from that morning, newly invigorated by all the ways they might get back at Regulus for his gross betrayal.

"No."

"We could slightly maim him?"

"No."

"We could… spank him like the naughty boy he is?"

Remus considered. "Maybe."

"Really?"

"No."

Sirius huffed, dropping his chin down on the windowsill. "I hate when you're like this."

"No, you don't," Remus said, a wry smirk on his lips. "You think it's charming and it gets you hot and bothered. That's why I do it."

Sirius bit his bottom lip, looking amused. "Tart," he said, smirking right back. "Still, you were so mad when it happened—what's changed?"

What's changed is I found out Regulus did it.

Remus pinched his forehead. "Starting a prank war with Regulus isn't going to turn out well for any of us—*especially* me. Did you forget I

still have to spend the rest of the year as his prefect partner?"

"Of course I didn't forget. You remind me *every* day. I just wish I knew how the tosser did it."

"I know how he did it—prefects have access to the photocopiers. Ten quid says he skipped out on music lessons with me to steal the poem off Peter, then got his slimy friends to distribute them." And really, Remus couldn't even bring himself to hate him all that much. The entire plot was genius—a social murder, if you would; something he'd initially thought beyond the morals of a one Regulus Black. But he should've known better.

Never underestimate a Black.

"We need to get him back," said Sirius

"We did get him back. Last June."

"Ugh! I miss angry Moony—sensible Moony's no fun. That little prat really fucked you up, you know."

"Did he? Didn't notice." Remus sighed, dropping his head forward. "I just want to forget about it. It'll be holidays in a few weeks anyway, then Regulus'll be old news."

Sirius set his jaw, like he wanted to argue but couldn't find the right words. "Come away with me," he said finally, fingers just brushing the cuff of Remus' sleeve.

"I'm studying," Remus answered, though not entirely untempted. "You should try it. We do have mock exams starting next week, you know."

"Stuff the studying. They're called 'mock exams' for a reason, let's go mock 'em. You're smart enough to ace any bloody test without even trying."

"Sirius—"

"Please…? Come on! Come away with me, and we'll plot a horrible prank to get back at that miserable brother of mine. It'll be brilliant."

Remus was almost considering it, but then Lily appeared over his shoulder and thrust a pencil at the tip of Sirius' nose to ward him off.

"Not a chance! We are *studying!* And if you're not also here to study, then you're here to distract. So off with you, Romeo."

Sirius teetered back onto the grass with a laugh, one hand over his wounded heart. “ ‘O, sweet Evans, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?’”

That was it for Remus. He pulled away from the window, already shouting; “Please, no more fucking poetry!” And Lily beamed proudly.

“You heard him,” she told Sirius, grabbing the window latches and pulling them closed. “Bye bye, baby!”

“ ‘Good night, good night’,” Sirius called woefully, “ ‘Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be—’”

The window shut, and Lily pulled the curtains together for good measure before stopping to dust off her hands. “There, finally some quiet.” She came to join him on the rug, their things already spread out on the coffee table between the sofa and fire. They were alone save the other girls distantly scattered about the room with studying of their own. This included Marlene, who was tucked up on a nearby sofa, long legs and Spanish homework set across the other cushions.

“I see he’s feeling needy today,” she teased, tossing a knowing glance in Remus’ direction.

“He wants to get back at Regulus.”

“Can you blame him? That was cold and underhanded, what Regulus did. Not cool at all.”

“I know.” And he did. Already Remus had pictured what it might be like to take Regulus apart piece by piece. The little git probably had a shrivelled up prune for a heart.

“But you aren’t really going to do anything to him, right?” Lily cut-in. “I feel bad for Regulus most days, and besides, going after him now would only put you on the same depraved level.”

“Nothing wrong with being a little depraved,” Marlene mused. “As long as no one gets seriously injured, I don’t see the problem.”

“Who are you and what have you done with Marlene McKinnon?”

Marlene uncapped her middle finger like a lipstick and drew it across her lips. Lily gave her a dirty look for the gesture—then giggled, muttering the words ‘you’re horrible’ before shaking her head and returning to her work. In answer, Marlene capped her finger again and

winked at Remus.

“Nicole and I overheard those guys really having a go at you in church. You holding up alright?”

“I’m over it,” he lied.

“Oh? Does this mean you’re finally enjoying your newfound popularity?”

Remus flicked his rubber at her. “Popularity can kiss my arse.”

“Aw, poor Remus. You should beat them up. Show them how romantic you can be while pounding their faces in.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’ll solve all my problems.”

“It’ll solve a few.”

“No, it won’t,” Lily said, barely glancing up from her notes. “You’ll just be giving them exactly what they want. They wouldn’t be so entertained in the first place if you hadn’t lost your head in the dining hall like you did.”

Remus grumbled; “Do you have to start every conversation with an ‘I told you so’?”

“I’m only saying that if you act like you don’t care then they’re bound to lose interest eventually. I’d give it a try if I were you.”

“That might be good advice, except someone has to give them something more interesting to talk about first,” Marlene added snidely.

“In that case, shall I chat-up Chastity?” Remus quipped, making her scowl lightly as she licked her thumb and turned the page.

“Alright, Remus,” Lily started, reaching over to pluck his notes from his hands; “What started the War of the Roses and what repercussions did it have on feudal England at the time?”

If he’d been really listening, he might have been able to answer, but just then Lottie guided a weeping girl into the room, quickly bringing an abrupt end to their studying for a second time.

“Don’t listen to him, Prissy!” She cooed, before ushering Marlene’s legs off the sofa so the two of them could sit. “He’s a fool for treating

you so badly—a right cad! I'll bet he comes crawling back on his hands and knees before the week's even out, you'll see!"

"I don't want him back!" The fitting girl howled. She looked about fifteen, but had enough makeup smudged beneath her eyes to rival a raccoon.

"What's wrong, Priscilla?" Lily asked, scooting closer on the carpet. Remus, adversely, slid further away.

"Prissy and Spencer had a row," Lottie explained quietly, as Priscilla continued her sobbing.

"I hate boys!"

"Join the club," Marlene muttered.

"That bastard!" Priscilla groaned, turning on her. "Did you know, he left me waiting outside in the freezing cold for ages and then had the audacity to say that I was the one who was overreacting—but he didn't even remember that it was my birthday! *My own boyfriend!"*

"Perhaps you should trade him in for a different model," Marlene offered. No one seemed to find it funny.

"Have you tried telling him how it made you feel?" Lily suggested.

"Obviously, but Spencer's a guy! And guys don't care about feelings. They'd rather skip out and talk about stupid things, like business and billiards!"

"And boobs," Marlene added.

"There, there." Looking sympathetic, Lottie cast her gaze toward Remus and instantly perked up. "Remus! Now there's a man with some real emotional breadth. Remus, come tell Priscilla that dossers like Spencer Whitmore aren't worth their weight in salt—*or* tears."

Feeling the inevitable weight of another problem that was not his to deal with, Remus tried edging even further away. "Er, sorry, Lot—I'm not really not sure this is my forte."

"Of course it is—you hate everybody!"

She had a point.

"What is it about November that turns guys into such pigs?" Priscilla

moaned.

“I think it’s the name,” Marlene suggested; *“Noh-vehm-berrr*—just not very satisfying. Now October on the other hand…”

Ignoring her, Lottie threw out an arm. “You’re a guy, Remus, so what’s the answer? Why’s it so hard for boys to be decent to their own girlfriends?”

“Entitlement?” He suggested meekly.

“Yes!” Lily agreed. “Remus is completely right. It’s all that priggish entitlement. They expect us to be the ones crawling back to them—except they can’t even remember to wash their face at night and cry when we pluck their eyebrows!”

Remus leaned in; “James lets you pluck his eyebrows?”

Before Lily could answer, Priscilla gave another wail; “So I guess we should just throw out the lot of them then!”

“Not Remus,” Marlene said reassuringly; “I’m not much sure on his bathing habits, but he’s actually quite helpful… When he wants to be, that is. And he’s *such* the romantic.”

He flipped her off, and Marlene blew him a kiss in return as Priscilla raised her tear-stained cheeks from her hands.

“That’s right. I read your poem, Remus,” she sniffled. “It really was quite beautiful. If only Spencer were capable of half that level of romance. Oh… what do you think I should do?”

Oh FUCK no.

Remus looked desperately to Lily, but she appeared only too ready to listen. Lottie was of no help either, only motioning in a sort of ‘go on’ gesture. And Marlene—well, she’d raised her book in front of her face and appeared to be trying not to laugh.

“C’mon, Remus!” Lottie prodded. “What do you think?”

“Yeah, Remus, tell us,” Marlene chittered.

He scowled, but then Priscilla sniffled again, all while staring at him with those big girlish eyes, and Remus had no choice but to answer.

“Well… If you ask me, I—I’d say Lottie’s right. I mean, no guy who

forgets your birthday and makes you cry this much is worth sitting in the fucking cold for… right?"

"You really think so?" Priscilla whimpered.

"Yes, Remus is absolutely right!" Lily said. "You should find someone who would wait out in the cold for you. Like… Like Remus! He'd stand in the freezing cold for anyone—especially a girlfriend. Just ask Marlene!"

"Oh no, Remus and I are ancient history," Marlene laughed, waving her hand. "Love him, but no."

Lottie leaned into Priscilla with an eager grin. "I know just what you should do, Prissy. Tell Spencer you're interested in Remus and I swear he'll be begging you to take him back."

Remus pressed his palms into his eye sockets. "Mercy—*please.* Have I not suffered enough this week?"

The girls erupted into a fit of giggles, but by then Priscilla had stopped crying and things were finally starting to look up again. She and Lottie were already on their way out—to go make Spencer Whitmore sorry he'd ever been born, surely—when Priscilla spun back around and looked straight at him.

"Remus, I hope it's alright to ask, but who was it who inspired your poem?"

He opened his mouth, then shut it.

"I just read a lot…"

* * *

Monday 21 st November 1977

"So that's it, huh?"

"Seems like it."

James squinted behind his glasses. "Definitely not a body."

Remus wasn't really sure what it was they'd expected. Though the pit

Filch had dug out behind their dorm was unreasonably deep, all he'd uncovered was a small metal case. The item in question had turned out to be a time capsule, buried in the earth by a group of leaving students and their professors. Now the contents of the capsule had been put out on display to give everyone a glimpse at what life was like at school fifty years before. It held photographs and newspaper clippings, as well as several class photos and official documents. It had also preserved several more personal items; an old wallet, a deck of dingy playing cards, cinema tickets from a bygone age, family photos, and also a calcified package of Gold Flake cigarettes. It was all stuff that must've felt important to someone once, but had become little more than dirty antiques for the new generation to ogle.

"Reckon those guys in the photos are still alive?" James asked.

"Probably," Remus answered. "They wouldn't be much older than your grandparents."

"They could've fought in the war though. Died."

"Oh. Yeah, guess they could've."

"That is so not a 'rock and roll' way to die," Sirius said, then; "I'll bet someone snuck at least a few nudie photos in there. McGonagall's just too 'fraid to show us those bits."

"I'm betting on weed," James sniggered. "You think they fit a little baggie inside the lining of the wallet? I know that's where Lupin keeps his."

"Oi, you always keep a little on you for luck."

"And how's that going for you, Shakespeare?"

Remus scoffed, pushing him lightly.

"What d'ya think fifty year-old weed even tastes like?" Sirius asked, stroking his chin.

"Dirt," Remus answered. "You can't get high off weed that old."

"Of course *you'd* know," James finished. They all leaned in a bit closer after that, until Sirius finally straightened up, wearing that clever look of his.

"Maybe we should bury our own time capsule. Leave a piece of us

behind for whatever losers find themselves in our places fifty years from now."

"What—you gonna put your own naked photos in it if we do?"

"Maybe I will, Potter. You think Evans would be my photographer if I asked?"

"Dickhead!" James grabbed Sirius in a headlock and the two of them began tussling back and forth, other kids weaving around them in the hall, completely unbothered by the usual antics.

"Hey, Remus—over here!"

All three of them glanced up. Peter was waving at Remus from down the hall, looking ecstatic. Beside him stood three other boys. In contrast, they all appeared nervous and awkward.

"So that's where Wormy went," Sirius grunted, still wrapped in James' headlock. Their friend had been missing all lunch hour, and Remus found it odd that he'd be turning up now with strangers in tow.

"Come on," Peter said to the others, before leading them forward. "Remus, these lads and I have a business proposition for you."

"What sort of business?"

"The *poem* sort."

"Oh no, you don't!" James said suddenly, freeing Sirius and getting between Remus and the three strangers. "Pete, I don't know what you're on about but Lupin's done with these bloody jokes, so you guys can just move on!"

"Yeah, enough taking the piss!" Sirius scowled, rubbing his neck. "Only we get to rag on Moony, them's the rules."

"They're not here to take the piss," Peter insisted. "They just wanna talk. Now could you two give us a moment? You can return to being Lupin's bodyguards after."

James and Sirius both deferred to Remus, who pursed his lips and gestured for them to go on. They do so, reluctantly, and as his friends shuffled up the hall, Remus crossed his arms.

"You better not be messing with me, Pete. I'm really not in the mood."

“Just hear them out,” Peter pleaded, before clearing his throat. “Lads, this is Remus. Remus, these are the lads! Ashton Hyde, Francois Martin, and Spencer Whitman.”

“It's Whitmore,” Spencer grumbled.

Remus looked the boy up and down. “You’re Spencer?”

“Uh… yeah.”

Not much to go off of at all, huh, Prissy, Remus thought candidly.

He uncrossed his arms. “Alright, so whatchu want?”

Before any of the others could answer, Peter slid back in. “You see, Lupin, these here lads are having some issues of the 'feminal' sort."

"That's not a word."

"Right. What I mean is that they’ve got trouble at home—the honeymoon’s over—their favourite birds have flown the coop—they—”

“I think I get the picture, Pete.”

Peter elbowed Francois fondly. “Told ya he’d get it.”

“So what do you want from me?” Remus asked, looking straight at Spencer this time.

“My girlfriend fell in love with that bloody poem of yours,” he said. “Apparently it’s the best thing since sliced bread, and now she’s threatening to break up with me if I don’t come up with something just as foppish.”

“Didn’t Prissy already break up with you?”

Spencer gave him an odd look. “How’d you know about that?”

“Uh… word travels fast.” Remus cleared his throat. “So what—you all want me to write poems for you?”

“Well, we can’t bloody do it, can we?”

“Have you tried?”

Before Remus could put his foot in it any further, Peter slid in;

“They’re willing to pay for it. You just whip something up, they pass it along to their girls—and boom! Everyone’s happy.”

“Except they’re not my girlfriends.”

“Come on, Moony, it’ll be the same as writing a song! And besides, you said needed the money for fags, right?”

Remus resisted a scowl; it was a ludicrous idea, but even worse was the bad business of telling buyers what it was they were paying for.

“Yeah, I dunno about that. Sorry, lads, but I really ain't the type.”

Peter surged forward, grabbing Remus by the back of the neck and smiled at the others. “Just give us a moment, lads,” he told them, before ushering Remus away a few paces.

“Pete—”

“Look, you can totally do this! They don’t even have to be *good* poems —those guys aren’t gonna know the difference. Just slap a few words together and you’ll have earned enough cash to buy fags until you’re forty.”

“What’s with all the sudden… manoeuvring?” Remus blabbed. “You sound like my dad if he knew how to smile.”

“Let’s just say my econ classes are finally starting to make sense.”

“Oh? So you’re a businessman now?”

Peter waved him off humbly. “I’m only trying to present you with the opportunity to earn an income of your own. I think it’s brilliant—easy money, and all you have to do is lift a pencil.”

“You know I don’t actually like writing poetry, right?”

“Who *likes* their job? We do it to support life’s little pleasures. Just think of it—three measly poems, and you’ll be rarin’ for when we go home for the holidays. You can even buy that girlfriend of yours a pretty little gift. I’m sure ‘Farrah’ will appreciate it.”

“Pete, I’m about three seconds away from smacking the shit out of you.”

“As long as you thank me for this brilliant opportunity afterwards.”

Remus sighed. He wasn't sure what had gotten into his friend, but if all it took to buy his own fags was a few cringe-inducing lines of script then maybe…

He turned back to the group. "Do they have to be long?"

Spencer shrugged, glancing at the others. "Nah, just enough to make her bawl a bit."

"Alright… but it'll cost you up front."

"How much?"

"Twenty."

"Twenty?" Francois yelped. "For a fucking poem?!"

"Each."

The boys gaped.

"I'll give you five quid," Ashton said.

Remus picked at his teeth with his nail. "Ashton Hyde… Isn't your dad a lord?"

The boy puckered.

"How 'bout we split the difference?" Peter suggested. "Ten each and he'll write like the wind. Your girlfriends'll think they've woken up to new men."

Ashton, Francois, and Spencer all looked at each other sorely.

"C'mon," Peter egged, "Lupin's right—s'not like you lads ain't good for it."

There was some more grumbling, but eventually all three boys were pulling their wallets from their coat pockets and slapping the notes into Remus' previously empty palm.

"Right," he said, tucking the money away with a satisfied smirk. "I, uh... Guess I'll need some info. Maybe just their names, some characteristics like hair and eye colour, and something they like. Try a favourite book or flower or something. Write it all down for me and we've got a deal."

Excited by the chance to woo their own girlfriends, the boys pulled out a pen and a paper each, quickly scribbling down what was needed. They split after that, and Remus let out a long breath, wondering how long it would be until all of it blew up in his face.

“Have I made up for accidentally letting Barty steal your poem yet?” Peter asked, looking smug.

“Nice try, Wormtail, but I’ve been burned before. We’ll see how this pans out first.”

Peter nodded, understanding, but still with a kick in his step that was distinctly un-Peter-like. When the ball rang, he strolled off with such a grin on his face that Remus found he couldn’t even be irritated anymore.

“They didn’t give you any trouble?” Sirius asked later, when he finally reappeared for Classics.

“Nah. Opposite, even. Tell ya later.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow in question, but already Professor Bilshin was calling out over the class.

“Alright, since some of you have gotten a little *too* comfortable recently—” He slapped a ruler down on a pair of desks up front, where a girl named Verity Wilkenson was currently straddling her boyfriend, both of them locked together at the lips. The pair burst apart, but did not look happy about it.

“New seat arrangements,” Bilshin barked. “Find your name on the board and park it, we’ve work to do today.”

Without even looking, Remus knew his chances of being sat next to Sirius were slim to none, but apparently the fates were shining on him today; he and Marlene had been given a pair of desks by the window.

“Finally!” She grinned, as he pulled out his chair and sat. “I’ve missed sitting beside you.”

“And what am I—chopped liver?” Sirius said, as he stopped by their desks.

“Liver with a side of day-old tripe,” Marlene answered, sticking out her tongue. Sirius made a play at trying to grab it, before instead picking up Remus’ copy of *Medea* as he pulled it from his bag.

“What’d you two think of today's play?”

“I loved it,” Marlene said automatically. “Let me guess, you never finished?”

“I *skimmed,”* Sirius said, flipping through the book. “Enough to know that Medea was a badass. ‘Cept she reminded me a bit too much of my mum. Maybe it was all the filicide.”

“I hope you’re being sarcastic."

Sirius gave Remus a snide look and passed the book back. “What’d you think of it?”

“It was okay. She was better in Ovid though.”

“Ha. You’re so cute when you talk like a swot.” Sirius crouched down. “Hey, get this—Prongs and I came up with a way to get back at Reg and his miserable comrades for what they did to you.”

“Does it involve any chemical warfare?”

“Just a little. But I’d hardly consider flour and bicarb soda real chemicals.”

“Bicarb soda? It isn’t more stink bombs, is it?”

“I’m offended that you even had to ask. We don’t *repeat* pranks. This one is brand new, and much sweeter. Call it a present, if you’d like. And the best part—all of Salazar’s gonna get a taste.”

Bewildered by all of the obscure hints, Remus opened his mouth in question only to be cut off when their professor ordered Sirius back to his desk. Winking at him, Sirius obeyed and dropped down into his seat, two desks away. His seat partner, a girl named Amanda, immediately started undressing him with her eyes, obviously delighted she’d gotten placed so close by. Remus wasn’t worried. The only one actually undressing Sirius Black was him.

“Shall I fetch you a camera?” Marlene murmured under her breath. “Bloody queer.”

Remus snorted into his palm, feeling familiar.

“Oi, pen any new poems lately, Lupin?”

It was Snape, naturally. The déjà vu must’ve summoned him. He’d

been moved two rows behind them and seemed just as happy as Remus that the two of them were finally separated. Unfortunately his new seat partner, Verity, did not look all that pleased.

“Just ignore him,” Marlene advised, taking Remus’ shoulder and turning him around. “He’s only trying to get a rise out of you.”

She was right, and Remus calmed himself with thoughts of Sirius’ mysterious prank. Snape was in Salazar House; with any luck the revenge would extend to him as well.

“Alright, settle down!” Professor Bilshin called. The class quieted a few moments later, and he turned to write the title of their most recent play on the board. Out of the corner of his eye, Remus saw Marlene lean in, as though she were a tiger getting ready to pounce.

“ ‘Medea’, one of Euripides’ more notable tragedies which I’m sure all of you read to *completion.”* The professor eyed his students pointedly, and Remus glanced over at Sirius who gave him a sarcastic thumb’s up. Professor Bilshin didn’t seem to notice; he turned around and added the word *‘Themes’* to the board.

“Now, as an intro to our unit, who can suggest to me one of the themes present in our text?”

Marlene’s hand shot up. “Feminism.”

“Oh, here we go,” someone muttered. Remus glanced up sharply, and found Wells Lewis already sniggering with another boy near the front of the class. Wells was Verity’s boyfriend and a right dickhead when it came to most things, but Remus had never had class with him until that term.

“Alright—feminism.” Bilshin added it to the board. “Anything else?”

“Marriage,” Verity called, making Marlene roll her eyes.

“Good,” Bilshin said, scratching ‘marriage’ across the chalkboard. “Explain.”

While Marlene soured at not being given the chance to extrapolate on her point, Verity perked up in her seat. “Well, the whole plot hinges on it. Medea and Jason are married yet he’s fallen in love with the other princess so she wants revenge.”

“Oh my god—*love?”* Marlene said loudly. “Did we even read the same

play? Jason doesn't love Glauce, he wants her father's kingdom."

"A friendly reminder to raise your hand in class, Miss McKinnon," Bilshin sighed. "Now, if we were to compare these two themes—marriage and feminism—what does the text say about them?"

Marlene raised her hand, but the professor picked Verity.

"That marriage is natural, but you have to be a good wife first. Medea loved Jason but she thinks she's better than him. Who would want to stay married to someone like that?"

"She doesn't think she's better—she thinks she's equal!" Marlene exclaimed. "Medea says it in the opening of the play, that marriage is intrinsically tied to a women's reputation and therefore is just another example of the power imbalance between genders! Jason can divorce her and he'll be fine, but she has to go into exile. It's pure misogyny."

"Hand, McKinnon," Bilshin ordered. "Can anyone else name a theme?"

Wells Lewis raised his hand. "Revenge. The creepy bird murdered both her kids just to get back at her cheating husband."

"Figures that's what you'd take out of it," Marlene protested quietly.

"Yes, but what drove her to that decision?" The professor urged.

"Pride," Marlene said. "The Greeks were obsessed with hubris, and Medea's too clever for the rest of her counterparts, but because she's a woman, no one will take her seriously. To everyone else she's just a villain."

"Didn't she cut up her own brother and throw his body parts into the sea?" Verity called.

"Exactly! She knew her father would have to stop to collect his son's body so it helped Jason and the Argonauts get away with the Golden Fleece. It was a brilliant counter move."

"I'd hate to be your brother," Wells sniggered.

"Medea's passion and suffering made her into a monster," Marlene continued, ignoring the ridicule; "But how can we say for sure that her story is inherently worse than any other? Hercules also murdered his own wife and children and he's still considered a hero. Medea's automatically condemned because we've all been brainwashed into

thinking that a mother's only duty is to care for her children. But she was powerful, and Jason tried to make her subservient. If anything I feel bad for Medea."

"Well, there's a shocker," Snape mused. "The suffragette feels bad for the witch. Someone call Hansel and Gretel."

Half the class began to laugh until Professor Bilshin silenced them with a stern clap of his hands. "Alright, so *suffering*, a strong theme to be sure." He wrote it on the board. "Lupin, I know you've read the play—what can be said about Euripes' treatment of his characters in relation to this theme?"

"Uh, well…" Remus glanced sideways, where Marlene was staring at him with desperate eyes. "I think Marlene's right. The play's all about society versus women, and what it means to take charge of their own bodies. It's—uh… Well, it's suffering."

"And what's the cost of your body, Lupin?" Wells' seat partner called. Laughter erupted again, but Marlene had the support she'd been seeking.

"Medea suffers because she's 'othered'," she called. "Because people are afraid of her! It's proof that she's powerful. Jason would've been nothing without her magic, and yet the moment they arrive home he throws Medea aside and calls her a barbarian."

"Maybe she was just ugly," Wells reasoned. "I wouldn't want to snog someone whinging about their problems all the time—especially if they had the face of a horse. Sound familiar, Lupin? You and McKinnon dated, yeah?"

A paper ball hit Wells in the back of the head and he turned around to find Sirius scowling at him. "Watch your mouth, mate."

"What? I'm just making an educated guess. Thought you'd be able to relate, yeah, Black? At least you know how to pick 'em."

While the class sniggered at Sirius, Marlene scowled.

"Pig. *At least Sirius—"*

"That's quite enough," Bilshin cut in. "We're discussing themes, not the issues of beauty versus morality. Now would anyone else care to play the field?"

“Not McKinnon,” Wells drawled. “She’s much too busy being a bitter rug-muncher to take a swing at anyone.”

“Better than sounding like a worn out hose-bag with a silver spoon so far up his arse you’d think he’d fucking choke on it!”

“And that is *detention,* Miss McKinnon!”

Sirius sat up in his chair very quickly. “Hold on, that toff just called her a ‘bitter rug-muncher’ and McKinnon’s the one that gets punished? That’s fucked up.”

“That is detention for you too, Mr. Black. After school—my office.”

“Fine,” Sirius huffed, before cupping his hands around his mouth to holler across the classroom; “Looks like it’s a date, McKinnon! You prefer red wine or white?”

“Sirius Black, hallway—*now,”* Bilshin snarled. Shrugging, Sirius got up and made his way down the aisle of desks. Just as he passed Wells, his elbow came up, clipping him in the back of the head.

“Go to hell, Black,” Wells hissed.

Sirius waved mockingly before shooting a wink in Marlene’s direction and joining their teacher in the hall. There was more sniggering, but as Remus turned to Marlene, she simply turned her face to the window, head bowed low over her book.

“You—uh… handled that pretty well,” Remus told her, after the lesson had ended and they were making their way out of the classroom.

“I’m so sick of how women are treated at this school,” Marlene scowled. “We had to fight just to get our own football team, and then they told us we couldn’t compete in any official tournaments. And now this bloody-fucking time capsule.”

Sirius slid an arm around Marlene’s shoulders. “Oh? You heard about that, yeah?”

“Unfortunately.”

“You should see the hole they left behind our dorm. Apparently those older codgers thought it would be funny to bury it ten feet under. Not even Moony could crawl outta a pit that deep.”

Remus took a light shot at the back of Sirius’ head before deferring to

Marlene. “What was wrong with the time capsule, Cherry?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong—that time capsule is from 1927, that’s fifty years ago!”

“Okay. Yeah…?”

“Do either of you know when Hawkings started admitting female students?”

Both of them shook their heads ruefully.

“Fifty-*four* years ago! Women were here four years before that capsule was buried, and there isn’t a single *hint* of their existence in the entire thing! Not in the school photos, or the certificates—none! It’s all memorabilia of men. Every photo and list and bloody artifact—men! But women were here—women were *contributing* to this college, and there isn’t a shred of evidence of that! We have no idea if they had clubs or organisations or what classes they enjoyed or how they spent their time. It’s tragic.”

Remus exchanged an ashamed glance with Sirius, who shrugged and offered an alternative;

“We were going to trick Salazar into eating a bunch of weed brownies if you wanted us to drop some off for Wells and Verity too."

“No,” she grumbled. “I think I’m just gonna sulk a bit more. See you in detention.”

Marlene pulled away and made her way down the hall to her next class, and Sirius sidled up to Remus and slung an arm around his shoulder instead. It was more of a reach, but Sirius didn’t seem to notice.

“Such a trooper, willing to take on some of society’s biggest quandaries,” he said, turning them the other way. “Think this is her first detention ever?”

“Probably... Is that really what we’re doing to Salazar? Weed brownies? That’s not a punishment, it’s a gift.”

“Not if they don’t know they’re eating them,” Sirius smirked. “And *not* if the gift comes on the same day as mocks.”

* * *

Sirius had kindly filled Remus in on the prank idea between final period and study hour, and even he had to admit that it was brilliant. As long as they made it tempting enough, the lads of Salazar House would wake up to a royal treat meant to motivate them on their first day of mock-exams. They wouldn't put enough weed in the brownies to do any real harm, but sure as the wind blows, they'd be feeling it come exam time. The Marauders would have to wait a few days for the timing to line up, but that gave them plenty of time to start stewing. Lily had already refused to give them her personal brownie recipe, but Sirius had found a cookbook in the library that would do the trick. Remus was pleased; he couldn't afford to get back at Regulus personally, but an all-House attack was a strong alternative. As long as he ate the bloody things.

Once Sirius and Marlene had disappeared to serve Bilshin's detention, Remus made his way across campus alone. He had prefect duty, and though it was with Regulus, they were only filing paperwork in the office. Hopefully they'd be able to come to a wordless understanding to ignore one another, and then leave and never speak again. *Hopefully.*

As he walked, Remus began to feel that familiar empty feeling in his hand. His fingers felt twitchy, and though he knew logically that it was brought on by the anxiety of having to deal with Regulus again, he still searched for something to sedate it. So often lately, he'd been able to fill that empty feeling with Sirius; just a touch, or even a kiss if they were lucky enough to be alone. It was a lovely occurrence, but as it was, Sirius was in detention, so he could only reach for his cigarettes.

They were tucked at the bottom of his bag, buried beneath school texts and exam notes. He managed to reach them—his zippo as well—but as he withdrew the carton, the zipper of his pencil case got caught on the button on his shirtsleeve and came tumbling out, hitting the pavement with a clatter and scattering pens and pencils everywhere. Remus sighed, and stooped over to collect them. He'd just picked up his rubber when he noticed them.

It was Audriana, along with her group of friends. The girls were walking up the pavement arm in arm, with giddy smiles on their faces. They might've just passed him by, said hello, or stopped to fulfil another purpose—one that was innocent and not at all driven by

ulterior-motives—except that Remus was never that lucky.

He hurried to collect his things, and then shot to his feet. It was stupid, he knew, to be running from a group of girls, but he wasn't actually running so much as hastening in the other direction. Every so often he'd chance a look over his shoulder and each time he found they were still there, smiling at him and giggling to one another. They weren't even waving—they knew he'd seen them, and now it was a game. A cruel game that only a girl (and probably Sirius) would find funny. But that wasn't all. Around the fourth or fifth time he glanced back, Remus began to realise the true circumstances of their game. The girls weren't just following him.

They were getting closer.

Remus urged his legs to go faster, without fully breaking out into a run because that would be embarrassing and a lot like admitting defeat. Instead he pumped his arms, all while experiencing a shrill feeling that had come over him. He'd thought it might be enough to give them the slip, but when he looked back again—*there they were!* The girls had also upped their speed; no longer arm in arm, but rather scurrying after him at the same pace.

Oh god. They were chasing him!

Remus whipped his head around, searching desperately for a way out. He was approaching the science block now, and just beyond that would be the dining hall and its surrounding berms. If he could just make it past them then Castle Hall would be a straight shot, but every time he looked back the girls were somehow closer, moving so briskly it was as if they secretly had wings on their school shoes.

Fuck it.

Remus had reached the science block, and the moment he disappeared around the corner of the building, he was off. Running to—running *from*—it didn't matter! All that mattered was that he put distance between himself and those crazy girls.

"There he goes!"

There were screams—he couldn't tell if they were in despair or delight, all he knew was that he was now sprinting across campus with a wild throng of sixth form girls chasing after him. It was worse than that day in the village, at least then he'd had Sirius to laugh at him—and they hadn't actually been running, they'd just been hiding!

Now he was *running*—running with only the open berm to save him. He passed other kids, most of them appearing completely flummoxed to find their classmate being chased around the side of their school buildings. It was mortifying, but also terrifying. Every time Remus turned a corner and spotted the group out of the corner of his eye it seemed to have grown—more girls had fallen in with the others, throwing their hat into the ring! He should've known; girls were pack animals, and like wolves they would chase their prey when given any opportunity.

He skirted the dining hall, thankful indeed that it was not yet time for supper and very few were around to witness his shame. The girls kept coming.

"THERE—GET HIM!"

"SOMEONE GRAB HIM!"

"HE'S HEADING FOR BASTION!"

They were right. Directly behind the dining hall and across from the skip bins was a tiny building known as Bastion Hall. Generally students were not allowed inside, since it was mostly offices anyway, but that meant reprieve. Remus' lungs were burning, and his bag kept walloping him in the gut as he ran. After skirting around a lorry parked out behind the cafeteria's loading zone, he made a beeline for the tiny hall. The doors were open—*thank god*— and he rushed inside, slamming it after him. There was no visible lock, but he could still hear the high-pitched shouts coming from the girls outside. Panicking, Remus turned around and made to dash down the main hallway, only to nearly punt Mrs. Norris across the linoleum as she came streaking out of a random office. He just managed to miss her, and in doing so, collided headlong with a rubbish bin, taking it down to the ground with a horrible crash.

"WHAT'S THAT MAKING ALL THE NOISE?"

It was Filch. He came thundering out of his office wearing his usual mouldy-looking trench and heavy, steel-toed boots. His quivering jowls became a nasty grin when he spotted him, as though he'd yet to fulfil his quota of terrorized students that day.

"What—What are you doin' in 'ere, eh?" He wheezed. "Students aren't allowed in 'ere!"

"It was a mistake!" Remus insisted. He scrambled to his feet, trying to

right the bin while chucking pieces of rubbish back inside. “I–I just tripped over the cat, and—”

“You hurt my cat?!”

There was a shout, this time from outside. The girls had crowded around the door and appeared to be pressing their noses up against the frosted glass.

“I think I see him!”

Remus abandoned the rubbish bin and all of its mess. The furious caretaker screamed after him, but there was no way he was going to stop. Remus wasn’t sure what was worse; being caught by the girls or submitting to Filch and spending the next several hours shovelling horse dung in the school stables.

Dodging a secretary as he ran, he burst out of the office building on the far side, letting out a moan of relief as Castle Hall finally fell into view. After making it across the road, he snuck in the back door and found himself alone at the end of Castle Hall’s ground floor hallway. His chest was heaving, and he couldn’t fathom how he was going to explain such a thing to his friends later on, but at least he’d made it.

Once he'd caught his breath, Remus straightened out his bag strap and made his way down the hall toward the main offices. Most of the secretaries and administrative workers would’ve gone for the evening, but that didn't mean he was lucky enough to be awarded peace and privacy. When he strode into the front office, he found Regulus Black standing along the head counter, busy sorting through files and replacing them in their correct cabinets.

“Finally decided to show, did you?”

Remus was instantly furious. There he was, stuck running from a problem that *he’d* created in the first place, and Regulus had the gall to snark.

“I’m not here to talk,” he snapped, dropping his bag down on a random chair; “I’m here because I have to be. So if we could just ignore each other properly, I’d appreciate it.”

“Fine by me. Just stay out of my way.” Regulus kept sorting, while Remus reached out toward his back to mimic strangling him. Finally he settled on flipping him the bird with both hands, and huffed strongly before marching over to the far side of the room to begin his

busy work. He'd just taken off his coat and hung it on the hook by the office's front window when a secretary marched back into the room, carrying a box that looked as though it'd been sitting in brown water for a decade.

"Oh! Boy, am I glad I caught you two. These books are being donated to the school in the village, but they need all our stickers peeled off. The prefects in the library were busy with a group of third years, so I figured we could lend a hand over here at the office." She set the box down on the counter next to Regulus' files. "There's more on the trolley in the hallway when you finish those!"

As the woman left, her heels clicking on the tile, Remus strode over to the box and opened it. The mildewy smell of old books had just hit him when Regulus yanked the case away. He was already digging into it by the time Remus realised that it was meant to be a slight, but rather than give Regulus the satisfaction of blowing up, he stomped out into the hall to retrieve a box of his own.

"Little git… right fuckin' piece of… cheeky arse-hole…!"

Remus kept grumbling under his breath even as he returned to the office, dropping the box of books down on the counter opposite to his prefect partner. At least he got the window. While peeling the stickers off of each book, he stared out at the early evening sky. It was getting darker much earlier now, and they were due for a snow fall or two. Hopefully the weather would hold out until after exams. He didn't much fancy lugging himself across campus during a snowstorm.

Pushing the stack of cleaned books aside, Remus reached into the box for another. As he did, movement beyond the window caught his eye, and he glanced up—just in time to see Audriana and her group of girls approach the Hall's front steps.

He fumbled the book, ducking out of sight below the counter. Instantly his heart was in his throat. *How had they found him? Why hadn't they given up? Were they really just coming into the hall for shit's sake?*

"There's odd, Lupin," Regulus said, having turned to stare at him; "And then there's you."

"Piss off!" Remus hissed, before wrenching his head up to peek out the window.

"Looking for someone? Like your fan club, maybe?"

Remus couldn't take it anymore. He jumped to his feet, thrusting a finger beneath Regulus' nose. "Honestly, where do you get off?! You'd think you'd have some sense of self-preservation—I am seriously four seconds away from annihilating you!"

"With what? Your extremely quick wit? Good luck trying, I'm not afraid of you."

"You're gonna wish it was wit I hit you with when I'm done! Do you even know how it's been for me since you stole that poem?"

"Not my fault Pettigrew can't keep track of his things," Regulus replied coolly.

"—Crap!" Remus howled. "It's been four days of absolute crap, and it's all your fault! You fucked me over!"

He'd been expecting another dismissive jab, or maybe a snide remark or two—something that would 'put him in his place', but what Regulus did next was ten times worse.

He *smirked.*

"And how's it feel, Lupin?"

"All I was trying to do was help you!" Remus bellowed. "Since the day I got here, you and Sirius have been trying to pick away at each other like fucking pigeons and I never took a side! He's my best friend and I defended *you* when he stepped outta line!"

"Well, thank heavens for that!" Regulus exploded. "You may be so generous, but I never asked for your 'help'! And I never asked to be friends with that girl either!"

"It's always 'I never asked'—'I never asked', but that's what nice people do, Regulus! And Trish is nice! She's nice and you don't deserve her friendship—I'm not sure you deserve anyone's!"

"Go then! I never wanted to be stuck with you then, and I certainly don't now! Why don't you go find my brother and make yourselves useless somewhere else!"

"I will! God, if you put half as much effort into being a decent person as you do being miserable, then we might've solved world hunger by now!"

Regulus scowled very deeply. Remus almost thought it might try to hit him, like that day in October when they'd fought, but Regulus was smarter than that. He knew he couldn't beat Remus in a fight, so he did the one thing Remus couldn't defend against. He marched over to the office window and threw open the latch.

"HEY! GIRLS! YOU LOOKING FOR LUPIN?"

Remus' stomach dropped. *No, no, no…*

"HE'S IN HERE!"

"What are you doing?!" Remus shot forward, pushing Regulus out of the way of the window. Just outside, he could see the girls, and they'd spotted him as well.

"You should really stop blabbing about your own weaknesses, Lupin. Someone might try using them against you."

"You little—" He rounded on Regulus, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. "You fucking cunt!"

Regulus flinched violently, and then grabbed onto Remus' hands to try and push him away.

"Y–You're a cunt!"

Remus had never wanted to smack someone more in his life, but the alarmed look on Regulus' face and the fact that his time was wasting was enough to give him pause. He could already hear the girls' excited shrieks and thunderous footsteps on the stairs outside. And so, in true fight or flight fashion, he released Regulus' collar, grabbed his jacket, and his bag, and left him to whatever miserable brooding he preferred.

* * *

He lost them by the lake. Perhaps it was too cold, or maybe they'd just tired of the chase; but either way, as Remus half collapsed against the side of the rowing team's clubroom—wheezing and coughing up a lung—he was relieved. The other Marauders were never going to let him live it down.

"That you, Lupin?"

He jumped—making his ribs twinge painfully. “Who’s there?!”

“Just me.” Trish came around the side of the clubroom, adjusting her muffler around her neck.

“Trish? What are you doing all the way out here?”

She pointed at the building with her thumb. “This place ne’er gets used in the winter. I come out ‘ere tae smoke sometimes… What's happened to you?”

“Oh.” He let out a long breath. “It’s a long story.”

She shrugged, indifferent or uninterested, he wasn’t sure. Then she pulled a baggie from her pocket. “Haven’t started yet. Feel like a walk and a smoke, wee bawbag?”

He did. Anything to avoid going back before the cover of nightfall. Together they left the clubroom behind and made their way down to the shores of the icy lake. Trish was an eager enough sharer, which Remus had to appreciate. She was a bit of an acquired taste, sure, but she was always real with you, and could definitely be counted on in a pinch.

“Yeah, I got a brownie recipe,” she said, as they walked along the edge of the Dubh. “Call 'em 'hash browns’. I’ll write it out fur ya—see if Salazar likes the taste. They should, I spent all last summer perfecting it with my cousin.”

“Clyde?”

“Na, got loads ‘o cousins, me. No siblings though.”

“Me neither.”

“Well, there you go. Us only bairns gotta stick together.” She stopped on the edge of the bank, next to a large boulder big enough to use as a make-shift table. “Here looks like an alright spot.”

She got to rolling, while Remus kept his back to her on look out. The wind had decided to be merciful, and only a light breeze was blowing off the water. They chatted, mostly about normal things, and eventually things turned to talk of Sirius.

“He actually called me a hippie? Smug bastard,” Trish mused, while sealing up her first joint and passing it along.

“He’ll call anyone a hippie. Think it’s just part of that age-old rocker versus flower-child rivalry.”

“I remember what his hair used tae look like when it was all long and *flowy*—he’s more ‘hip’ than he thinks. ‘n besides, I’m more like a stoner socialist anyway. A narcotist nonconformer, if ya will. Look here.” As if to illustrate her point, Trish passed him her thermos, which Remus stared down at quizzically.

“What is it?”

“It’s tea—or, a kind of tea. Go on, try it.”

Shrugging lightly, Remus tucked the spliff behind his ear and twisted the lid off the thermos. He took a swig, and the smell hit him about half a second too late. It left him instantly sputtering—almost gagging as the garish taste flooded every corner of his mouth with the rich flavour of rotting earth.

“Eugh—tastes like fucking dirt.”

Trish let out a cheeky snort. “It’s ‘cause it’s made with mushrooms.”

Remus frowned at the idea of drinking liquid fungus. “I’m guessing you don’t mean the average sort.”

“Nope, these are of the *magical* variety. Don’t worry, I never make it strong enough tae start seeing shit, just enough tae leave ya a bit floaty for ‘a while.”

“I gotta say, that’s pretty ‘hippy’ of you, Trish,” he said, before taking a second swig, grimacing, and handing the thermos back.

Trish took it and chuckled, looking out over the calm lake waters. She’d finished three joints, and tucked the leftovers back into her coat pocket. “What’s the hippiest thing about you, Remington?”

Remus considered. “I have a tattoo.”

“Na wey! Can I see it?”

He tapped his chest sarcastically. “Too cold. Should’a kept me inside if you wanted to strip me down.”

She snorted again. “I ken a few people who’d kill me for trying.”

“Ha, like who?”

“Half o’ yer wee fan club for starters.”

"Please, don't bring it up."

Trish looked pleased. “Alright, ya hippy—What’s yer tattoo of?”

“It’s Lily’s initials.”

“And just *why* do ya have Lily Evan’s initials tattooed on you?”

“Let’s just say I was heavily coerced on Halloween. I think your cousin was involved too.”

“Ohhh,” Trish smirked, “Halloween, huh? I remember, ‘n I have ‘a few guesses as tae who it was under that sheet by the wey.”

Remus bit his lip. “Oh yeah…? Er, who?”

“I’ll let’cha know when I figure it out for sure.” With an impish grin, Trish glanced down and suddenly came to a startling halt. “Oh my god!” She bent down, coming back with a stone she held up to her eye. Remus could just make out the warm brown of her iris through it. The stone had a small hole in its centre.

“It’s a hag stone!” She trilled.

“A what?”

“You know, a witches stone. In Gaelic we call them *gloine nan druidh* —‘druid’s glass’. They’re supposed tae ward off evil charms and prevent bad things like nightmares. They’re really rare.”

Remus stepped up to peer through the stone from the other side. “That's cool. Could always use more ‘evil charm’ protection.”

“I collect rocks actually,” Trish said, pocketing the stone and sipping her mushroom tea; “That’s my hippie thing. My dad always complains about how heavy my bags are when he comes to pick me up at the end of term.”

“That’s… sort of fitting,” Remus smiled.

“I know, right? Let me know if ya have any nightmares and I’ll let ya mooch it,” she teased.

They continued walking, passing the magical fungus tea between them until they’d made it all the way around to the eastern edge of the lake,

near the storage buildings that were all shut up for the season. It'd be dark soon, but the sun was still a rich orange colour in the sky. Nice evening for a walk.

"Fancy a swim?" Trish asked, as she plopped down on one of the metal benches meant for watching the rowing teams.

"No thanks, I've felt those waters in the winter. Not nice."

"Och aye, I remember hearing about that last year. Reginald told me."

"You mean Regulus," Remus replied, with a hint of distaste. Trish caught it, and set a hand over her brow, squinting up at him.

"You're mad at him, aren't ye? For what he did."

"Aren't you? What he said to you before wasn't exactly nice."

Trish dropped her hand. "Guess I don't really mind all that much. I know he's hurting inside, and when ya hurt in here, it feels better to bring that hurt out. Sometimes others just get caught up, that's all."

Remus slumped down on the bench next to her, feeling a bit flighty from the tea, but also troubled. "I didn't realise that the two of you were... close."

"We aren't really. Just in the same year. Sort of ran in the same circles as prefects, but he's 'a tough nut to crack, that one. Not that I havena' tried. It's stupid, but I always end up thinking that the best people to have around are the ones that want nae to do with me. It's my hamartia."

Remus looked down at his feet—at his boots caked with mud. *Hamartia; a fatal flaw.*

"That why you started talking to me?" He asked.

"Like'lie. You've got so many rumours around ye, Remington, it's almost exciting."

"Eh. Mary starts half of them."

Trish began toying with her lighter, clicking the spark wheel over and over again. "So this must mean that yer pretty bothered by whit Reginald did with your poem then."

“Are you saying I shouldn’t be?”

“Na, but ye might be looking at it the wrong way… How many people have told ya that they like yer poem?”

“Enough.”

“Did ya listen tae any of ‘em? I mean really listen?”

“Sirius liked it,” Remus said, quietly.

“Oh? And what did the great Sirius Black have to say?”

“He said… Well… He said that it was like seeing himself again. But through—” *My eyes;* “—Someone else’s eyes.”

“That’s nice,” Trish smiled. “I bet if ye listened a bit more, you’d hear the same thing from other folk too. It’s like those songs of yours. People want to see themselves in ‘em. And the girls at this school, they just wanna feel something tender. Like yer poem. Don’t ya ken… Boys are mean, Remus.”

Remus was surprised. He didn’t think he’d ever heard Trish use his real name. Somehow it reminded him just a little of Sirius.

“I’m sorry for what Regulus said to you.”

“Eh. It’s all water under the bridge,” she shrugged. “He’s the one missing out, not me.”

Remus smiled. “You’re actually really smart, you know that, Trish?”

“Naturally. Dinnae tell me it took ye ‘til now tae notice?”

He laughed then, wondering how it was possible to feel so good after feeling so bad. Mental illness, probably.

“Does everyone have a hamartia?” Remus asked.

“Mm… maybe. Do you think you have one?”

“I dunno. Can I think about it?”

“Yeah, sure.” Trish pinched her lighter between two fingers. “In the meantime, want to share that spliff now?”

Remus sat up. “Yeah, go on. I’ll spot you when we get back to the

dorms."

They lit up together, the pot-heads, and passed it back and forth until they were thoroughly baked. Not even the cold could touch them.

"If you were a rock, what kind 'a rock would you be?" Trish asked, flipping a smooth lake stone around in her hand. They'd since abandoned their bench and were throwing stones across the dark water, trying to hit a large boulder that was sitting several yards away and was just barely skimming the surface. They'd yet to hit their target, but Remus had faith.

"A grey one," he answered blandly.

Trish began to splutter. "Not what colour—what *kind?* Like obsidian or—or basalt."

He bent down and scooped up another stone. "What kind of rock is this?"

"It's probably just shale."

He threw the rock, watching it plop into the water's surface next to the lake boulder. "Then I'd be shale."

"So much for exciting."

"What? Shale's great. There's so much of it—" He threw his arms out across the lakeside for emphasis; "Sounds great too. Shale. *Shhhhhaale.* Shale-shale-shale."

Remus kept saying it until the word lost all meaning in his mouth and they were both laughing.

"Fine then," Trish said. "If you're shale then I'm schist."

"No, you just made that up."

"I did not! Sch—" She snorted and had to try again; *"Schist* is a type o' metamorphic rock just like shale."

"Schist is what people say when they stub their toe." Remus illustrated by pretending to ram his boot against a large stone. " 'Oh schist'! See?"

They both began cackling, the sort of laugh that occurred when you were too far gone to remember where the boundary was between funny and just plain stupid. They were laughing so hard that they

didn't notice it when they were run up from behind. Luckily, it was not Audriana.

"Moony, what the hell?"

Remus glanced up to find Sirius standing next to the bench, arms tucked in either armpit to ward off the cold. He had a vague look of irritation on his face, but Remus only thought it looked handsome.

"Oh," Trish smiled, "Shale look, it's yer boyfriend."

"Hey, boyfriend," Remus grinned dopily.

Sirius gave a start, blinking at them and opening his mouth before quickly closing it. If Remus wasn't so off his arse he might've noticed how he was blushing up to his eyebrows.

"Are you two stoned?"

"Yes, he's shale and I'm schist," Trish sniggered. Sirius gave her a bewildered look, before an icy chill whipped past them and he winced.

"Christ. It's fucking freezing out here, you even missed dinner. Come on, Moons. Evans said we're studying tonight and we got other shit to fry if we want to take down Reg and his minions."

"He means 'schist' to fry," Remus said to Trish, who immediately broke down giggling again.

"You were supposed to save some of the hash for Salazar," Sirius grumbled, coming down to the water's edge and grabbing Remus' coat sleeve. "How high are you exactly?"

With a smile bordering on smug *and* stupid, Remus held his free hand up over Sirius' head and passed it over him several times. "About five inches higher than you, short-stuff."

Trish howled behind them, but Sirius only shook his head.

"Ha-ha—*very funny.* Do you know how long it took me to track you down, you tall twat?"

"Maybe you'd be warmer if you didn't insist on wearing nothing but a leather jacket in December, *Moooom,"* Remus blagged, sassily pulling his arm out of Sirius' grasp.

“So you got jokes then? Alright.” Sirius made to grab for him again but Remus shot backwards, holding up a finger snootily.

“It’s my arm! No touchy!”

Astonished, Sirius nearly laughed. “Moony, I ain't playing games. Now get back here.”

“Uh-uh!” Remus snorted, dodging his boyfriend for the second time.

“You cheeky shit—I am not doing this. We got actual pranks to plan!”

“You’re the one chasing me!”

“I’m not chasing you!”

“Are too!"

Sirius stopped short on the bank, giving him a stubborn smile. “Fine, come here then.”

Remus pretended to consider, taking a few steps forward until he was just an arm’s reach from Sirius.

“Good. Now are you done acting like a—”

Remus shot past him, smacking Sirius on the shoulder. “You’re it!”

“Ugh. Fucking prat,” Sirius scoffed, falling for it and finally giving way to an exciting game of cat and mouse. They tore across the banks, slipping past one another and laughing.

“Trish, stop him!” Remus wailed eventually, after Sirius had nearly caught him for the dozenth time.

“Nah, yer on yer own, schist-head,” she quipped, scanning the bank for more rocks.

The joke was enough for Remus, who—in a fit of laughter—turned very sharply and ended up on his back on the rocks. Sirius skidded to a halt next to him, bending over and grabbing him by the front of his jacket.

“There! Caught you!” He panted.

Remus might’ve kissed him right there in the open—even licked his lips in anticipation—but suddenly a sharp clang sounded from across

the water, and they both turned to find Trish with her hands thrust into the air in triumph.

“I hit it!” She cried. “Remington, I hit the boulder!”

Sirius straightened up, staring past her at the lake with a look of absolute shock. “No fucking way.”

“I did! I did! Look, I’ll do it again.” Trish grabbed another rock and threw it. It fell just short of the ‘boulder’, but on the second toss her aim was true, and another clang echoed across the lake, making all of them perk up.

“That didnae sound like ‘a boulder,” she murmured in sheepish realisation, before holding a hand over her eyes and squinting. *“In the name of the wee man,* I think it’s a trolley!”

Remus stood up and stumbled down to the edge of the water with them. He’d been too dazed before to realise it, but there was no denying it. The seasonal cold had lowered the water level, and where the lake used to cover it entirely, the corner of Stan’s missing trolley now stuck out of its surface like a tiny floating island.

Sirius checked an invisible watch on his wrist, then whistled innocently. “Wow. Wonder how that got there…”

Remus lost it. By the time Trish and Sirius had managed to drag him back up the bank toward home, he was still laughing.

Chapter End Notes

I've decided not to worry about C/W around smoking and drugs anymore unless its significant. I think that at this point, it's just an expectation. If anyone disagrees and thinks I should keep them, please let me know.

As for posting, my next chapter won't be up until May 13th—two weeks from now. I'm going on a bit of an impromptu holiday and I won't have a lot of time for writing or the like. Hang in there, the next couple chapters are really some of my favourites <3 (Two more until another Marauders Christmas!)

Chapter 81: Hamartia

Chapter Summary

> Exams have come to Hawkings. Remus plays business mogul. A prank goes wrong, and then oh-so-right.

Chapter Notes

> No CW for this chapter. Also, I'm dedicating this one to Anastasia, because I know she'll never see it and I love that for her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'Cause I'd rather stay here,
With all the madmen,
Than perish with the sad men roaming free;
And I'd rather play here,
With all the madmen,
For I'm quite content they're all as sane as me…

- "All the Madmen" David Bowie, 1971

Friday 2nd December 1977

In reality, Trish had had the right idea all along. People did like his poems. They even liked them enough to pay. More than a week had gone by, and in some pinch of luck, Regulus' grand joke had turned itself into a real financial venture. Eventually the girls had given up chasing him, and life returned to normal somewhat.

"We should call you the Poem Pusher," Peter said, as Remus got up from the library table. He gasped, then; "The Substance Sonneteer!"

Remus let out an apprehensive chuckle. "Careful, Pete, your poor eyebrow's only just grown back. Wouldn't want it to go missing in the middle of the night."

Peter covered both eyebrows with his hands. "You're quite right, Moony. I reckon the 'Blitzed Bard' is ten times better anyway."

"Somebody hold me back before I kill him."

“Go on already,” Sirius laughed, pushing him on. “Don’t want to leave your two o’clock waiting.”

Remus smirked back. He was in the best mood he'd been in ever since Regulus had dropped that bomb on his life; they still found time to practice and write music, and soon exams would be over altogether. Then they’d be free to return home for the holidays, where he and Sirius could meet up in that little beach-themed bathroom as many times as need be. Yes, it was the simple pleasures, that's what Remus Lupin was after these days. Good friends, good music, and a good snog.

With his hands in his pockets, Remus left the small study room their little group had cloistered themselves in and made his way down the library’s centre aisle. He was looking for something—or more accurately, *someone*—and found them waiting for him in the Anthropology section, looking twitchy and nervous. Remus wasn’t nervous, rather, he felt brazen. He had the entire thing down pat. No holds, no exchanges, and certainly no I-owe-you’s. All payment was to be made up front, and if his buyers didn’t have the cash, then they would just have to look elsewhere, and now that word of his exploits had finally spread (thank you Barty) looking elsewhere was certainly easier said than done.

“You said ten, right?” The mousy boy warbled, staring nervously from behind glasses too big for his face. He was a tenth year, far too young to have such girl troubles, but money was money, and Hawkings was full of it.

“Price’s gone up actually. Now it’s—”

Reluctantly, Remus drew up short. The kid was white-knuckling his books and staring at him with brown eyes as big as a girl’s. He had a tenner peeking out of one hand.

“… Ten. Ten’s fine.”

A smile split his rosy face, and he raised the ten pound note, handing it over. Remus pocketed the money and then pulled out a tiny notepad and a pen.

“Who’s it for?”

The boy blinked at him. “Huh?”

“The poem. What’s her name?”

“Oh, uh… Sam.”

He wrote it down. “Hair colour? Eye colour?”

“Brown. B-Both brown.”

“Mhm. And what do you like about her?”

“Uhm… Do you think you could just write something nice? I–It doesn’t have to be too specific.”

Remus clicked his pen impatiently.

“Don’t you want it to be more... special? She’s already gonna know I wrote it.”

This was true. Everyone knew. What had started as a few boys looking to keep their girlfriends from breaking up with them had quickly ballooned into a school-wide fad. Every girl wanted a Lupin poem, it was like a new status symbol. Maybe they couldn't have their own personal tennis court or a leopard-skin bed with a mirror on the ceiling, but they could certainly cop a dingy limrick. He’d already written half a dozen for Chastity Bell alone, and though it always bothered him, he was at least able to charge those poor sods double.

“It’s okay if she knows,” the tenth-year insisted. “Put whatever you think would be nice."

"Does she at least have a favourite song? Band...?"

"What? Oh! Yeah, sure. She—er… She likes Pink Floyd a lot! And—uhm… The E-Eagles. It's an American band.”

Remus smirked. "I know who the Eagles are. Your girlfriend’s got good taste."

It might've been a trick of the light, but Remus could've sworn he saw the kid blush. Pretending not to notice, he cleared his throat and gestured back to the notepad.

"Alright, should only take a couple days. What’s your name and House so I can get this to you when it's done?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it!” The other boy chirped. “I’ll come find you!”

He took off down the aisle like he was scared of him, and a few

seconds later Remus heard Ms. Pince's reedy wail from across the library;

"Samuel Sheridan, you stop that running this instant!"

It didn't take Remus long to put two and two together. He glanced down at his notepad, a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach, and—almost secretly—added 'Sheridan' after Sam. Then another voice was calling out to him through the shelves.

"Psst, Lupin! You still writing those poems? How much?"

Remus covered his mouth with a yawn.

"Twenty-five."

Ten minutes later, Remus returned to the study room and found the rest of his friends exactly where he'd left them. They'd been there since breakfast, and in that time Lily's hair had grown to twice its usual size simply from running her fingers through it while stressed. Lottie sat quietly next to her, listening to Spanish books on tape and chanting different verbs and their conjugations under her breath while Mary battled her way through an overdue psychology essay. On the boys' side of the table, James had his Physics notes spread out around him as though a tornado had ripped through his school bag, but he wasn't quite crying yet. Peter, on the other hand, had already wept twice over his Maths, and was currently copying out Lily's notes from last term as though his life depended on it. Only Marlene had remained fully quiet—secluding herself on the far corner of the table and writing what appeared to be a very long essay of her own.

As he sat down at the table, Remus tugged his school bag toward him and pulled out a fresh notebook. There he began brainstorming all of the potential ideas for his newest customers, while Sirius—the only one of them that had managed to resist studying altogether—leaned over to snag a peek.

"Another score then, Moony?"

"Shush. It's still working hours, Black," Remus said, a smile still playing on his lips.

"I don't know how you keep up with it all," Mary asked, looking up from her essay. "How many of those poems has it been now?"

Remus shrugged indifferently. "Around forty-three."

“Forty-three?!”

“Give or take.”

“That’s insane!”

“Shhh!” Lily hissed. She was flipping through her flashcards with such speed that she could’ve rivalled a street magician.

“It is insane,” James agreed quietly. “I don’t know how he writes ‘em so fast... And uh—speakin' a which, Moons, you finished with that thing we chatted about the other day...?”

Not even bothering to look up from his work, Remus reached into his bag and pulled out an envelope, which he passed onto James.

"Brilliant!" His friend grinned, before turning in his chair. "Hey, Daisy? Guess what, I've a little present. Now I know it's a bit early for Christmas gifts, but I think you'll like this one. It's 'eau de Lupin'."

" 'Eau de'?" Mary giggled. "Water of Lupin?"

"Huh? I thought that meant 'from'?"

Not one to be interrupted, Lily took the poem and added it to her stack of study papers with an air of indifference while James tried not to look too crushed.

"Is there any for me in there?" Mary asked. "I told Greyson I'd give him another chance if he stepped up his game a bit. And Jason's been dropping hints about some 'surprise' all week."

Huffing, Remus returned to his bag once more. "Here," he grunted, retrieving four different poems, each commissioned by a different guy. Mary lit up when she saw them, eagerly snatching them from Remus' hands.

"Shouldn't the guys who paid for those be the ones who give them to you?" Peter asked, having observed the entire thing from a safe distance.

"Of course. But how else am I supposed to know which one I'm going to like best if I don't see them all first? I'll give them back—let them think they're a step ahead."

Peter snorted, and then glanced at Marlene. "Can you believe that?"

"Mhm... sure," Marlene murmured, eyes boring into her paper. Remus was about to ask what class it was for, when Sirius reached over and nudged him.

“Oi. Where's my poem?"

"I only work on commission. And I’m backed up on orders as is.”

"Hmph. Stingy."

Remus smiled to himself, while Lily arched an eyebrow at him from across the table.

“You should be studying for your exams,” she swore, adding several more flashcards to her stack. “Not writing poetry just to make a bit of money on the side. It’s almost extortion.”

“You show me the legal definition of 'extortion' and then we'll talk,” Remus retorted. “This is simply supply and demand.”

Lily shook her head like he was hopeless and returned to her flashcards.

In all honesty, Remus might’ve been more worried about his marks had he not stayed up most nights studying on his own. It was fine to study then, in the hours he couldn’t sleep, but he’d already ixnayed poetry after dark. It always made for soppy messes, and was no good for writing with other people in mind. Now the *daytime*—that was when the poetry became easy, and once he'd figured out how to remove the *him* and *Sirius* aspects from it, the words began to flow like water. Remus had already amassed enough money for fags and booze to last him until the end of the year, and even had a bit leftover for some Christmas shopping. With his goal reached, he was now hoping to earn enough to make a small cash donation toward the flat. He knew Tomny’s pride would force him to refuse the gift, but Remus was determined. It would mean repaying Tomny for all the times he'd rescued him in a pinch—even if he had to shove it up his arse, Tomny would take the money.

“Ugh, I can’t take it anymore,” Lily huffed after a long while. “Sirius, will you quiz me?”

She handed the cards across the table and Sirius took them, clearing his throat.

“ ‘What must be present for a system of judicial precedent to work’?”

“The identification of the binding parts of the judgement, an agreed hierarchy of the courts, and… a sound system of law reporting.”

“Brilliant. A bit scary, but brilliant.” Sirius flipped another card. “ ‘To what extent has the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty and the role of the judiciary been affected by the UK’s entry into the EEC?’ … Jesus, Evans—you put entire essay questions on your flashcards?”

“You never know what they’re going to ask!”

“Alright then, I have a question for ya. What do they call those wigs all the judges wear in court? Do you know?”

“Don't—”

“A bob-wig, ha!”

“Sirius!”

“Fine,” he grumbled, raising the cards again. “What are the three types of delegated legislation?”

Lily sat back with her hands in her lap, looking confident. “Orders in council, statutory regulations, and local by-laws.”

“Ooh, so close. The card actually says ‘statutory *instruments’.”*

“That’s the same thing.”

“Not according to the card.”

“Sirius Black!”

“Careful,” James warned. “Push your luck any more and she might actually murder you.”

“Yeah, straight threatened my life this morning when I buggered up ‘House of Commons’ and ‘House of Lords’,” Peter added pensively.

“They’re completely different systems!”

Peter whistled innocently. “Whatever you say…”

They continued like that for a while, and when Lily looked close enough to reach across the table to throttle his best friend, James humbly took over. Without the job of quizmaster, Sirius turned his full attention to Remus. He started with subtly grazing his hand along the

outside of his thigh beneath the table, before growing more emboldened and trying for a full grab. Remus ignored it at first, confident that no one else would notice. He was too busy trying to think of a word that rhymed with ‘irresistible’, but there truly was no ignoring Sirius Black. Eventually his fingers slid higher—then deeper, toward the inside of Remus' thigh. Remus put a hand on his wrist to stop him, and Sirius began stroking with his thumb, sending shivers across his skin.

Remus looked at him. “Black, you’ve a spider on your shoulder, did you know?”

Sirius seized, clapping a hand to his shoulder immediately, but when it came away clean, Sirius scowled at him.

“Dick.”

“Don’t you dare mention spiders,” Mary threatened. “There was one in our room just this morning. Marlene had to kill it with a slipper, right Marls?”

Marlene gave a little mumble, still barely listening. She’d moved on from her essay, and was now tracing lines across another paper with her ruler.

“What are you studying for?” Remus asked.

“I’m not.”

"What was the essay then?"

"It wasn't an essay."

Attention caught, Sirius turned to them with a raised brow. “Marlene McKinnon not studying for exams? Someone call the paramedics.”

“It’s a petition,” Marlene said haughtily, drawing back from the table to reveal a cleanly drawn-up list of values. “I’m tired of the blatant disregard for equality at this school. Hawkings claims to be a forward-thinking institution—it’s time they prove it. We're the ones hosting the year-end tournament this time around, and I can't think of a better way for Hawkings to showcase it's supposed 'ethos of equality' than by letting the girls play too."

“Wow,” Lily breathed, snatching her flashcards back from James; “You’re making a petition for a girls tournament?”

"No, not a *girls* tournament—I want the girls to play in *this* tournament. Same as the boys."

"THAT'S A WONDERFUL IDEA!" Lottie called, headphones still on and shouting through her Spanish tapes. *"Muy bien! Estupendo!"*

A few of them laughed, and Mary craned her said to get a look at the petition.

“I think it’s a good idea too," she said, "but do you really think old McGonagall’s gonna go for it?”

“That’s what the petition’s for, numpty." Marlene straightened up, cheeks splotchy with nerves. "If I can get enough kids and faculty to sign this then she’ll have to take me seriously. And besides, she’s a woman in a man’s job. It’ll happen, just you wait.”

Somewhat eagerly, James stood up from his seat and reappeared over Marlene’s shoulders to read the petition over. “I think it’s a great idea too,” he said finally.

Marlene appeared flummoxed. “You do?”

“ ‘Course. I’d kill to have some of you girls on the team. The guys get complacent thinking no one’s better than them, but then they turn around and pull crap like refusing a scrimmage match because they ‘don’t play girls’. It’s bloomin’ tosh."

"Oh... Well, they're just afraid they'll lose anyway."

"Too right," James grinned. "McKinnon, If you’d let me, I’d like to be the first one to sign your petition.”

A look of utter shock crossed her face, but slowly Marlene moved aside so James could lean down and scribble his name just below hers.

“Hand it here, Prongs,” Sirius called after him, before adding his name to the list and passing it along to Remus. The paper went around the table until all eight of them had signed and Marlene was left positively weepy.

“Thanks guys,” she said, holding the paper against her heart.

“We’re with you, Marls,” Lottie smiled, headphones now strung around her neck. “Anything to get out of more studying. Any more

verb conjugations and I'm going to top myself. *Juro por Cristo."*

“Agreed,” Sirius said, already moved on to making card towers out of Lily’s spare flashcards.

“I’ll give a copy to the other prefects if you’d like,” Remus offered, making Marlene beam.

“That would be great! The more people who see it the better. Mrs. Brady in the admissions office has already agreed to let me make as many copies as I want.”

“We could make it a group thing,” James suggested. “Pair off and take turns every lunch hour or something.”

“Yeah!” Sirius agreed. “Make it a contest—whoever gets the most signatures before holiday break wins.”

“You always have to make everything a competition,” Lily scoffed.

"How else do you make life fun?"

“Well, what’s the winner get?” Mary leered. “A lap dance from all the other losers?”

There was a chorus of moans turned laughter that Lily silenced with a wave of her arms. “I think the winner should get the satisfaction of knowing they helped their dear friend Marlene with an issue that was very close to her heart.”

Sirius blew a raspberry at her. “Boo. Boring. Lap dance is better.”

“Tell you what, Sirius,” Marlene said, “you get the most signatures on the petition, and you can have a lap dance from *anyone* you want.”

Remus glared at her, but Marlene remained purposely oblivious. Sirius wasn’t cheeky enough to make eye contact, but he did squeeze Remus’ left arse cheek from under the table.

“Deal, McKinnon.”

Delighted, Marlene went back to her petition and Remus knocked Sirius’ hand away before returning to his work. As he did, Sirius subtly slid him a spare flashcard. His perfect handwriting was all over it.

Better start brushing up your dance moves, it read.

Remus narrowed his eyes and stole Sirius' pen.

You wish.

Sirius took the pen back promptly; *I'll even get Mary to lend you an outfit. Fancy a skirt?*

Crumpling the note, Remus shoved it into his pocket and Sirius smugly turned back to his card tower.

"I need one of those," Lily said, snapping her fingers at him a moment later.

"Only if you give us that brownie recipe of yours," Sirius said, concentrating hard on placing another card on top. Unimpressed, Lily stole one of the bottom cards and the whole thing came tumbling down with a flourish.

"You're positively wicked, Evans."

"And you're not getting my brownie recipe. Potter told me what you were planning and I'm not helping you sabotage an entire dorm right before exams just because Regulus was a little nasty."

"A little?!" Sirius shot his best friend a glowering look. "Utterly whipped, you are."

"I couldn't help it," James whined. "She's top of our law class, which means she's *very* convincing."

"It's alright," Remus said kindly. "Trish gave me her recipe last week. She's even got the hash oil. We can start baking on Sunday."

"Brilliant!" James cried, while Lily covered her face and groaned.

"The things you four could do if you applied yourselves to something *good* for a change."

"But it is for a good cause!" Peter reasoned.

"Which is?"

"A... wicked prank?"

Lily rolled her eyes and went back to studying.

"Nice, Wormtail."

“Well, *I’m* not top of the law class…”

* * *

The next day, the Marauders got straight to work. Not on their pranking—that could wait another day—but on the petition. After all, there were stakes now. And though Remus had very little desire to actually win himself, he couldn't very well *lose.* He and Lily had volunteered to take the first lunch shift, and after Marlene had delivered them a stack of fliers, they took to the dining hall’s main corridor, attempting to catch anyone who was coming or going.

“Really, I’m sur—*prised,”* Lily grunted, while slamming her hand down on the stapler in an attempt to attach one of Marlene’s petitions to the hallway notice board. “Trish was so unassuming last year… *ugh…* Damn thing.”

Remus took the stapler from her, unjamming it. “You’re too aggressive, staplers are sensitive. They need a gentle touch.”

“Har har.”

He passed the tool back. “And Trish is still unassuming. It’s how she gets away with everything.”

“You're right. I don’t think she’s ever had a detention.”

Lily returned to hanging the petitions, while Remus stood by awkwardly with a clipboard of his own. He’d been eager enough to volunteer, but when it came to actually collecting signatures, he was proving to be a bit shit. Lily’s preferred method ended up being grilling any unsuspecting student who happened to walk past until they either signed or fled in terror, but like expected, Remus wasn’t really all that cut out for campaigning. He didn’t have her brazen drive, and was starting to realise that there was a very real chance they’d all be giving Lily Evans a lap dance come end of the term.

“Wouldn’t *you* like to sign a petition allowing women to play alongside men in this year’s football tournament?” She demanded of a group of passing eighth years. The young kids exchanged unsure glances but before they could scurry away, Lily was pressing her clipboard into their faces. “Equal right to play on the same field! No one should be denied the chance to show off their skills just because of their gender, don't you think? Or are *you* for discriminatory school

sports?!"

Intimidated by her instant lecture, the kids passed around the chipboard and rushed off, leaving Lily with a pleased look on her face. “I think I might have a knack for this,” she boasted.

“Maybe," Remus said, "but one of them signed as ‘A. S. Muncher’.”

Lily raised the clipboard and groaned. “Whatever. We’ve already gotten like seven ‘Seymour Buttz’. Whatever helps Marlene, I suppose.”

“I dunno, I thought ‘Pierre Pants’ was pretty good.”

As Lily stifled her laughter, she spotted another girl making her way up the hall toward them and immediately shoved Remus ahead of herself. “There! Ask her!”

Remus swallowed, regretting everything, but like Lily had said—whatever helped Marlene.

“Hey—erm... Wanna sign a petition?” He babbled, drawing the girl to a stop in the middle of the hall. She looked at him, surprised at first, before drawing all of her hair onto one shoulder.

“Maybe. What’s the petition for?”

“To let the girls play alongside the guys at the end of the year football tournament.”

“Hm." She looked him up and down. "Strange to see a bloke crusading for a women’s football team of all things.”

“It’s a favour for a friend—” he started, before rushing to correct himself; “But girls should be allowed to play football wherever they want too!”

She considered for a moment before holding out a hand expectantly. Acting quick so she didn’t have time to suddenly change her mind, Remus passed the clipboard over and she left a big loopy signature at the bottom. “Is your name on here?” She asked, scanning the list.

“Oh, I signed a different page.”

She nodded and gave him a sly smile before handing the clipboard back. “Good luck with the petition.”

She left with a quiet flourish and Remus proudly looked at Lily, who was watching him with her arms crossed.

“You’re unbelievable.”

“What? You told me to ask her!”

“She all but left her phone number, Remus.”

“You know, Sirius actually got a phone number yesterday. I’m afraid he might be winning.”

“Figures.” Sighing half-heartedly, Lily tucked her clipboard under one arm and began fiddling with the stapler. “Hey, so James told you guys that I’m going back to his for Christmas, right?”

“Yeah, told us a while ago."

"And you're going too, right?"

"Mhm. My dad and Sandra’ll be vacationing in the French Riviera for Christmas so Giles is letting me stay at James’. Peter’s just next door and Sirius basically lives there now so it should be great."

"I've never been to London. We were gonna go for Pet’s birthday one year, but she decided to go to Cardiff with her girlfriends instead."

"You'll like it," Remus said. "Plenty of libraries. You won't even run out."

She smiled, before nervously twisting a lock of red hair around one finger. "Listen Remus, I’m only telling you this because you’re my best friend.”

Interest piqued, he turned to her in question. “Yeah…?”

“I’m a bit nervous,” Lily confessed all at once. “It's just... I’ve only ever spoken to James’ parents over the phone a few times—and they were always kind! But… it’s not exactly the same as meeting someone in person, is it?”

“You think they won’t like you?”

“Well no, but—" She stepped in closer. "What if they don't like that James and I are dating? What if they don't like that I'm not Indian or a Hindu, or—or that my family is working class? I don't have anything to offer him, I'm just... me."

"Lils..."

"It's not an ethnicity thing," she amended sorely. "I don't care that James isn't white, I never have... But I *really* want his parents to like me, and what if they'd rather he date someone else? A nice girl with a good background. Someone who takes tea in the garden and has a personal tailor and whose dad doesn't have to choose between thatching the roof or mending the fence, and—"

"Lily," Remus tried, more forcefully; "You have nothing to worry about. Who gives a shit about background—you're literally the smartest person I know. Besides, there's no way James would ever let anyone put you down for something as crap as a busted fence. You're amazing, you are!"

Lily sighed. "Remus, I know you're trying to be kind, but you don't get it. I'm not like you, all I have is school."

And she was right. As othered as Remus had begun to think of himself, he would never know what it was to be outclassed by someone he loved. He and Sirius might've been queer behind closet doors, but they were lucky as far as material wants went.

"It's not that I don't trust James," Lily went on; "It's just that a part of me's always wondered if maybe he was keeping it hush. That maybe his parents were worried and he didn't want to kick up a fuss while we were at school."

"I'm sorry," Remus said. "I didn't mean to dismiss your feelings. But I swear, Lils, that's not James. You must know it's not. And it ain't the Potters either. They're going to love you, especially because you're always grinding their son's gears."

She smiled bashfully. “You really think so?”

“I *know* so! The Potters—blimey—they’re amazing. They took Sirius in without a second thought, right? And they always considered him a son, even before that. They’re incredibly smart, and they support James with our music too. I’m... Well, I'm a bit jealous, to be honest.”

“You never know, maybe they could adopt you too."

“As much as I’d love to be your future brother-in-law, I don’t think it would work out,” Remus said, trying not to imagine what it would be like to be Sirius’ adoptive brother and dating him at the same time.

“Well, alright," Lily said, untucking her clipboard from beneath her arm. "I suppose I should stop worrying about what they're going to think of me and start worrying about what sort of gift I should bring.”

“I know James’ mum likes these little sweets that taste like pears—he’d probably know the name. And I’ll bet Monty would love to hear about your parents’ botany. He’s got a great garden, if that helps.”

“It does, thanks. Reminds me to be less nervous. I think I’m gonna go hang a petition up in the girls’ loo upstairs. Marlene figured it would be a good idea to put them where we know other girls will see them. Head to lunch with me after?”

"Yeah, go on."

He handed her a stack of petitions and the box of staples from his pocket and Lily started for the staircase. She was halfway up when she around and called back to him;

"Remus? You're pretty amazing, yourself."

Remus smiled. "Meet you back here."

As Lily turned and skipped back up the staircase, Remus began happily rocking back and forth on his heels. Their conversation had put him in a good mood—confident, even—and he made sure to put it to good use. While scanning faces as they passed him in the hall, a group of guys approached and Remus raised the clipboard.

“Sign a petition?”

They didn’t stop, but the group after them did. And the one after that. Eventually Remus realised that it was much easier to catch people heading into the dining hall, rather than out, where they'd inevitably have some lesson or meeting to get to. He was just finishing up with a few kids from his English Lit class when he was approached by a few more girls. They were headed by Priscilla, the one he'd witnessed crying into Lottie's shoulder the week before. She was beaming—grinning at Remus like he'd hung the moon himself.

“Hi, Remus.”

“Oh, hey… Priscilla, right? You know Lottie.”

She nodded fervently, while her two friends tried to hide knowing smiles.

“I haven’t seen you around since that day in the dorm, but I wanted to thank you,” she said. “You helped me realise that Spencer wasn’t worth my time—or my tears, as Lottie put it. I dumped him right after. But not before he gave me this.”

She held out a piece of paper, one of his poems. It looked rumpled and worn—*well-loved,* he realised.

“Glad you got it,” he said. “But no need to thank me, really.”

“I heard you and Jillian went on a date earlier this year,” Priscilla said. “But you told her that you were already gone for someone else.”

“Er… yeah.”

“And are things still like that?”

He nodded. “They are.”

“She’s lucky then, the girl you’ve fallen for.”

Remus smiled, genuinely. “Not as lucky as I am.”

The girls squealed—*actually* squealed—and Priscilla turned back to them to join in, before carefully tucking her poem away.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” One of them asked.

“Oh!” Remus felt stupid for nearly missing his chance. He passed the clipboard over. “It’s for one of my friends—Marlene McKinnon? Anyway, she’s captain of the girls football team, and she’s trying to petition the school to let them play in the tournament at the end of the year.”

“Oh my god, I love that,” Priscilla said. “Who says only boys can play sports?”

“Yeah, it’s complete bollocks,” he agreed. “Would you consider signing?”

He'd hardly needed to ask; one by one the girls went around and added their names to the list.

“Would you like us to take a copy?” Priscilla offered. “Val and I are on the dance team and Katie’s in the art club so we could get you a lot of signatures.”

“Yeah, that’d be great! Thanks so much.”

“No, thank *you,”* they giggled, each taking a spare copy of the petition and slipping past him.

“And don’t be a stranger, Remus! Let’s meet for lunch sometime,” Priscilla called. “I wanna hear more about your mysterious girlfriend.”

“Yeah. Yeah—totally!” Pleased, Remus looked down at the petition before an idea suddenly occurred to him. If that many girls knew his name, then it stood to reason that they might not object to giving them theirs.

Whispering a silent apology to Lily, Remus left his post in the hallway and ventured into the dining hall. There he began going table to table, interrupting other students until it wasn’t even scary anymore. He even approached Audriana, who had since cooled whatever crush she’d been brewing.

“You’re just too fun to tease, I think,” she cooed, before signing the petition and taking an extra copy to hand out among her theatre group.

When he’d exhausted all of the filled tables, Remus snagged an apple from the fruit trays along the far wall and scurried back out into the hallway. Fully ready to brag to Lily about his feat, he didn’t notice the interruption heading his way until the clipboard was tugged from his hands.

“Collecting donations for the poor and buggery, Loony?” Barty sneered. He waved the clipboard around as if to taunt him, while Regulus stood by beside him, looking indifferent. Remus might’ve reacted badly, had he not had over a week to put Regulus Black from his mind. He pulled the apple from his mouth and squared his shoulders, ready to take the pair head-on.

“Just give it back, Crouch.”

“You know those girls won’t actually be able to keep up in a real tournament,” Barty goaded. “No amount of signatures can change basic biology.”

“Sounds like exactly the sort of misogynistic bullshit I disagree with. Now hand it over and piss off before I write you up for harassing a prefect.”

“Ah, that’s right, ‘Loony the Prefect’—we all best run or else risk detention and a broken nose.” Barty pinched his and moaned mockingly before ripping the stack of petitions off the clipboard and flapping them in Regulus' direction. “Lookie here, Reg. This list’s only got girls’ names on it. Should’ve known since all Lupin's good for is stealing girlfriends.”

Remus crossed his arms. “Wouldn’t have thought that that would bother you much, Crouch, since you hardly have a girlfriend to steal.”

Barty’s sneer turned into a bitter scowl, and with one sharp toss, he scattered the petitions across the floor, throwing the clipboard down for good measure as he retreated up the hall. The pen he chucked the other direction. Afterwards he gave Remus a look that was worthy of a good pounding and began flouncing up the hall.

“Come on, Reg, let's go before we catch a case 'a the queers. Good luck with your silly round robin, Loony!”

Grinding his teeth together, Remus bent down and began collecting the papers, wincing as other students stepped on them and left dirty boot-prints behind.

“Here.”

It was Regulus. He bent down over Remus, holding out a stack of petitions. Remus eyed him sceptically, before taking the papers and adding them back into the pile.

“Shouldn’t you have gone already? Think your crap friend's calling for you.”

“Barty doesn’t tell me what to do.”

Remus scowled further, fetching his clipboard and standing up to tower over the other boy. “Yeah well, I know you’re hard to figure out on principle, but why you’d ever want to hang around him is truly beyond me."

"Yes," Regulus said, "it is beyond you."

He bent down to pick up a few more petitions, passing them over, but Remus turned his nose up.

"What's that you're always saying—'I never asked for your help'?"

"Do you want them or not?"

Huffing, Remus snatched them back. "What's with the sudden friendliness?"

"I'm not being friendly. We aren't friends."

"But we could've been, couldn't we? I thought we might've had a chance there. For a while anyway..."

"You're delusional. We can't be friends, you're already my brother's… friend."

"You're really starting to sound like a broken record," Remus snapped. "Hear me now, Regulus Black—*I* decide who I'm friends with, that's it. There's no 'convenience' to it. I'm not friends with people because I share a room with them, or lessons—I'm friends with them because I *like* them. And I even liked you for a while, 'til you showed your true colours..."

Regulus' eyes traced the ground. They stayed there for a long time, and eventually Remus had had enough. He turned to go.

"Why does it make me any worse?" Regulus asked suddenly.

"Worse than what?" Remus demanded, whipping his head around.

"Than him." Regulus' eyes came up. Hard, and grey. Almost familiar. "I was angry," he said sternly, "so I got you back. Tell me, how does that make me worse than my brother?"

Remus drew up short. He'd been prepared for another fight—more quippy remarks accompanied by aloof undertones; but for all his wisdom, he'd somehow forgotten. Despite the cold exterior, despite the viper-like tongue, Regulus was still only a sixteen year-old kid.

"It doesn't."

"Then why would you want to be friends with him and not me?"

"I didn't think you wanted to be friends with me, Regulus."

Regulus seemed to remember himself. He raised his chin. "I... I don't!"

"That doesn't sound very convincing." Remus sighed again, and reached up to scratch the back of his head. "You know, you really messed me up there for a while. What you did really *fucking* sucked."

“Guess that makes us even.”

No, it's your fault! Your fault, your fault!

Remus closed his mind off to the voice. He didn’t want it affecting his decisions. He thought about leaving. A part of him even wanted to, but Remus had always been nosy when it came to Sirius and his problems. And whether either of them liked it or not, Regulus was one of Sirius' problems.

So, Remus extended his hand one final time.

“Even, then?”

There was a moment of silence. Maybe it was shock; like Regulus couldn’t believe he was offering him a second chance. It almost looked as though he was going to decline—Remus told himself to expect it. But rather than push it away, or even take it, Regulus gestured to the petitions.

“Have you got a pen?”

Now it was Remus’ turn to be shocked. He'd lost the one Barty had stolen, so he desperately searched his pockets and came back with one of the biros Lily had supplied him with, dubiously handing it over. Regulus took the pen along with his clipboard, stunning him further when he left his name printed neatly beneath the others. He held onto the petition for a moment longer, reading it over, before finally passing it back, the picture of good manners.

“Even.”

“You’ve surprised me,” Remus said.

“Is that good thing or bad thing?”

“Good,” he smiled. “Definitely good.”

Regulus nodded pensively while Remus tried not to let his relief show on his face. To hide it, he glanced down at the petition and remembered the mess that had gotten them there in the first place.

“Look, maybe it’s not my place,” he started, “but just one word of advice?"

"I'm not going to talk to Sirius."

"Ha, no… But you should talk to Trish."

Regulus puckered a bit. Guilty.

"She won't talk to me. Not after what I said."

"Nah, you see, I think she will. It's her hamartia."

It earned him a funny look, but Remus only nodded earnestly.

"Just try apologising to her. You don't have to be friends or anything, but I know it'd mean a lot. She thinks you're really cool."

Regulus hesitated, and suddenly his proud demeanour vanished in favour of that awkward, shy kid Remus had only just begun to notice beneath the surface.

"Alright, I'll apologise to her. But not because you told me to. For your information, I was going to apologise anyway."

"Of course," Remus smiled. "Oh, and one more thing. Whatever you do, don't—well… If you see a brownie from now until Christmas, it'd probably be best to avoid it. But you didn't hear that from me."

The barest hint of a smile crossed Regulus' features. Remus counted it as a win.

* * *

Sunday 4th December 1977 – The Night Before Exams…

That evening, they finished their final round of studying early and even skipped dinner. It was all part of the plan; anyone who happened to follow their nose to the Godric kitchenette would've found only four boys, innocently cooking a batch of brownies ahead of a long week of exams. In reality, they were plotting—plotting while simmering the ground up hashish in a pot of melted butter. And though it seemed almost a shame to waste good product on sods as sour as Severus Snape and Barty Crouch, all four of them were optimistic.

"I don't endorse this sort of thing," Lily said as she passed an armful of dinner boxes and canteen napkins to James, "but dinner is important."

“Love you too,” James grinned, kissing her forehead and making his girlfriend scoff while she dusted the cocoa powder from the front of his jumper.

Once the brownies were securely in the oven, Remus retired to the common room with a book. He tried reading, but his head kept thumping in rhythm with the grandfather clock and he couldn’t manage more than a page before feeling dizzy. Somehow he’d managed to wake that morning feeling poor and lethargic. It was probably a result of all of his late-night studying, but there was so much to know! And with the poems… *ugh.*

He tried not to complain. None of the other Marauders seemed to be under the weather, and Remus didn’t want to risk being left behind during the prank. As he finished gorging himself on lukewarm lamb and potatoes, courtesy of Lily, Sirius came to join him by the fire.

“You feeling alright or are we gonna have to postpone?” He asked, pressing a hand to Remus’ forehead.

“Can't postpone,” Remus said, batting his hand away. "Tomorrow's exams."

"We could always wait until another day. Don't matter to me whether Reg fails his chem or maths exam."

Remus shook his head. He'd purposely neglected to tell Sirius that he'd tipped Regulus off to the prank. Better to avoid a fight and let him think his brother had outsmarted them. Even if he hadn't known, getting Regulus to eat anything so suspicious had been a long shot at best.

“Don't worry about it, I’m fine now. You three all finished in the kitchen then?”

Sirius held up a plate of wrapped brownies, grinning slyly. “By tomorrow morning, half of Salazar’s going to be taking their exams while severely off their trolley.”

James and Peter appeared in the doorway of the common room, puffer jackets in hand. “Dorm rounds are done,” James grinned, while Peter clapped his hands together. “Let’s get to messing, lads.”

Not bothering to be very sneaky, they went out the front doors and were rewarded by immediate teeth-chattering cold. It hadn’t snowed yet, but the forecast was calling for it, and the overnights were

already dipping below freezing temperatures.

“I hope you saved a few of those for us,” Remus said, eyeing the brownies as they made their way up the dorm’s front path.

“We don’t get stoned on the job,” Sirius said, holding the plate of edibles out of reach.

“I didn’t mean for tonight, you twee idiot, I meant for after exams when we—”

Up front, James spun around on his heel and pushed them both back. *“Abort! Abort!”* He cried. “It’s Filch’s car!”

“Shit,” Peter hissed, as they all turned to see the caretaker’s rusted lorry creep up the road, headlamps casting a harsh glow like two great yellow eyes.

“We can go around back!” Sirius hissed. "Quick, cut between the Houses!"

Quickly they all turned and booked it back around the side of their dorm where the December frost crunched loudly beneath their boots. There Remus could feel the haze of his breath just in front of his face, but it was a cloudy night and without the moon or the street lamps to illuminate their path it was as though they were walking blind. He stumbled more than once on the uneven lawn, which was treacherous enough in daylight, covered with ice puddles and the occasional molehill. They could still hear the distant bang and rumble of the caretaker's truck, as though warning them to keep their wits about them or risk detention all the way into the new year.

“I can’t see anything back here,” Peter complained. “It’s like walking with a bloody sheet over your eyes.”

“Should we go grab the torches?” Asked James.

“Don’t bother,” Remus said. “Let’s just get on with this so we can get back.”

“Easy for you to say, wolf-man,” Sirius teased. “You can probably see in the dark.”

“I think it would be more ironic if Lupin turned out to be a vampire or something,” James mused. “I mean, he never sleeps.”

Peter chimed in; “What are you talking about? Moony sleeps all the time now. Can’t hardly get him up in the morning.”

“That’s just the morning,” Sirius said haughtily; “At night he’s actually very—”

Remus went to pinch him. He’d just found Sirius’ arm when suddenly the ground came out from underneath him. *Literally*.

With a surprised yelp, Remus plunged downwards in a short free-fall which ended several feet down on a stiff cushion of dirt. On impact his knee jabbed him in the chest sharply, momentarily winding him as his friends cried out in shock up above.

“Moony!” Sirius shouted. “Holy fuck! Are you okay?!”

Groaning, Remus looked up. A circle was impressed into the inky sky, all of the stars blotted out by clouds. The hole around him had to be at least nine or ten feet deep, but he could just make out the round shape of his friends' heads peering in on him.

“Yeah, m’fine,” he grunted. “Dirt broke my fall, I think.”

“It’s the bloody hole they dug looking for the time capsule,” James’ voice called. “Can’t believe they haven’t filled it in yet! I swear this school’s *trying* to kill us.”

“Don’t shout,” Peter warned. “Filch is probably still around... Can you reach us if we hold our arms out, Moony?"

In answer, Remus began feeling around for the walls of the pit. It was slimy, covered in dirt and muck, but he managed to find a short tree root lodged into its side. Grabbing hold of it, he reached up and for the barest of moments managed to brush a set of finger tips before the root gave way and he collided back down into the dirt on his arse.

“Shit... Too slippery. Frost has practically turned the bottom to mud.”

“We could get a rope—pull him out,” James suggested.

“There’s also that ladder in the kitchen cupboard,” Peter added.

“Okay. Well, you two go on then, I’m gonna stay with him,” Sirius said.

“Alright, be right back. Hang in there, Lupin!” James chirped, before the sound of shuffling feet began to fade into the distance.

“And be quick!” Sirius shouted after them. Remus shook his head lightly. There wasn’t a version of Sirius Black that came in ‘quiet mode’.

With nothing else to do but wait, Remus tried his best to survey his surroundings. The hole was pitch black, the kind of dark that began to look like grotesque faces when you focused on one spot for too long. He could tell just by puttering around that the bottom was at least a couple of feet across, enough space for him to sit comfortably at least, which he did and instantly regretted as the freezing dirt squelched beneath him. *Whatever,* he was already covered in muck; he could feel it seeping up his shirt sleeves from his hands and across the knees of his trousers where he fell.

“Moony, you sure you’re alright?” Sirius called from up above.

“Yeah,” Remus called back. “Believe it or not I actually think it’s warmer down here.”

“Well duh, no wind down in a hole.”

Remus smiled to himself and crossed his arms over his chest, glancing up. The sky had begun to clear some, and he could just see the beginning twinklings of stars peaking through.

“It’s like another world down here. You can actually see the stars shining,” he said. "Hey... How's that one John Lennon song go?"

A little snort. “... Are you high?”

“Ha, I wish. Would probably make this a lot more funny. C'mon, you're the one with the perfect memory, tell me how it goes.”

"Superior memory, not perfect."

"That mean you don't know it?"

Another snort. " 'And we all shine on... like the moon and the stars and the sun'... That the one?"

"Yeah." Remus hugged his knees. "That's the one."

There was silence for a moment, and then Sirius began to whistle the tune. Finally he stopped;

“Just you wait, Moons. We’re gonna get you out and finish this prank. You can laugh then.”

“S’long as I get first shower privileges tonight.”

“Of course. You think I’d let such a filthy man crawl into bed with me?”

“You’re impossible.”

Sirius’ head appeared over the edge of the hole, like a dark silhouette. “No, I’m *improbable.* Unexpected.”

That you are.

Remus kept on staring up. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought Sirius might be smiling. From down below, it was as though he were in the sky—floating amongst the stars like the Sirius for which he’d been named. It was so like him; Sirius was like the sky.

Remus was cold, and wet, and yet somehow content. *Sirius was his sky.*

“Say,” Sirius started, after a while; “how many of those poems have you written now?”

“Uh, maybe fifty or so?”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. Think I’m gonna stop soon though. I’m running out of adjectives to describe girls’ eyes. There’s really only so many times one can use the word ‘dazzling’ before it loses meaning altogether.”

There was a short chuckle, then; “So… you’re gonna stop soon?”

“Probably, yeah. I’d like to focus on our songs a bit more, I think. At least that way we’ll have something to show James and Pete’s parents over Christmas.”

“Oh. Well, that’s… That’s smart.’

The way Sirius answered made Remus think he wasn’t saying all there was to say, so he squinted up in the dark again.

“Sirius.”

“Hm?”

“Out with it. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Sirius.” Remus grabbed a clod of dirt, throwing it up at the edge of the pit.

“... You missed.”

“Out with it!”

There was a great sigh, and then a flourishing hand appeared over the edge of the pit. “I just don’t know how I feel about it, s’all. You… writing love poems for other people.”

“But they're not *my* love poems."

"I know that! But you're—you're complimenting them. Making them feel good... I just sorta thought you'd only want to do that with me."

"Oh."

“It’s not like it's that big of a deal or anything,” Sirius said quickly. “Not even that much different from songwriting, right? And people paid Wilde and Shakespeare to write for ‘em so… You’re good at it too! It’s why they like them so much. A-And they're nice. Genuine, even. In fact, yesterday Cindy Carlisle showed me hers, and—”

“Sirius—”

“I don’t want you to think I hate them! Because they’re so beautiful. And they’re so 'you' too, and I love you, so...”

“Sirius!”

“… Yeah, Moons?”

“I’m sorry.” Remus frowned deeply. Such an idiot, he was. “I didn’t realise writing those poems would bother you.”

“They don’t! It’s not the poems… it’s… the other people.”

“It’s alright, I understand now,” Remus said. “I’ll stop writing them. Right now—I’m done. I was finished with ‘em anyway.”

“No, you don’t have to stop,” Sirius replied. “It’s good practice, and good money too, obviously. You don’t have to stop just ‘cause it bothers me.”

“Of course I do. We’re dating—why would I ever want to bother you?”

Sirius fell quiet then, as though he hadn’t been expecting such an answer. Because it made him nervous, Remus sat up a bit more, craning his head as though he could catch a glimpse of his love in the darkness.

“Sirius, you can tell me when things bother you,” he called. “I *want* you to tell me when things bother you. I’m not as good as you—I’m not a mind-reader. But I think this—talking bit... Talking about the things that bother us—well, it’s what a relationship is supposed to be, innit?”

“... You suck.”

“Huh?”

“How about beguiling?” Sirius said suddenly. “ ‘And her eyes were like a beguiling labyrinth, deep and without end’.”

“I—” Remus stopped to let out a chuckle. “I can’t keep up with you.”

“There’s always the classic ‘ravishing’. Ooh, yeah, tell her that her eyes were ravishing. That’ll really get a girl going.”

“How about ‘glorious’ instead?" Remus supplied. " ‘And glory was in the skies, reflected in those grey, storm cloud eyes’. What’d you think —any good?”

He’d meant the rhyme as a quip, but when Sirius said nothing, Remus grew nervous again.

“Sirius…? Come on, I was only teasing. You’re still there, right? … *Sirius?”*

There was no launching cry—no *‘bombs away!’* —Sirius simply sailed down into the pit in front of him with a heaving grunt, nearly landing directly on top of Remus’ ankles.

“Oh shit—that was way deeper than I thought!” He gasped, wobbling in the muck. Remus gaped up at him, half frozen from surprise.

“What—What the fuck are you doing?!”

Sirius gave him a wry look. “Oh, you know… Figured you’d be lonely down here by yourself. Thought I'd 'drop in'—heh!”

“But you’re supposed to be up there so they can find us in the dark!”

“… Oops.”

“Oh for fuck’s sakes.”

“You’re right though—s’cozy down here,” Sirius said, plopping down next to Remus in the dirt so they were shoulder to shoulder. “Whaddya think, should we cuddle?”

“Shut up.”

“C’moooon, you know you want to. And you were being so romantic a second ago—*my little poet.”*

“Shove off. James and Peter—”

“Would probably find it very hot and want to join in. We can just tell them we were cold. That we’re staving off fever.”

Remus smiled to himself and rolled his eyes. “Only we would end up stuck in a hole the night before exams.”

“That’s why we’re going to be rock stars and everyone else is going to be ordinary,” Sirius sassed.

Remus reached out and took his hand. Even in the dark—even covered in as much filth as they were—he knew every line and curve of the beautiful pianist’s fingers that instantly opened up and intertwined with his own. It made sense—he had spent the better part of the last two years zoning out on them.

“You sure seem to like Trish,” Sirius said eventually.

“I do,” Remus answered, then when Sirius was quiet again; “What, no quippy jokes?”

“I’ve…” He took a breath. “I’ve decided I wasn’t going to be jealous anymore.”

“Blimey, when’d you decide that?”

“About four seconds ago.”

“Prime timing, that.”

Sirius’ free hand came up, swatting him lightly across the nose and

leaving a smudge of dirt behind. “What’s the point of being jealous when all you do is go around making everyone like you so bloody much?”

Remus snorted, wiping his face on his sleeve. “I do like Trish,” he said. “But I think I like her—*well*—because she reminds me a bit of you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So did Tonya, actually. I sort of… look for you in other people.”

“Why would you need to do that when you’ve got the real thing right in front of you?”

“It’s my hamartia, I guess.”

Sirius hummed in delight. “Careful, you start saying stuff like that and I might actually fall in love with you for real.”

Maybe it was the darkness, or the fact that he couldn’t see Sirius’ face and expressions in their entirety. Whatever it was, it cushioned him enough to let the words flow out like a river.

“I love you,” Remus said softly. “More than anyone.”

There was the barest sound of an inhale, and then Sirius’ mouth came up and he settled his lips along Remus’ lips. Remus could practically taste his smile. Hotter than any fever, it burned like the enduring passion of a star. It singed and warmed him all at once.

“I love you,” Sirius said between kisses; “The most.”

“I love you, Sirius,” Remus said back, because he couldn’t stand not saying it. "Always."

I love you, I love you. I am in love with you, Sirius Black.

Heedless of the dirt or the muck, they clung to each other in the darkness. In his head, Remus was already constructing the lie that got Sirius into the pit in the first place when he spotted the familiar yellow of a torch cutting across the top lip of their filthy prison.

“Sirius,” he mumbled against his lips; “Sirius, they’re back—James and Pete.”

Sirius broke away immediately and jumped to his feet, arms flailing.

“Here!” He cried. “We’re down here, Prongs!”

Standing next to him, Remus jumped too, both of them shrieking until finally their saviour was bearing down on them with a torch trained viciously in their eyes.

Hand shielding his brow, Sirius swore; “Fuck Wormtail, mind turning your light that way a bit? S’not like we’ve been sitting in the bloody dark this entire time or anything.”

The torch whipped away and Remus blinked around the sun spots in his vision. Then his stomach sank to his knees.

“Ooh, dear, we are in trouble,” Filch sneered, grinning with teeth as yellow as his torch.

Bollocks.

* * *

Probably against his better judgement, the sour caretaker did agree to get them out of the pit. When Remus finally climbed out, covered head to toe in muck, he found James and Peter standing off to the side, both looking rather sorry and glum. They’d been caught on their way back out on their rescue mission, and rather than risk leaving their two best friends to freeze to death overnight, they gave up the ghost and told Filch everything. Though they conveniently left out the part about the weed being in the brownies.

“I’m telling you—they’re a surprise for a friend’s birthday. We were gonna leave them outside their door,” Sirius scowled. Filch had them lined up in front of their dorm, marching up and down the line like a drill sergeant.

“Likely story comin’ from a couple ‘a pumpkin heads out after hours,” he scoffed. “No, I’m confiscatin’ the lot as contraband.”

All four boys exchanged an unsure glance, but Filch had already set the plate of sweets aside. “Now, turn out yer pockets—all of yeh. Let's see what else you've managed to sneak in illegally.”

They did so bitterly, handing over everything from wads of pre-chewed gum (“That’s right nasty, Pete.”) to a near-full pack of cigarettes. Remus lost his second lighter to Filch, and was

contemplating his odds of being able to slip his hand into the caretaker's pocket to get it back when they were all ordered to lift their arms so they could be patted down for any other possible 'illicit goods'. None of them had any weed on them, but Remus realised too late that his pockets weren't quite so empty.

"You ruddy mop-sticks hide all sorts of rubbish under these bleedin' coats—" Filch was saying, before his gnarled fingers fell across the hard shape tucked into Remus' breast pocket; "What have we 'ere, 'ey?"

Before he could stop him, Filch ripped the lapel of Remus' coat away and shoved his hand down, snatching up his song journal in one fell swoop.

"Oi! Give that back!" Remus cried. He'd forgotten that he'd left it in his coat pocket and seeing Filch's slimy fingers all over it made him thrum with fury.

"If this little book were so important to yeh, then you shouldn't have been caught out after hours!"

"You can't just grab a student like that!" Sirius lashed. "It's practically assault! We have a right to autonomy and privacy!"

"Rule breakers forfeit all rights to privacy!"

"But you can't just take our things! What does one little book have to do with being out after curfew?!"

"I'm reviewing it for contraband! Who knows what sort of dirty messages are written in 'ere!"

"It's a bloody notebook!" James hollered.

"One more word out of any of you's and I'll have yeh muckin' stables 'til June!"

Sirius managed a swipe at the journal, but Filch caught him by the wrist.

"Try that again and I'll break yer fingers," he threatened, before throwing Sirius back and grabbing Remus by the collar to haul him out front. "Now march, ya bleedin' ingrates! You'll head straight to Professor McGonagall's office in the morning!"

Filch slogged them all the way up to the fourth floor of Godric House, muck and all, and left them in the doorway of their bedroom with a final threat; “I see any of you’s out again after hours and I’ll make yeh wish you’d never been born!”

The moment the awful caretaker had shut the door and stormed off, Sirius charged it, wailing on the wood with his boot. “Fucking—*DICK!”*

“That’s enough, Black,” James sighed. “You’re gonna wake up the whole dorm.”

After stripping out of his dirty clothes, Remus slumped back on his bed. Beyond the embarrassment that Filch might possibly read his songbook, he was left more than a little depressed. The notebook had everything; “September”, his version of Sirius’ “Wag the Dog”, "Tonya’s Song", and even the beginning drabbles of “Hard to Be a Teen”. Every shred and scrap of his songwriting was in there. Now it was all gone, and unlike Sirius he didn’t have the musical memory to replace it.

“Fuck,” Remus hissed, aiming a light kick of his own at his wardrobe.

Instantly Sirius was at his side on the bed. “I’m sorry, Moons. I know what it was that bleedin’ codger took.”

He sighed, holding his head which had begun to ache. “Whatever, I’m tired. I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Peter reasoned, while Remus rifled through his hutch for a fresh towel.

“Says you, Wormtail,” Sirius snapped. “You didn’t have much to say when Filch was robbing us blind.”

“Well, I just assumed we’d get it all back."

This gave the other three boys pause.

“You mean break into Filch’s office?” James started.

“Yeah, duh!”

“Pete, we tried that—in year ten. Twice! Filch had us cleaning out the crawl spaces above the science buildings for weeks.”

“I still get nightmares about all the dead squirrels,” Sirius shuddered.

“We didn’t have Moony back then,” Peter reasoned; *“And*—Filch hadn't confiscated an entire plate of edibles right before either.”

“Oh my god, he’s right,” Sirius said, perking straight up; “In a hour that son of a bitch is gonna be out cold. Christ, this kid might be a genius after all!”

While Peter crossed his arms haughtily, Remus slowly looked up from his hutch.

“Do you really think he’d eat them?”

“Do I think he'd resist eating an entire plate of freshly-baked goods? We’d have a better chance of finding a giant squid in the Dubh,” Peter scoffed. “Nothing ever comes out of Filch’s office, especially not sweets.”

Sirius leapt up from the bed. “This is brilliant! That tosspot doesn’t know there’s weed in them—which means the prank worked after all! By the time he wakes up he’s not even gonna remember what year it is, let alone that he gave us detention!”

James, ever the voice of reason, chimed in; “As much as I want to stick it to Filch, we do have exams in the morning, you know.”

“Oh c'mon!” Sirius cried, surging toward his best friend and clasping him over the shoulders; “What would you rather be known as, Potter? The guy that got a good night’s sleep before one of his boring law exams—which he’s been studying for religiously *anyway*—or the guy that broke into Filch’s own bloody office when he was utterly caned?!”

The answer was obvious on James’ face, but it was Remus he looked to.

“Well, Moony? It’s your book, and you’re the one who’s gonna have to pop the lock.”

As his friends rounded on him, Remus glanced at the clock on his bedside. He was tired and filthy, and still had a headache… but it wasn’t shit-all hour yet.

“Alright. Let’s go rob the bastard.”

That was all the permission the others needed. Bundling up in whatever mucky coat they could find, they quickly slipped back out

into the night. Four boys with a bone to pick.

Filch's office was located in a tiny building tucked away behind the cafeteria called Bastion Hall, though over the years it'd affectionately earned itself the moniker of 'the Bastille', since anyone going in was certainly about to be punished. Remus had only been inside twice, the first time after Filch had caught them setting off firecrackers on Sirius' sixteenth birthday, and the second just last week when he'd been fleeing the clutches of Audriana and her pack of girls. He'd never made it all the way into the caretaker's personal office though, and for that he was thankful.

Being one of the older buildings on campus, the Bastille felt more like the Shrieking Shack's more straight-edged cousin. The floor tiles were chipped and worn and all of the walls had a certain shade of yellow to them, earned from years of age and smoking indoors. Together they snuck in quietly, their hearts thrumming with the excitement of getting to stick to one of Hawkings' oldest bullies. Sirius, who naturally had the most experience with Filch's office due to his many detentions, took the lead, brandishing them onward in the dark.

"It's this way," he whispered, glee and anticipation clear in his voice.

"Remember," James said, "this is a covert rescue mission. We're only taking back what's ours."

"And what we can carry," Sirius sniggered.

They made it to the office door, which had a cross hatch window complete with curtains drawn behind it and a small plaque bearing Filch's name. James and Sirius leaned their heads together to peek through the small slit between each curtain before drawing back with big smiles on their faces.

"He's in there, alright. Looks like he's asleep," Sirius said.

"Did he eat the brownies?" Peter asked.

"Can't be sure. Try and keep quiet with the door, alright Moony?"

Remus nodded, pulling a few pins from his pocket and kneeling down before the doorknob. Its insides were worn down from years of use, but he managed it quick enough, grinning when that familiar tick and click echoed from its joints.

"Thought you said this was going to be hard," he quipped snidely.

“ ‘Fraid that’s not the only door we gotta get through,” Sirius smirked, making Remus’ smile falter a bit.

Once he’d moved out of the way, James slowly rotated the doorknob. All four of them held their breath as it dropped open, squeaking painfully on its hinges until finally they had a decent view of the grimy man through the gap. Filch was slumped back in a seemingly ancient leather chair with his eyes closed and his feet up on the desk. Next to them, the desk lamp was still on, illuminating a half-eaten batch of Marauders-certified weed brownies.

“Oh fuck yeah,” Sirius breathed, fist-bumping James.

“Make sure he’s really asleep before you start celebrating,” Peter warned as they all straightened up and slipped soundlessly into the room.

“How many d’you figure he ate?” Remus asked.

James squinted at the brownies; “Looks like at least six.”

Creeping up to the caretaker’s side, the Marauders peered down at him. Filch’s eyes were closed and he was buried up to his nose in his heavy winter coat, but he was unmoving—completely still.

“You think he’s dead?” Sirius murmured grimly.

“No way, you can’t die from too much weed,” James said, before his face fell; “Right, Moony?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tried it!”

They leaned in closer and slowly Sirius held up a single finger. Before Peter could even attempt to stop him, he poked Filch in one wrinkly cheek and the caretaker gave a hoarse snort, making them all wheel back in fright. Though by either sheer dumb luck or the brownie’s effectiveness, Filch stayed asleep, now snoring horribly.

“And what would you have done if he had woken up?” Remus grumbled.

“Ask if he’d like another brownie. Duh.”

"Just don't touch him anymore," James shot, as they all spread out to start their search.

The office itself was covered in clutter; stacks upon stacks of old

newspapers and magazines covered every surface, coffee-ringed mugs and overflowing ashtrays littered between it all. One wall was made up entirely of rusted filing cabinets overflowing with files and other bits of paper and there was a coat rack in the corner piled so high with jackets an entire person could've been buried beneath. There was only one window in the entire room, which was covered in dead flies with its exterior barred and coated in an endless array of spitballs—some of which were certainly courtesy of Sirius.

"Moony, over here," James called, ushering Remus over to another door on the room's far side where they'd all gathered. One look at it told him everything he needed to know about his friends' first failed attempt to storm the office; the door had at least a dozen locks of varying styles, some that were definitely going to need to be pried off.

"I think I'm gonna need more than a few bobby pins," he winced. "Anyone see any keys?"

"He always keeps 'em on him," Peter winced, turning to look back at the dozing man. James joined him, scratching his head dubiously.

"Moony, you wouldn't happen to make a good pickpocket too, would ya?"

"Don't bother. It's a good thing Filch always comes prepared," Sirius grinned, scooping up a crowbar that had been unceremoniously left in an umbrella stand next to the desk.

Once Remus had rid them of the locks he could handle and James had taken a pair of bolt cutters to the thin door chains, Sirius slid the edge of the crowbar up under the final bolt and gently pressed his weight against it. The door gave a deep groan, making them all wince, but still did not give.

"Prongs, come help me out with this."

With the two of them at it, the bolt began to pry back, millimetre by excruciating millimetre.

"So close!" James grunted, before finally the lock snapped back with a sharp bang and they fell against each other in one big pile. Horrified, Peter and Remus whirled on Filch. The caretaker gave a low grunt through his snores, but kept sleeping, and they relaxed as Sirius tossed the crowbar away with another clatter and popped up to his feet.

“Open sesame,” he grinned, throwing the door wide.

Inside was a mountain of confiscated goods. Boxes towered over one another, dingy from dust and neglect, and there were cabinets full of liquor bottles, glass pipes, and other drug paraphernalia. There was a trunk of prohibited clothes in one corner with a rusted, metal shoe rack next to it, piled high in the same risqué heels worn by the corner girls that came out at night in Soho’s red-light district. Above that was an entire shelf dedicated to banned books and dirty magazines, and as it so happened, a crate of what looked to be spray paint. Just beneath that was several plastic tubs full of water pistols, which must’ve been confiscated from the largest water-battle ever hosted. The room was absolutely a delinquent’s treasure trove.

“How much you want to bet there’s a family of rats living in here?” James asked, pulling the string on the only free-hanging light bulb in the entire room.

“Smells like mould and moth balls,” Peter commented, eyeing a tub randomly overflowing randomly with rubber ducks.

“Oi lads,” Sirius called from next to the trunk of clothes, “think Filch plays dress up?” He held an ugly old bra the size of his head up over his shirt and James snorted.

“I think that belonged to your grandmother, actually.”

“And how would you know that?” Sirius asked, whipping the brassiere at the other boy’s head.

“C’mon Padfoot, you know the old ladies love him,” Remus smirked. James scooped the bra up from the floor and threw it at him in return.

“Alright,” James ordered once they’d stopped laughing, “let’s get our crap and get out of here.”

“What’s the rush, Prongs? Even if ol' Filchy wakes up he’ll be in no fit state to do anything. I want to look around,” Sirius said, pulling open a drawer and inspecting its contents. “Holy fuck—jackpot!” With a triumphant look, Sirius pulled out several roman candles, waving them around and making shooting noises at his friends. James instantly joined him, rifling through eagerly.

“There are some of Bob’s firecrackers in here!” He said gleefully. “Think of what we could do with all these.”

“Burn down the entire school, likely enough,” Peter added, though he didn’t look any less excited as he opened his bag and began filling it with all sorts of explosives.

On a more personal mission, Remus began sorting through his own share of drawers and boxes in search of his songbook. As he did, he ended up coming across an impressive array of tapes and vinyl LPs, which Sirius practically drooled over until James reminded them that they were only to take what was absolutely necessary. (The fireworks, in this case, were absolutely a necessity.) Remus thought he'd found what he was looking for when he unearthed a box of tattered notebooks and journals, but all that was there was a collection of assorted class notes and diaries older than himself. Unsatisfied, he pushed the box away.

Across the room, Sirius beckoned Peter over; “Wormy, get a load of this—” before promptly opening a can of rubber snakes in his face, making Peter jump back and nearly topple a stack of cardboard boxes that was taller than he was.

“At least someone’s having fun,” Remus muttered to himself, before glancing back toward the main office. There was a chance Filch hadn’t bothered to sort through everything he’d taken off them earlier in the night before sitting down to enjoy his stolen midnight snack, which meant that he could’ve still had Remus’ songbook and lighter on his person. The thought didn’t bode well, but he had to try.

Leaving his friends to their nonsense, Remus made his way back into the office and pushed up his sleeves. He’d just rounded Filch’s chair when he spotted his first obstacle; sometime between getting the storage door open and heading inside, Mrs. Norris had taken up residence on the sleeping caretaker’s lap, her yellow, lamp-like eyes staring back at him as though she were daring him to try anything funny.

“Nice kitty,” he breathed, slowly sliding closer. “I’m not gonna hurt you, I just need to…” Biting his lip, Remus slipped his hand into the side pocket of Filch’s coat, feeling around. He didn’t dare take his eyes off of Mrs. Norris, afraid that the moment he did she would come flying at him with her claws extended or worse—wake her master.

Remus’ rifling was rewarded with his personal carton of Embassy cigarettes, which proved well enough that Filch had yet to empty his pockets. He tucked them away for safekeeping before moving on to the next pocket, in which he found Sirius’ cigarettes and three

lighters, one of them being his own.

“Moony!” Sirius called suddenly, his voice a strained whisper. “What are you *doing?”*

Remus looked back to find all three of his friends standing in the storage room doorway, utterly gawping.

“Are you mental?” Peter hissed.

“Just hold on,” he told them, before slowly reaching up to the collar of Filch’s jacket.

"You're gonna get yourself killed!"

Remus ignored the warning. He was so close. Only one more pocket left.

“That’s it, nice Mrs. Norris…”

The cat made a small noise like a trill and he froze, but all Filch did was snort and shift slightly in his chair. When the old man had settled again, Remus pressed on. He was holding his breath and would’ve bet anything that his friends were too, but when he finally managed to slip his hand into the inside breast pocket of Filch’s coat, his fingers brushed the smooth edges of his journal and he was able to grab hold of its cover.

Giddy with victory, Remus pulled his hand back and let out a sigh of relief. “Got it,” he grinned, holding up the book.

“Yeah, Moony!” James cheered quietly, then in perhaps a moment of oversight, he clapped his hands together and that was all it took to spook Mrs. Norris. The cat skittered off Filch’s lap with a yowl and each of them gasped in horror. Instantly a gnarled hand clamped down around Remus’ wrist, squeezing so tightly it threatened to crush his bones like a bird’s. Remus’ stomach launched into his throat as Filch turned his head, slowly opening one eye.

“What... time is it…?” He lurched in that scraggly voice of his.

Remus was speechless at first. It felt like a joke.

“H–H–Half past one."

Filch narrowed his beady eyes before swallowing like he’d tasted something fowl and dropping his head back against the chair. His grip

loosened on Remus' arm, and Remus ripped away, scrambling backwards until he slammed into Sirius' knees. It was only then that he realised that Filch was not in fact getting up to throttle him, but rather had fallen back asleep in his chair.

"Holy shit. You just might be the luckiest son of a bitch I've ever met in my life," Sirius said, helping Remus to his feet.

Remus shook his head grimly. "I think I'm gonna be sick..."

"Glad you got your book back, Lupin," James said, patting him on the back. "Now let's get out of here before the old fart actually wakes up."

With their pockets and school bags full of all sorts of banned bits and bobs, they took the remaining brownies and fled the hall, feeling richer than kings.

"Got all sorts of stuff perfect for pranking," James was telling Remus while they skittered up the sidewalks. "Rubber snakes, explosives, fart in a can—the works! Padfoot here, even found some of his own tapes that Filch had confiscated after our stereo prank in eleventh year."

In answer, Sirius held up the tape and kissed it. "Rock 'n' roll is back, baby!"

"We're so going to get expelled," Remus grinned, lighting a victory cigarette. Just then Peter shouted from up ahead;

"Hey lads, don't look now but it's snowing!"

They all glanced up at the night sky. It was bright and Remus could see the tiniest flickerings of little snowflakes as they drifted down to earth.

"First snow fall," he mumbled. "Always unexpected."

"This is great," James declared, batting Sirius fondly and not looking the least bit tired; "We got everything back and then some and in less than two weeks we'll be heading home—all of us, *together*. We should make more plans! Maybe try and see a live show—catch a glimpse of our futures, yeah? Is that new song of yours ready yet, Lupin?"

Remus pat his breast pocket, where his newly-returned songbook was securely tucked away. "Almost, Prongs."

“Brilliant! S’all brilliant!”

“So brilliant we should celebrate,” Sirius suggested, before drawing to a stop under one of the buzzing road lamps and reaching into Remus’ pocket himself and withdrawing his lighter. He tossed it at James, who caught it with a questioning look.

“You mean…?”

Sirius smirked, and at the same time, both boys said;

“Roman candles.”

“Oh hell yeah!” Peter cried, dropping his bag on the icy sidewalk as he and James eagerly began to root through it.

Remus stood back, content with his fag, but as he watched Sirius just turned around in front of him and blocked the view.

“Here," he said, holding up another zippo. "To make up for the one I just stole. And the one I lost...”

The lighter was silver, made with cheap plate metal that was already tarnishing on one side and turning brassy. Remus recognised it instantly. Utterly stunned, he reached out and took it, turning it over in his hands. It was the one Tomny had given him the day before eleventh year, the same one he'd lost to Filch ages ago. He was suddenly trembling, and not from the cold.

“You remembered!” Remus exclaimed, looking up at Sirius.

“ ‘Course. It meant a lot to you, I couldn’t very well leave it behind." Sirius grinned, then bit lip giddily. "That’s the right one, right? I had to sort through about a million of those little fuckers.”

"Blimey..." Remus’ face split into a smile, even though he felt like half-crying. “It’s definitely the right one. It’s Tomny’s actually. He—er… he gave it to me before I came to Hawkings.”

“Oh, well in that case—” Sirius made a grab for the lighter, but Remus pulled his hand back in time.

“What? What are you doing?”

“Can’t have you thinking ‘bout that toff every time you light up. My pride couldn’t take it.”

Remus laughed, unable to help himself. “I thought you were trying to be less jealous?”

“Of *girls.* I said nothing about other guys.”

“Shameless, you are.”

Sirius opened his mouth to deliver what was undoubtedly another clever quip, but suddenly a loud pop sounded from behind them, followed by a spectacular show of red as James aimed one of the roman candles up at the sky.

“Oi, Black,” he called, before dropping his arm and training the firework in their direction; “Think fast.”

Sirius tilted his head. “You wouldn’t—”

Oh, but he would.

The candle fired and Remus and Sirius had to dive apart to avoid it, hitting the grass with two low groans. They looked up in time to see a second shot—this one green—arc over their heads from Peter.

“You’re mental!” Sirius shouted. *"And so dead!"*

Cackling, James and Peter loped away across the frozen lawn while Sirius tossed Remus a firework of his own, quickly fumbling with a lighter and the fuse.

“This is how people end up in the hospital!” Remus warned, grappling for the roman candle before narrowly avoiding another green burst. *“Motherfu—!* You’re gonna regret that, Pete!”

“Bring it on, Moony!”

“Marauders, ATTAAAACK!” Sirius cried, racing after James with his candle pointed ahead of him like a magic wand. It blew red, lighting up his laughing face in the darkness.

No one, in fact, ended up in the hospital.

It was a good night.

Chapter End Notes

> Personally, I think I've been a little too good to you. Lots of fluff recently. So I think I'm gonna rock your worlds a bit for next

week's chapter. Mwah.

Chapter 82: Everything, or Not At All

Chapter Summary

> You might want to tuck in and cue up some Bowie for this one... it's a ride.

Chapter Notes

> C/W: for emotions????
> (and woo, we broke 600k lmfao. pfft this fic will never end...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm the guy in the sky,
Flying high, flashing eyes;
No surprise I told lies,
I'm the punk in the gutter;
I'm the new president,
And I grew and I bent,
Don't you know, don't it show?
I'm the punk with the stutter…

- "The Punk and the Godfather" The Who, 1973

Tuesday 6th December 1977

They say it's easy to become relaxed when one was in love, but whoever 'they' was must've been smoking some real strong shit. After two years Remus had grown used to life's little derailments such as fad gossip or the occasional detention, but he'd never truly been relaxed. He'd still had the same trouble sleeping as anywhere else, still lost out to his emotions during those terrible, high-tension moments, and was still carrying secrets on his back as though he were Atlas trying to hold up the sky.

Still, Sirius made things easier. Sirius had more of him than anyone else. He made Remus feel safe, even if there was hardly ever a calm moment between them. Most of the time loving Sirius felt like running headlong toward a brick wall; every shred of you screaming to stop, to pull back, but you can't because you've already committed. And then just when you're expecting to crash—expecting to shatter every

goddamn bone in your body—you haven't. You've made it through, there wasn't even a wall at all. It was a door. A magic door.

Yeah.

Loving Sirius Black was like magic. He was made of it. Perhaps that was the scariest part; Remus Lupin was not made of magic. He was made of resentment, of poor decisions. By the grace of a mother and father, he'd been made out of unlove, and now that he knew the difference, it was getting harder to ignore.

I should tell him, he thought, whenever the thoughts and memories began to seep back in. *We could understand each other even better then. And he wouldn't give a shit. It's only me who cares.*

Maybe, the voice said; *But what about after?*

What do you mean, after?

Don't play thick. ***After.*** *When he realises it isn't worth it. When your friends find someone better. When they all get tired of you.*

Sirius isn't like that.

Oh, yes he is. One day he's going to get tired of you, and when he does, he'll leave and take every last bit of you with him. What will you be then?

Those were the worst thoughts. Born of guilt and agitation and quiet. Of the idea that Sirius was anything like all the others that had given up on him. *I should tell him, I should tell him*—he'd regret the cowardice later. Back then it'd felt like handing Sirius a burden that wasn't his to bear, but that was the brilliant thing about burdens; the more hands to carry it, the lighter it became.

That afternoon, Remus had tucked himself next to Sirius' bed with a book in his lap. It was just the two of them, they being the only ones without an exam that day, and Remus had long since called it quits on any and all revision. He'd resolved that if he didn't know it already, he wasn't going to know it at all, and he'd rather sit with the stereo on, enjoying himself, than slave over an exam that wasn't going to matter much in the long run. A quick turn of the head found Sirius lounged out on his bed behind him with a copy of Peter's father's paper open on the covers, one of Lily's red revision pens sticking out of the corner of his mouth. The little thief.

"What's that?"

Sirius' head shot up, pen falling from between his teeth. "Huh?"

"That." Remus pointed. He'd spotted what appeared to be a letter, open overtop of the newspaper. It had some sort of fancy crest at the top, but Sirius pulled it back before he could get a decent look.

"It's nothing. Exam work." Sirius slipped the paper beneath the ad-riddled publication, smiling at him brightly. "I've been thinking, how do you feel about Camden?"

“Camden? What about it?"

Sirius picked up the pen, twirling it between two fingers; “How would you like to live there?”

"As in full-time?"

"No, as in a summer home—yes, full-time, you knob."

With a little smile, Remus shut his book and dropped his head back against the edge of the bed thoughtfully. Next to them, the stereo was playing a Lou Reed song. Slow and melodic.

“Camden’s fine, I guess. Lots of squatters, but it’s central enough. Could be fun.”

“Hm. And have you thoughts on Clerkenwell? This ad here says ‘two bedroom flat in Clerkenwell’.”

“Clerkenwell's... Hold on, why're you looking for flats now? S'pretty far off, we still have a whole ‘nother term to finish first.”

“I’m just getting myself familiar with the market,” Sirius replied staunchly. “Now Clerkenwell?”

“It's fine. Lots of council housing. You know, casual gentrification, the like.”

He flipped the page. “And Soho? There’s this corner place on offer, seems big enough.”

“Oh yeah, bet we could find real cheap rent over a massage parlour. And there’s a bagman on every corner for when we run out of hash at three in the morning.”

“Far from you to complain about easily accessible drugs. Oxford Street then?”

“Only if you want to be blown up by the Provos.”

“You’re joking? Bloody Irish. Well, I suppose we could always try the East End. This place called 'Mile End' sounds nice. This one boasts black mould in only *one* of the bathrooms.”

Remus smirked up at the ceiling. “A posh boy like you? Those Eastenders would eat you alive.”

“Ah, but what do I have to worry about when I have a tough guy like you to protect me?”

The next thing he knew, Sirius had leaned forward and slipped a hand down the side of Remus' neck. He automatically curled into the touch, letting his eyes slip shut as soothing fingers worked the knots from his muscles. Pleased, Sirius slid across the bed until he was close enough to leave little kisses along the shell of his ear.

“I've got somewhere to be, you know,” Remus mumbled rather reluctantly.

“Mmm… Where's that?”

"Told James I'd meet him after his physics exam. He’s working on a Christmas present for Lily and he asked me to help out.”

“No, blow the tosser off.” Sirius’ voice turned husky as he dipped lower still and ran his tongue along that sensitive bend connecting Remus’ neck and jaw. *“Stay here with me.”*

For a moment he was tempted. He imagined giving in—turning around and meeting Sirius' lips with his own. Falling back into bed with him, clutching the collar of his shirt until it nearly split at the seams, the little moan Sirius made when he sucked that spot between his ear and jaw. And then... James walking in on them, mouth open in shock, lips forming the words—*bloody queers!*

Remus cleared his throat, drawing his face away with a sharp flinch.

"Sirius... *James."*

"—Would probably be very jealous and want to join in."

He nearly laughed. *Nearly.*

"He's waiting. I don't show and he's bound to come looking for me anyway.”

With a frustrated grunt, Sirius pulled back and flopped down into his pillows. “What good’s a best mate if all he does is cock-block me?”

Shoving down the guilt, Remus shut his book and turned over, leaning his elbows on the side of the bed. “He also happens to be the lead guitarist of your band.”

“An unfortunate coincidence.” Sirius curled his fingers around the collar of Remus’ shirt and drew him across the bed for another bout of snogging. Remus gave in again, but only for a few minutes. It was hot—Sirius’ tongue always found that little spot on the roof of his mouth that turned his arms and legs to jelly.

Really he couldn’t wait until they were free to snog all they wanted in the comfort of their own flat. Lily and the girls were almost finished with their uni applications, as were James and Peter, though they insisted that it was only to satiate their parents. Alternatively, all of the school brochures Lyall had sent ended up as kindling in the common room fire. Even if the band thing didn't turn out for them, Remus had no interest to go back to school. Neither did Sirius, and he had more than enough inheritance to keep them afloat until they figured out a backup plan. Once they found themselves a place to live, they could get jobs and furniture and a huge bed to lie around in, and soon enough there’d be no more talk about exams or marks or lessons. Just music, friends, and *Sirius.*

“I love you,” Remus whispered when they broke apart again.

“I love you too,” Sirius replied, before biting his bottom lip. He looked so handsome that Remus had to kiss him once more before popping to his feet.

“Better split now if I’m to meet Potter on time. See you at dinner?”

"Kay."

Remus pulled away, and as he did Sirius flipped another page in the newspaper. "Can't wait until we're all sharing a flat," he mused. "I'm gonna find us a 'do not disturb' sign to hang on the door. Potter's just gonna have to get used to playing second fiddle."

Remus nearly missed the meaning. He was by the door now, about to wind his muffler around his neck when he suddenly froze and caught on.

"You mean you want all of us to live together... after school?"

" 'Course," Sirius said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world; "Didn't I already say that? All the best bands live together when they're starting out. Even Queen did it."

"But don't you think this'll be kinda hard that way?"

"What way?"

"You know... *us.* And them. Everyone in the same place?"

"Why would that be a problem? We're in the same place now."

Remus squirmed slightly. "Yeah, alright—the dorm's tight for sure, but at least we have the whole school. A flat, it'll... It'll be a lot harder."

"Yeah, well maybe I didn't picture us hiding it by then."

"... Oh."

Sirius sat up a bit more, pushing a thatch of dark hair out of his face. "You said it yourself, right? It's a long way off. But how long did you really think we could keep this up anyway?"

A lot longer than this, Remus thought nervously.

"So you're really thinking of telling them then."

Sirius shrugged, nonchalant. "Maybe."

"You were."

"Alright, so I was!" He snapped then, throwing up his hands. "Is that such a crime?"

"No! But I'd wish you'd tell me your plans before you just—"

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?"

Remus supressed another yelp. The news had come like a punch to the stomach. Sirius hadn't done anything wrong yet, but the promise of more had him blindsided. He couldn't get a breath in.

"When did you imagine doing it?" He asked, voice thin and reedy. Sirius looked away, and then got up to stand next to the stereo and fiddle with the dials. Remus hated it, seeing his back turned.

"I was sort of thinking... over Christmas."

Shit.

"That's like five days from now."

"No, we go *home* five days from now."

"And what would you even say?"

Sirius shrugged, shoulder blades cutting through the fabric of his jumper like razors. "The truth, obviously. That I'm a raging queer."

Shit... Shit fuck shit!

"And us?"

At that, Sirius turned to face him. "Well, I guess that's up to you, ain't it?"

"Don't do that," Remus warned. "Don't put this on me."

"But it's gotta be on you! You're the one who doesn't want to say anything."

"And I suppose you hate that, right?"

"Oh, I hate that I'm living every day like a charade? Wow, you got me there, Moons. You've cracked the code! Somebody get him a gold star."

"Don't be a dick, this is serious!"

Sirius laughed, and it felt scornful. "Oh, I *know* serious, but I also know that I can't keep this up forever. I'm not like you. I can't play some stupid part in front of my friends just to save face."

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing! Sorry, I just—" He huffed, lips pressed into a thin line. "Dammit... Potter's my best friend, and he thinks he knows me but doesn't."

"What? You're saying you can't really know a person unless you know all their habits in bed?"

"It's not that simple, and you know it!"

Remus felt his chest seize. *Tired of you. Tired of you.*

“So, what… Are we breaking up?”

“God—*no!"* Sirius practically hollered. "A bit fatalistic, aren’t you? Just —Just listen to me for a second.”

Coming forward, Sirius bent down ahead of him and scooped up Remus' muffler. He hadn't even realised that he'd dropped it. “I thought about telling him on Halloween," Sirius said, wringing the scarf out between his hands; "but I didn’t say anything, and he was still so *good* about it. It’s just like… I keep asking myself, what is it that I’m waiting for? For him to turn homophobic? To come out to *me?* Wouldn't that be a laugh. But Potter's not like McKinnon. He's not just gonna turn gay to make things easier."

"Marlene didn't—"

"I know! Bloody fuck, but I'd just rather he find out from me rather than anyone else.”

Remus' fists clenched at his sides.

“H–Has something changed then? Did James—”

“I’ve changed, Moons. I know what it is that I want now—I’m grown. I’ll understand if you don’t want the same things, but I think you should at least admit it to yourself one of these days. Doesn’t even a little bit of you want to tell them?”

“Of course I want to tell them! But you can’t just *tell* people shit like this and not expect them to—to not care!”

“Tomny didn’t care!”

“Tomny’s different!”

“How?” Sirius demanded. “I don’t get it. What are you so afraid of?”

The word 'everything' hung on his lips, but honesty had never come naturally to Remus. Instead, he did the vicious thing, which did come naturally, and turned it around.

"You want me to fight you on this," he spat, backing up until he was closer to his own bed, familiar territory. "You want me to beg you not to tell him anything so that you can say that it's not fair."

Sirius followed, caging him in. "Isn't it?"

"Then why bother asking my permission? Since you've so clearly already made up your mind!"

"I'm not asking," Sirius pushed, "but I just thought that maybe if I said that I was ready, you might be too."

"Well, I'm not, okay?! You wanna know what it is I'm afraid of? It's the *change*. It's the bloody fucking change! Because that's all this is, innit?! Things are good right now, and that scares you! You can't trust in your own happiness, Sirius, so you have to go and blow it up!"

"You don't think I don't know how you're feeling? I've been there—Christ, I'm still there!"

"Oh yeah? And what other secrets do *you* have?"

Sirius frowned deeply. "That's not fair."

"Whoever said life was fair."

It was enough of a dismissal, and Sirius stepped away, rubbing his forehead. "I didn't want this to be a fight," he murmured, a bit haggard; "I just wanted you to know where I was at. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"That sounds like a lie."

"Whatever. Call it whatever you want."

Remus sucked back a whimper. He didn't want this, he only wanted—

"All I've ever really wanted was you."

"Yeah... Well, now you have me."

Not looking at him, Sirius tossed the muffler aside and returned to the stereo beside his bed. The album had ended, and he began picking through the collection with lazy fingers, like his heart wasn't in it. Remus couldn't take it; he reached for his muffler again, fully intent on storming out, but at the last second—spotted the newspaper sitting open on Sirius' bed. It made him think of their little imaginary flat, waiting for them in Soho or Camden or wherever. It made him think about his poem, and all the *longing* he was about to put to waste.

"This one."

Sharply, Sirius spun around. Remus had approached him from behind,

reaching over his shoulder to touch the edge of the record. He'd picked randomly, but it was Bowie. Typical.

"Thought you had to meet Prongs," Sirius replied dryly.

"He can wait a bit longer, I think. Right now, I want to be here with you."

The corners of Sirius' mouth tugged like he wanted to smile, but neither of them said anything more as he put the album on. When it was spinning, they wordlessly took up a spot on the floor between the two beds beds. There was nothing else to do beside stare up at the ceiling and wait for the song to start, just like old times. They were so close their ears were nearly brushing, and when the record started Remus couldn't help but recognise the song. Really, it was just his luck.

'Still don't know what I was waiting for,
And my time was running wild, a million dead-end streets and;
Every time I thought I'd got it made,
It seemed the taste was not so sweet!'

"You've *got* to be fucking kidding me."

There was a quiet snort, as though Sirius were trying to make himself laugh at the irony.

"You're the one who picked it."

'So I turned myself to face me,
But I've never caught a glimpse;
Of how the others must see the faker,
I'm much too fast to take that test—
Ch-ch-changes!'

Sirius shifted, and Remus felt dark waves tickle his ear like a whisper. He thought about reaching out to run his fingers through it, but then Sirius was speaking.

"I'm pretty sure 'Hunky Dory' is one of the best albums Bowie's ever made," he said, almost nonchalant. "Like I never—"

‘Turn and face the strange,
Ch-ch-changes!’

“—thought something that sounded so stupid could be so wonderful.”

“I could. I’ve heard you talk.”

“Wanker.”

‘Time may change me—
But I can’t trace time!’

Remus felt Sirius’ shoulder flinch next to him. “Ooh, shit. Just got the shivers,” he murmured. “God, isn’t it amazing how music can do that to you?”

“Mm.”

Suddenly the room felt very big, and very empty. Remus wondered how long it’d been since they’d done this. Listened instead of talking. Easy and hard all at once. Had he done this with Miles then? Remus hated the idea. He wished for the *Remus and Sirius* they’d been not twenty minutes before. *Fancy a place in Wembley?* Sirius would say, and though it would be naught much more than a mask, Remus would be blissfully ignorant.

But he wasn’t ignorant anymore. Sirius was going to tell James, and when James knew, others were bound to follow. How long until they put two and two together? And could they even stay *together* with one of them out and the other still severely locked in the closet? Would that not just lead to more resentment?

‘And these children that you spit on,
As they try to change their worlds;
Are immune to your consultations,
They’re quite aware of what they’re goin’ through—
Ch-ch-changes!’

Remus felt as though he were in mourning. It was as if a million tiny, little grains of sand were slipping right through his fingers. He didn’t want Sirius to slip through his fingers, but it occurred to him that

while he was off imagining the dingy pubs they would play in and the jobs they might have, his boyfriend was deep in a mourning all his own. Remus could sparsely picture it; how they might not be able to hold hands in their own home or kiss each other good morning as they sipped tea or coffee or vodka—whatever happened to fit their fancy that day. None of it had bothered him because he was happy enough with how things were now, but perhaps he'd been taking Sirius' feelings for granted. Perhaps he was trampling them—had been for a long time. Dammit.

Remus took a deep breath. *No backslide. No backslide.*

'Time may change me,
But you can't trace time…'

"What would you say is your favourite Bowie song, Moony? If you *had* to pick a favourite?"

"Sirius, I think we—"

"Aw, don't be like that. I know you secretly love him. Heard you mumbling 'Rebel Rebel' in the shower just the other day!"

'Ch-ch-changes—
Turn and face the strange!'

"Is that one your favourite? You can tell me, I won't tell anyone, swears."

"Sirius—"

'Ch-ch-changes!
Pretty soon now you're gonna get older—'

Remus shivered too.

"Ooh, I felt that one, Moons! You got goosebumps?"

'I said that time may change me,

But I can't trace time…'

It was enough.

In one fluid motion, he rolled over onto his stomach, bearing down over Sirius' face with desperation leaking from every pore. He might've kissed him—he almost did—but Sirius was still faster. Anticipating him, he turned his head to the side, and Remus' lips hit his cheek instead. It was a total rejection, one he probably deserved. He was losing Sirius, he realised. And it scared him.

"New Years," Remus said very quickly; "Give me until New Years."

Sirius sighed. "Moony, you don't have to do this."

"I don't want to lose you," he begged. "Whether it be now, or ten years from now. And if this is something you need, then… I'll do it. I'll do it with you! I can be ready—I-I am ready!"

"No you're not."

"Who says? *You are!* I thought this was what you wanted—or were you just waiting for me to say no officially so you could break up with me and be done with it?"

"Fuck, Moony!" Sirius sat up, nearly slamming their foreheads together. He knocked the hi-fi's needle aside, before pressing his head into one hand and exhaling very deeply. "I just want to feel whole for once, okay? You're not the only one who feels half-empty all of the time, and don't fucking bother with any more shitty metaphors like how I'm 'full' 'cause I'm not! Alright?!"

Remus sank back on his knees. He wanted to fall through the floor. Just—*down, down, down,* until nothing else mattered but the dark. It scared him, made his nose burn and his eyes sting, so he wiped them on his sleeve.

"I love you," he said, stubbornly.

"Love you too," Sirius answered, twice as so.

They were quiet again, like neither of them could think of anything besides a pitiful 'I love you'. Finally, Remus reached out a hand. Sirius looked at it, then at him. His eyes were glassy.

“I told myself I wouldn’t be jealous anymore,” Sirius started lowly; “but it’s not just the girls anymore. It’s James and Lily—Peter and Moira. It’s everyone who’s ever gotten to have what I can’t.”

I know. God, I know.

"And it's not about being ready," Sirius swore; "It's about not being able to take it anymore. I lost one family, I can't handle sitting around and waiting to lose another."

“I understand," Remus said. And he did. "Look, I know I’m not as brave as you, but I promise, I’ll try. Whatever you need—I’ll *try*... Just give me a bit more time. New Years, that’s all I’m asking for.”

"You don't have to."

"I know. I want to."

Several seconds passed between then, but when Sirius finally reached out and took his hand, Remus just about threw up from relief. Eagerly, he brought it to his lips and kissed his knuckles over and over again—until Sirius was pulling him by the shirt and they were just kissing. Two desperate kids, missing one another. Remus clung to him, and together they fell into the hutch between the beds. The clatter knocked the turntable’s needle off its stand, immediately starting up the music mid-song.

‘—h-ch-changes,
Turn and face the strange!’

Sirius threw his head back and laughed, bright and brilliant. It was contagious, and Remus was laughing a second later.

“New Years,” he promised again, “just give me until then. After that we can sort out what it is we’re telling people.”

“If you say so.”

Sirius bit his lip over another short chuckle, but it still felt sad. Remus apologised by kissing each knuckle, and Sirius returned the gesture by reaching out and brushing the mossy brown hair back from his face. They held each other for a while longer, staring back at one another and kissing every time the silence got to be too much. Finally Sirius released him and rolled back up onto his bed, whipping one leg

around to take a quick shot at Remus' arse for good measure.

"Get on out of here then. Don't want to keep our lead guitarist waiting."

"I guess so." Remus coughed, clearing the nerves from his voice. "Erm —not when we're to live with him forever."

Sirius stabbed a finger into the newspaper still lying open on his bed. "Think Prongs'll fancy this little row-house in Chelsea? He can even bring that girlfriend of his—the feisty one with the red hair."

"Just try and keep us out of Brompton or Kensington," Remus told him, as he reached once more for his scarf. "I know you can afford it with your nepotism money but that doesn't mean I'm willing to admit to being a posh prat just yet."

"No, you're far too rough for the comforts of home to apply."

Dropping his head with a shake, Remus quietly slipped out into the hall. The cheeky tête-à-tête was enough to calm some of his frayed nerves, but not enough to forget what he'd just done. He'd just made a promise he wasn't sure he could even keep, and as per usual, his intrusive thoughts were becoming more disruptive than a German bomber plane.

That's it? The dreadful voice echoed, as he clattered down the steps of the school trolley that'd dropped him outside the Bellchant building. *You're just gonna tell everyone after all this time? After all this shit? Just like that? Just—Happy New Year, I'm a queer! Ha! … As if.*

God, just shut up.

How can I shut up? I'm you, bloody nutter.

He kicked the building's wall on his way inside and let the dull ache in his toes distract him. Intrusive voice or no, the reality was that he'd just told Sirius what he wanted to hear. Nothing had been solved, they'd just talked in circles until one of them cracked a joke that distracted the other long enough to end the conversation. Either Sirius was very right, and they were genuinely terrible at communicating, or they were so good they were bad. So smooth they'd turned slippery. It was all just one big headache—which coupled with the very real headache he was getting from his persistent cold, spelt only disaster.

"You don't think it's too cheesy?" James asked him later on, nervously

clutching his guitar across his lap while Remus set the recorder up on the floor of the private music room they'd sequestered.

"It's absolutely cheesy," he agreed, grateful for the distraction. "But you wrote it for her, so she'll like it anyway."

"You wrote most of it, I just plucked a few strings."

"Semantics," Remus dismissed. When James had approached him with the idea of writing and recording a song for Lily for Christmas, he'd initially been shocked. It was around the same time of his 'poem-pushing' but Remus' first assumption had been that James would go to Sirius for that sort of thing. It became more clear why he hadn't after he'd presented the song's concept. Sirius wouldn't have been able to stomach something so sappy.

"There. It's no proper studio, but I think we're good to go," Remus said as he readied the tape machine and pressed record.

James cleared his throat, leaning into the whirring machine and taking a deep breath. "Er… So this is 'Lily Bloom in June'. Music by Potter. Lyrics by Lupin."

"—And Potter."

"Lyrics by Lupin *and* Potter," James drawled sarcastically, then; "This one's for you, Daisy. Happy Christmas, babe."

Remus smiled so broadly his face hurt, and James shot him a warning glance as he sat back and shook out any jitters. When he took up the guitar and began play, the tone proved rich and warm; courtesy of the dead strings he'd refused to change ever since he got the thing. But the song was soft; slow and romantic.

"Take a walk on down the path," James sang, more sure of himself with every word;

"Just past the little house carpeted in grass;
There you'll find a serene lakeside,
Where lilies bloom in springtime…

"And I'd sit down on the shore,
Shake that rock from my shoe, there's always one more;
There I stop and admire the setting sun,
And all the lilies that bloom in the springtime…"

Remus tried not to look at his friend directly. Apart from not wanting to break his immersion, he was somehow too embarrassed. James loved Lily so much—that was clear—but he'd been so distracted by Sirius as of late; it was startling to remember that other people could be just as happy as them.

"You are prettier than I,
I'm just your average guy,
You're like living colour;

"And when the summer passes by,
Gives way to autumn skies,
I still feel so lucky;

"You, you're all I need and more,
You're my lake that meets the shore,
You're my Lily bloom in June—

"And with you by my side,
There's nothing to lose;
'Cept a bit of pride,
And the rocks from my shoe;
I look into your green eyes and I see my future life,
With my Lily bloom in June…"

He stopped for a quick interlude, in which his fingers danced across the strings and Remus could only quietly admire it. He'd always thought James handsome—even with his untidy black hair that tended to stand up in all directions, a few bits still bleached white in the front from Halloween—but he was never more striking than when he had a guitar in his hands. His voice was almost willowy, deeper than Sirius' but raw and supple. As he sang the song turned into a soft ballad like a lullaby, and for the first time in his life Remus was truly proud of something he'd helped create.

"Take a walk on down the street,
Just past the little house made for you and me;
There you'll find our favourite pastimes,
Like sipping tea long after tea time;

"And I'd sit down next to you,

In that soft chair patterned all in blue;
And there I'd remember that little lakeside,
Where I brought my Lily during springtime;

"You are prettier than I,
I'm just your average guy;
And I wrote this little tune,
For my Lily bloom in J—"

In a sudden fit of protest, the tape recorder began shrieking with the tell-tale sounds of jammed plastic, and James' singing came to an abrupt halt.

"Bugger," Remus hissed, hitting the eject button and ripping the 8-track tape from its slot. The slight smell of melted PVC followed, making them both wrinkle their noses in distaste. "Must've gotten caught up inside the machine."

"Damn. I knew I wouldn't sound magnificent or anything but that just stings," James snorted sarcastically.

"You sounded great," Remus amended, squinting the tape. "It doesn't look all that damaged. Will probably still play actually, though I wouldn't risk trying to copy over it now."

Shrugging, James took the cassette from him and flipped it around, sliding it back into its slot and hitting play. This time instead of recording, it played the song back to them in all its raw and genuine goodness. At the very end, there was a little rippling sound and then Remus could be heard muttering *'bugger!'* before the tape cut off.

"We could get another one from the AV room," he offered. "Though we might have to wrestle it off Pete."

"You know what, I sorta like it this way."

"You don't think you weren't dragging the bridge a bit? … *Ha*—just taking the piss."

James scowled; "I was gonna say that now it's got a bit of both of us."

"Then you're a sap."

"Guess I am." Smirking slightly, James yanked the 8-track from the machine while Remus handed him a felt pen. He quickly scribbled the

date across the cassette's back. The front he finished off with *'To Daisy, all my love, JP'.*

“You really think she’s gonna like it?” He asked after.

“No,” Remus answered, “I think she’s gonna love it.”

James grinned down at the tape, all dimples, and Remus suddenly felt disappointment surge over him. Not at James, but at himself.

“Hey James?”

“Mm?”

“You care about Sirius, right?”

“Like my own brother," James supplied, before furrowing his thick brows furrowed together in question. "Why? Is something the matter with him?”

“No, sorry. I was only thinking about something he said earlier.”

“Which was what?”

Remus bit his lip. “Prongs, do you believe in keeping secrets?”

“Depends. In third year Simeon tried to convince all of us that babies came from space. Said it was a secret only adults knew."

"Did you believe him?"

"Only for a few years." James smiled, and tilted his head. “Has something happened, Moony?”

“No… not really.”

"Would you tell me if it had?"

Remus took a deep breath, straightening his back and giving James his best Janus-faced smile. “I’m fine, Prongs. Don’t worry about me. Just got caught up thinking about how it’s gonna feel not being with the guys for Christmas.”

"You mean your Tom friend and them."

"Yeah..."

“Well, don’t be too sad, you've got us to keep you company after all. And if you’re really missing the ambience, we can just set something on fire. Like a rubbish bin. S’long as it’s outside, of course. Mum would have a fit otherwise.”

Remus smiled, despite himself. “Thanks, Prongs. You’re a real mate.”

James set a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it kindly. “Anything for the world's most dangerous Marauder.”

* * *

It wasn’t always hard. Sometimes imagining a life with Sirius was easy.

“Plants! We should get loads of plants. Big ones! The kind that climb right up to the ceiling and ruin all the walls.”

“Do you even know how to take care of a plant?”

Sirius would smile. “Can’t be any harder than taking care of you.”

And Remus would melt, just a little bit. “In that case we’d need a lot of light.”

“Yes!” Sirius agreed. “We’ll find a place with big windows—or maybe a skylight. They have those in London, yeah? And your books can go there!” He swept an arm out, toward whatever imaginary wall he was picturing. “We’d have to display my records too of course. Find a great set up for the stereo. Think we could build one?”

“You and me? Not likely. But we could hang a photo of Mick Jagger over the dining room table.”

“And Hendrix in the toilet, with a claw-footed tub!”

“Isn’t that a little tacky?”

“Of course, but who’s ever lost out to a little bit of ‘tack’?”

Remus chuckled to himself, the feeling of Sirius’ hands curling into his hair. It was a Thursday and nothing exceptional spectacular had happened, but somehow, it felt like they were the only two people in the entire world. Like Sunday.

“How ‘bout Clapham?” Sirius whispered later that night, after he’d snuck into Remus’ bed. They were so close, Remus could feel the tip of Sirius’ nose brushing against his own.

“Sure, if you like being knifed on your way home,” he murmured back, only half lying.

“How stirring. I hear Hyde Park is nice in the winter, maybe we should look for a place with a view.”

A sudden snore cut across the room. Peter.

“Ngh… no, James… you’ll set off the burrito trap early… not enough… nghh… salsa…”

Sirius snorted into his hand, then; “We’re totally gonna be stuck with these tossers forever.”

“Yeah,” Remus murmured. “But a view would be nice.”

As their friend’s breathing evened out, Sirius drew a finger up the side of Remus’ cheek, tracing the shape of him. “I am going to buy so many shitty leather jackets.”

“Mm…” Remus kissed his finger. “And what else?”

“A new pair of Doc Martens.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm. And then I’m going to beat the shit out of them for no reason at all. We’ll get you some new trainers too. Like those red Chucks we saw in Camden.”

“You want to dress me up?”

“Ha. If I had it my way you’d be naked all hours.” Sirius smirked devilishly in the dark. “Also, m'gonna buy a motorbike and use it to wake up all our neighbours when we come ripping home from a show at the crack of dawn.”

“Just don’t come to me with any injuries. Blisters or otherwise.”

“You mean you wouldn’t want to nurse my wounds? *What happened—"*

"Shhh!"

Sirius laughed noiselessly. "What happened to that dashing Moony in the bathroom—the one who bandaged all my wounds for me?"

“He found some sense. I think I baby you too much, Padfoot.”

“You never know, maybe I’d like being babied by my baby.”

They kissed, and when they were tired, they slept. Or, Sirius slept. For Remus, sleep still felt impossible. He couldn’t decide if he were *up* or *down*. These moments with Sirius made him feel *up,* but the uncertainty of each day and night wore on him, and it wasn’t just because of exams.

It felt good that Sirius wasn’t retreating from him at least. After their talk, Remus had been afraid that he’d shut him out, but whether it be because he had real faith in him, or because he couldn’t stand the quiet, Sirius remained familiar. There were no cold-shoulders—no resentment—and eventually Remus was able to relax a little. There were things to look forward to during the holiday, after all. The two and a half weeks at Potter Cottage were sure to be warm and friendly and genuine, but there was no astronomy tower in East Finchley, and James had a big family. If the rumours were to be believed, then even the hall cupboard would be packed with a cousin or two. Sirius had his own bedroom at the Potters now, but that would be given up for Lily and the room Remus had stayed in was being occupied by Effie's great aunt Binita. The woman was apparently a hundred and two and slept with the fireplace raging even during dead summer.

“So you two are gonna be bunking with me,” James offered kindly, as they continued going over plans for the trip home. Peter still had maths to revise for and therefore was missing, but Lily had completed their humble group of four in his honour. With her in tow, they'd met up in the Godric common room, as Remus had started running a fever and didn't much feel like leaving the dorm.

“Dad’s still got the old cots we used for camping, so at least you won’t be on the floor," James continued. "Might just have to wipe the dust off."

“Oh *sure,* we get it. We’ll be on the cot in *Potter’s* room,” Sirius said snidely, elbowing Remus with a suggestive wink. "We don't mind a little *camping* do we, Lupin?"

“What are you on about now?” Lily asked with a tone of annoyance.

“Nothing—Lupin and I will be *totally* bunking with Potter. Goooooot

it.”

James’ eyes shot wide while Lily’s cheeks burned. “If Mum catches Lily and me in the same room she’ll hang me on the wall like mistletoe.”

“Oh? How nice. I hear mistletoe’s good for snogging.”

Lily moaned. “You’re horrible.”

Sirius winked in Remus’ direction again, while Remus just sipped his tea. He wasn’t about to fight it—if James and Lily caved then it meant they’d get a room to themselves for an entire holiday. He just hoped the door had a lock.

“Don’t pretend you’re not excited, Evans,” Sirius started up again.

“Of course I’m excited, it’s Christmas.” Lily pushed her hair from her face, looking haughty. “And it’s the first time I’m spending the holiday away from home. You should’ve heard the fit Pet threw. Mum and Dad never let her stay away for so long when she was our age.”

“The woes of being an older sibling,” Sirius sighed. "You young'uns have no idea how easy you've got it."

"Does this mean you've talked to Reg again then?" James asked gingerly.

"You mean since you pulled that little saviour stunt of yours? No, as a matter of fact, I haven't. I mean, did you really think that the tosser was gonna give me the time of day twice in one week?"

Sniffling slightly, Remus leaned in, getting the feeling that he was somehow out of the loop. "I don't understand, you mean you actually talked to Regulus?"

"Aren't you listening? I said I *tried.* If the little git doesn't want to talk to me, it's on him."

"What did you say?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Ask Potter. Practically breathing down my neck, he was."

"Only because you refused to do it on your own," James rebuffed. "I just thought it would be nice to tell Reg our plans. See if he'd like to... y'know, tag along. It was only to be nice, of course!"

"That was nice of you," Lily agreed. "Pet and I don't always get along, but I would hate going home without her. It wouldn't feel like Christmas with one of us missing."

Sirius thumped his palm against the common room table. "Thanks for that stirring addition, Evans, but *my* brother took one look our way and told us to fuck off. Little Reg would rather swallow his own tongue than follow us back to Potter's, and I say, more power to him. Maybe now he'll finally get to be the only child he's always dreamed of being, ha!" He looked at Remus then, probably expecting a smile, and when he didn't get one, Sirius straightened up in his chair with an air of dismissal.

"No matter. This is still going to be a *great* holiday. Family be damned."

"Don't jinx us now, mate," James said. "Still got a few exams left."

"No, it is," Sirius insisted; "I can feel it."

It didn't seem like an intentional jab, but Sirius' remark had gauged a deep crevice into Remus' confidence. He didn't think Sirius would offer him an ultimatum, *Either you tell them or I will;* but the only other alternatives he could think of were breaking up or living a lie, and he didn't want that either. So, Remus sought the advice of the only person he could think of.

His ex-girlfriend.

"No, I haven't told anyone else aside from you and Sirius," Marlene said, when he'd asked a day later. They were alone together on a bench outside the cafeteria, the snow-covered lawns stretching out in front of them like shimmering fields of ice and crystal. Sometime near the middle of exam week, Remus' light malady had mutated into a persistent cold. He felt gross, but apparently wasn't beyond the realm of snoggability quite yet. Sirius still laid with him every night, dreaming of their imaginary flat. Those moments were easy, it was the days that sucked.

"It's just me and Nicole," Marlene went on, breath coming out in a haze; "And Chastity, I suppose, but she ain't likely to tell anyone. She's back to dating Tristan Thomas now anyway."

"You've thought about telling the girls though, right?" Remus said, coughing into his elbow. "Or even just… I don't know, Mary?"

“Well fuck, of course I’ve *thought* about it, but am I gonna say anything? Not a chance. Not now anyway.”

“Why not? Are you still afraid of how they’d react?”

Marlene covered her face with her hands. “Remus, I’m sorry, but I really can’t talk about this right now. Not right before we go home.”

“Oh.” He tucked his hands into either armpit. “Right. Sorry…”

There was a sigh, and then Marlene was looking at him sadly. “Things are more complicated than just telling people, I think,” she said. “It's hard not to wonder who they might tell. And I... Well, things feel a bit different now. Like, I can’t imagine myself with a man anymore."

"Really?"

She shook her head. "I’ve tried. It was easier when I was a kid, but now we're more grown and—"

"Sirius said the same thing..."

"He understands."

And I must not then, Remus thought bitterly.

"When we dated," Marlene started, "I thought it might work out with you. That I could like you the way I like girls, but it just didn’t end up like that. And I’m not sure how to tell people that without making it sound like I’ve changed. It’s like, I’m still me, I’ve just… grown up some.”

Remus nodded, and Marlene slid her hand along the bench in offer. He took it, and squeezed her gloved fingers.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” She asked timidly. “Is it Sirius then? Has he said something?”

It was as though a breath had turned to ice and lodged itself in his throat. Remus coughed again, trying to clear it away, but the sob built up and up until his eyes were pricked with tears.

“I like him so much, Cherry,” he swore, “but what if I’m wrong about all this?”

“What do you mean, love? Are you thinking that maybe you don’t like guys after all?”

He hung his head. “No—I know I like guys, but Sirius, he—he’s *so* sure. So sure about everything! … What if I’m just dragging him along behind me?”

Marlene sighed and leaned into his shoulder, hugging him tightly. “You gotta talk to him, Rem. Before you implode.”

He wondered how to tell her that talking was the very problem. They talked so much that they just ended up going in circles. He didn’t want to be angry with Sirius for doing something that he needed so desperately, but he couldn’t help but feel like Sirius was leaving him behind. Remus wished he had Tomny to talk to, or even Tonya, who he’d sparsely thought of in recent months, but both were miles away, and he wasn’t sure he could stomach the conversation over the phone. So rather than *talk,* he did the next most impulsive thing he could think of. The first chance he had alone with Sirius, Remus initiated one of the most intense snogging sessions they’d ever had.

Sirius was more than surprised—they were in the corner stacks of the library, barely out of sight—but he never pushed him away, and Remus just kept up. If he couldn’t say the words, then maybe there was a chance he could make Sirius understand with his actions.

Every moment they had alone together following his and Marlene’s conversation were spent snogging; holding each other up against the first available surface and doing just about anything time would allow. They had more close-calls during this short whirlwind of affection than ever before, but a desperate sense of recklessness had already taken over. It was as though he had to prove that their relationship was worth having even if no one else knew about it—because it was the only thing that made sense. But if Remus had been allowed a shred of omniscience, he would have seen himself spiralling, and might have had the time to realise that the faster he fell, the harder the crash back to earth would be.

“Remus?”

He lifted his chin from the top of his guitar case to find Sheila walking toward him down the hallway, her heeled Beatle boots clicking on the tile. They’d finished their music exam ages ago, but Remus had stuck around, telling the other Marauders he had prefect duty. He didn’t really, he just wanted to be alone for a while.

“What are you doing here?” She asked, stopping beside him. “Shouldn’t you be at supper?”

“Wasn’t feeling very hungry.”

Sheila glanced at the wall across from them—at her and Hope’s photograph. She sighed a little, and it was almost wistful.

“Come with me then, hey?” She nudged his arm fondly. “We’ll have some tea.”

He followed her back to the room, but rather than make them sit in the tiny office, Sheila poured him a cuppa and together they set up along the orchestra risers. As he waited, Remus thought of the exam. James had done brilliantly on his recital, although he’d been quite worried about his results of the written component afterwards. Peter had done less spectacular during the practical, but scored near top of the class on the written. And of course Sirius had breezed through it all.

“You’re the same age now as we were then, in that old photo,” Sheila recalled, as she handed Remus his cup and came to join him on the risers. She was wearing a flowery white blouse tucked into red gingham slacks—quite tame for her, all things considering—but she’d made sure to match the red to her hair scarf. The entire ensemble made Remus think she looked a bit like Audrey Hepburn.

“Funny how people age and photos don’t,” he answered blithely, sipping his tea. Sheila eyed him, but only stirred hers with a spoon.

“I thought you were wonderful during your mock-recital today. You’re really starting to get to know your way around that bass. Have you given any thought to trying out a different instrument?”

“Guitar,” Remus said quickly. “I’m learning a bit of guitar.”

“Oh?”

Before he could stop her, Sheila was up and moving again. She quickly zipped across the room to her office, and after a short clatter, reemerged with an instrument case in hand.

“Might need a bit of a tune-up, but she’s a personal favourite,” she said, setting it down in front of Remus. The case itself was worn—smoothed over by years of love and use—but when he flipped the snaps up and lifted the lid, what was inside took his breath away. It was a Martin acoustic guitar in pristine condition, made of a rich mahogany colour and polished to a shine. Bob Dylan played guitars like this. David Gilmore. Eric Clapton. *Legends.*

“Go on then,” Sheila prodded. “Show me what you’ve got.”

He didn’t *have* much, but the instrument was too beautiful to keep in its case. Remus withdrew it carefully, quickly tuning each string while Sheila watched, her chin balanced on one hand.

“I’m not gonna sing or anything,” Remus warned.

“Oh no, never,” she smirked. “Know any scales?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, give us a C major then.”

He did as she asked, and with no mistakes to boot. Pleased, Remus glanced up and Sheila nodded.

“Good! Now D minor?”

He knew that one too. Apparently there was a point in practice. *Take that Sirius.*

“That’s brilliant, Remus, just watch out for that pinky… Can you show me any more?”

“Uh… E major, maybe?”

She gestured for him to go on, and Remus looked back down at the guitar but this time as he set his fingers to the keys, he messed up.

“That’s alright, try it again,” Sheila encouraged. He did so, and she nodded him on. “Faster.”

So, Remus went faster.

“Again. Faster.”

He went faster.

“Faster!”

On his third loop around, Remus’ index finger slipped, creating a loud *thwang!* that had them both wincing and laughing.

“I’d say that’s pretty good for a beginner,” Sheila mused, before holding her hands out. “May I?”

He passed the guitar back, and Sheila kicked one leg up over the other. She found herself in the strings quickly, and the next thing Remus knew, she was singing.

“ ‘Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you got ‘til it’s gone—paved paradise and put up a parking lot…’”

She kept playing, mostly humming and poking fun at the melody, and finally Sheila clapped her hand over the strings and grinned.

“Admittedly, I’m not much of a singer. Your mum was leagues better than I ever was. She used to be able to—as they say—charm the birds from their trees.”

Remus dropped his gaze to the guitar, and Sheila must’ve caught it, because she handed the instrument back for him to pluck at.

“I hear you don’t have much in the way of plans for university?” Sheila prodded. When he raised a brow, she shrugged innocently. “We teachers do talk to one another, you know.”

“I suppose you’re going to try and talk me into applying then?”

“No, not really. The world's too vast to be hung up on institutions forever. And I knew your mum, and she had no real desire to go to school either. At least not the traditional sort.”

She uncrossed and then recrossed her legs, and when Remus said nothing, seemed to take his silence as permission to continue;

“Hope only wanted to play piano. She would’ve played it from dawn until dusk if you’d have let her—even had a dream of doing it professionally. But when her parents suggested she get married, she gave it up.”

Because he was surprised, Remus finally asked; “Couldn’t she have been married and also followed her dream?”

“That was her plan actually. She’d even accepted a seat in a top conservatory to begin training, but in the end she backed out.”

“Why?”

“Because she found out she was pregnant.”

Remus didn’t even have it in him to be shocked. He simply clutched the guitar’s neck more tightly, glaring down at the floor.

“So what—she couldn’t have a dream because she had me instead?”

“What? *Oh no.* Remus, please don't think..." Sheila sighed, then leaned forward to look him in the eye. “You've misunderstood me. Hope loved you, Remus, truly. There was only one thing in the entire world she wanted more than music.”

“And what was that?” He asked miserably.

“To be a *mum.”*

Remus could’ve clawed his own eyes out. They betrayed him—instantly burning with seventeen years worth of unwept tears. If Hope Lupin had wanted to be a mother so badly, then why hadn’t she stuck around long enough to do it?

“Don’t you see, Remus?” Sheila said. “You were her dream come true.”

* * *

Friday 17th December 1977

It was with great reluctance that Remus phoned home. He’d waited until the second-to-last day of term to do it, and although Effie had been so kind to pre-arrange everything with Giles herself, Remus still figured he owed it to the old man to let him know his plans.

“I should tan your hide,” Giles’ stern voice rumbled through the phone. It was morning and Remus was god-awful tired, but he always enjoyed their friendly back and forth.

“Think you can reach it from London?”

“I see you haven’t lost any ‘a that sass… How did your exams go?”

“They were only mocks.”

“And?”

“And they went great, *thank you.*"

“Great? Not just ‘fine’?”

“I could just hang up, you know.”

Giles chuckled, and somehow Remus found the sound soothing. He wouldn’t have said so—that’d be embarrassing—but either way the chance was taken from him when his body was suddenly wracked with coughs.

“Blimey, you alright, son?”

“Yeah,” Remus wheezed. “Just a cold. I’ll get over it. But I was calling to tell you that I’m gonna stay at James’ for the holiday.”

“And you're just telling me this now?"

"Does that mean I can't?"

A gruff sigh. "You sure you’re feeling up to it?”

“Mhm.” He couldn’t stand being home anyway. Not now. Not after Sirius and Sheila and… *fuck*.

“Alright,” Giles said, “but you should come home at least once. See the dogs, have a meal or two. Your father and Sandra have already left for the Riviera. It’ll just be the two of us—and the lasses in the kitchen, if you’re lucky.”

“I dunno. You might ask me more questions about school, and—*eugh*—university.”

“Promise I won’t.”

Remus smiled, wiping his sleeve beneath his nose. “I’ll phone ya. Swear.”

“I still get to be the one to pick you up from the station, right?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, Gil.”

Another chuckle, and then Giles grimaced. “Ugh. This damn heartburn. Doc says I’m not allowed to eat fatty foods anymore. No more steak or bacon, can you believe it? Dunno what he’s on about—I’m as healthy as a horse.”

“A forty year-old horse, maybe.”

“Exactly! Not a day over forty—it’s what I keep telling him.” Giles gave a laugh that descended into another bout of hawking. Remus

supposed it made them both disgusting and ill.

“Oh!” Giles said suddenly; “Reminds me, I found some old trunk in your room the other day. White outside, brass handles, practically falling apart—sound familiar?”

Remus let out a breath. Hope’s trunk. He hadn’t brought it that term. Ever since blending his records in with Sirius’ collection, there’d been no need.

“Yeah. S’just an old thing. You can get rid of it.”

“You sure?"

"Yeah, don't use it anymore anyway."

"Understood. Now you enjoy that ride home tomorrow. I’ll be there to pick you up when you and those lads ‘a yours arrive.”

“Kay. I should go anyway, I’ve got prefect stuff.”

“ ‘Prefect stuff’? Oh, if only that therapist ‘a mine could see you now.”

“Shove off. As if you have a therapist.”

They said their goodbyes then, and Remus hung up, immediately bursting into another coughing fit that left his entire chest sore. It’d started with the fevers, then a runny nose, and now this. At least Sirius hadn’t seemed to catch it. A miracle, considering how often they’d been snogging lately.

But there wasn’t time to be sick, he was going home tomorrow, and today... Well, today he had a prefect partner to contend with. If being with Sirius was like plunging down on a never-ending rollercoaster, then trying to navigate Regulus Black was like trying to climb a mountain with no peak. Sirius was never silent, he was loud and obnoxious and gloriously free. But Regulus was none of those things. In the beginning Remus had just thought him quiet—quiet and bitter and unwilling to change. But he knew better now. He knew that silent and quiet were not mirror images of each other. Instead they were two sides to the same coin; you could be silent, or you could be quiet. Sirius was never quiet, but he could be deafeningly silent. He could be that kind of silence that seemed to say all the things words couldn’t. And it occurred to Remus, as the two of them were cleaning up after the Hawkings staff holiday party, that Regulus Black had his own iteration of silence as well. He hadn’t tried snapping at him for the

amount of mop suds Remus was dripping across the floor, and neither had he made any sarcastic remarks about the festive decor or the small collection of liquor bottles someone had tried to hide at the bottom of the rubbish bins. He was simply withdrawn, moving about the room like a ghost.

“So, how’d the fifth years' little concert go?” Remus asked finally, desperate to fill the emptiness. “Sorry I couldn’t make it—had a history exam.”

Regulus dropped a tray of half-eaten fruit cake into a large rubbish bin. “It went fine,” he said numbly. “They got through most of the song at least.”

“Oh, that’s—well, that’s great.”

“Mm.”

Remus stretched awkwardly. “The kids—they’ve really started to like you, hey?”

“If you say so.”

“Charlotte clings to you.”

“She just likes the violin.”

“She called you magnificent three times the last time we were there. Said your playing was ‘really-super-*uber* good’.”

Regulus kept his back to him, slowly collecting the last of the paper plates and throwing them in the bin, and Remus felt defeat wash over him like a wave. He and Regulus may have managed to put their general differences behind them to get through their prefect duties, but they were far from friends. Perhaps he was expecting too much.

Sighing, Remus turned back to his mop.

“They asked me if we’d do it again next term,” Regulus said suddenly.

Remus’ head snapped up. Regulus wasn’t looking at him, but he’d turned, clutching a small tower of styrofoam cups in his hands.

“You mean like keep teaching the kids?”

“Yeah, but only a few times a month.” Regulus tossed the rubbish in the bin. “It was Buchanan’s idea. She—er—she came to see the

show."

It was unlike Regulus to stumble with his words. It made him sound more his age—more human, perhaps. It made Remus soften.

"I hope you said yes. We still haven't gotten to 'Für Elise' after all."

There was that fleeting smile again. It graced Regulus' mouth—so like Sirius' mouth—but was gone a moment later as he turned his gaze to the window. He looked forlorn; tired. Sirius had always looked the same way right before leaving school. There had be an alternative.

"Hey Regulus, have you ever given any thought to staying at school for Christmas?"

"Why would I do that?" Regulus retorted sharply.

"Lots of people stay over the holidays. Mostly to study, but... You just seem like like something's bothering you."

"That's none of your business, is it?"

Remus sighed awkwardly. "Well, do you really want to go home? I know Sirius talked to you and all but—"

"Please, not that again. You and your incessant obsession with my brother is really starting to wear on me."

Temper momentarily ignited by the quick dismissal, Remus threw the mop to the ground—creating a clatter so spectacular that Regulus jumped and turned around again.

"You didn't answer my question," he said sternly.

"I never agreed to answer your bloody question!"

"So you're a coward then?"

"Why don't you just fuck off, Lupin?!"

Remus mentally punched himself. "I didn't mean it like that. I just meant to say that you don't have to go back if you don't want to. There are things you could do instead."

"Such as following somebody home like some stray? Follow *you?* Sorry to say that not all of us are blessed with our own personal delinquent."

“Does that mean you actually want to go back there, to the ‘Ancient and Most bloody-fucking noble House of Black’? All by *yourself?”*

“What else am I supposed to do? It’s home.”

The answer told Remus everything he needed to know. Slowly he picked up the mop, clutching it with both hands. “My house never felt like home,” he said plainly. “Never. I don’t think I even knew what ‘home’ was supposed to feel like until I left. And I may not know much, but what I do know is that home isn’t where *other people* say it is. Home is the one place you can be yourself. A front door and a bedroom don’t give you that—people do. People you *love.”*

“Love? Is that what you told my brother to get him to leave?”

The accusation rocked him to his very core. “Regulus, I didn't do anything! Your parents sent Sirius to *Belgium.* He had to run away from another fucking country! He didn’t—He didn’t leave you!”

“You don’t know anything!”

“Then try explaining it to me!”

“It’s so easy for him!”

“What’s easy?”

“Everything!” Regulus shouted. “He has *everything!* Everything comes to him with such ease—it’s damning! What with his friends and his talent and marks and even that *fucking boyfriend and—”*

Regulus froze instantly, eyes boring into the floor tiles as though he were searching for a way to take the words back. It was regret on his face, clear as day, and Remus could hardly believe it.

“The what…?”

Regulus visibly paled, and Remus knew the look. Like he'd said something he shouldn't have.

“Forget it. This is stupid. Let’s just finish this and be done with it.” Regulus spun around, looking for something else to clean, but the tables were clear, the chairs stacked. There wasn’t so much as a piece of tinsel left to distract him, and so he began ringing his hands, looking back and forth as though he were craving another distraction. Remus wouldn't give it to him.

“Regulus, do you mean…?” *Miles.* The name hung in the air like a storm cloud, and afterwards Regulus dipped his head, squeezing his shoulders in very tightly as though he could make himself disappear.

“Of course he told you…”

“How do you know about that?” Remus demanded, even more firmly this time. There was a short silence, but finally Regulus set both hands on the table before him, spreading his fingers as though he were grounding himself. When he began his confession, he seemed to Remus small and frail.

“He… He was always getting these letters when we were at home. He never let me read them, of course, but I knew he was sneaking them in. So one day I waited for the kid that was always bringing the post and I... Well, I fucking took them. Then I made him swear he wouldn’t tell Sirius, said I would rat him out to our mother—get him fired. I had no idea when I opened it that he was… well.” Another pregnant pause, and this time Remus caught the flash of Regulus’ shoulders as they trembled. “I knew what she would do if she found it, so I burned it. I never snooped again, I swear.”

Remus swallowed thickly, looking at the ground. “And Sirius, does he…”

“Know it was me? Of course not. And I never told anyone either. They’d have disowned him ages ago if they did.”

“And what—you didn’t want that?”

Regulus whipped around, a look of excruciating hurt across his face. “Why would I want that?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“I know how you all think of me. That I’m just some carbon copy of everything Sirius hates. That I’m the worst of him.”

“Reg—*I–I mean,* Regulus, no—no, we don’t think that.”

“He does. But I guess it doesn’t matter now anyway. He’s got a new family… And a new boyfriend.”

Remus felt his blood run cold. Suddenly he couldn’t see Regulus at all. It was just that dark pit, with endless mud clinging to ever inch of him —burying him. Blocking out the stars.

"… How did you find out?"

"Figured it out myself. Wasn't that hard, once I started paying attention."

He might vomit. He would vomit. The room was spinning.

"Regulus—"

"Just stop, Lupin. I've had enough. He's left and that's that. But I'm tired now, and I'd like you to go. You can just leave the mop. And don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone. There's no one left to tell anyway."

Remus didn't have any words left to argue with. He retreated quickly, setting the mop back into its bucket and snatching up his coat. As he did, a small rattle echoed from the pocket and Remus was suddenly reminded of what was inside. With shaky fingers, he reached inside and withdrew a small 8-track tape of Miles Davis' greatest hits.

"Happy Christmas, Regulus," Remus murmured, leaving it on one of the tables on his way out.

* * *

Later that night, as he was lying in his bed and wheezing from shortness of breath, Remus added Regulus Black to his list of things he was trying not to think about. It was getting rather long now; *Hope, Lyall, Sirius, Tonya leaving, Tomny stuck in the End, Sirius, addict Lee and his dead brother, Sirius, his marks, the band, London, Sirius*—all the usual stuff. Regulus was an unwelcome addition, but an addition none the less.

He managed to push the list of worries away long enough to make it through the following morning, where he and his friends all rushed about, furiously packing and chittering over the things they were most excited to do over Christmas. James wanted to take Lily ice skating and to see the lights in Hyde Park. Peter was looking forward to practising on his own set of drums back home and had agreed to go see a stage show with Moira, who would be in London visiting extended family. Marlene was going to be spending every other evening volunteering in a soup kitchen. She kept talking about some film she was excited to see called *Star Wars,* but Remus thought snidely that the plot sounded rather ridiculous and long-winded. She'd

gotten Mary to agree to go with her though, provided she concede to several days worth of shopping around Carnaby and Oxford Street.

Remus had made no plans. Nor had he called Tomny. He'd been too busy, and now was simply content enough to just let things fall into place. If the others' busy schedules meant he and Sirius had the time to sneak out and catch a show themselves, that was just fine by him. He didn't want to think about New Years.

With their things all packed and ready, they met up with the girls and made their way down to the dining hall for supper. The tables were packed, it being their last night, and the food was already getting cold, but his friends were determined to put on a show. They'd come up with the idea the day before, and though Remus had never really really been one for Christmas carols, none of them seemed all that deterred.

"On the seventh day of Christmas, my true love gave to meeee!" Lottie sang; *"Seven Lily's fretting!"*

"Six of Mary's exes!" Lily chanted.

"Five failed math tests!" Mary keened.

"Four tea sugars!" Peter cried.

"Three boring swots!" Marlene trilled.

"Two stinky trainers!" James crooned.

"And a Moony in a really bad moooood!" Sirius wailed.

It was brilliant and horrible all at once—brilliantly horrible! They went on down the line like lunatics, all seven of them screaming out in the middle of the dining hall and practically forcing other kids to join in. Remus might've felt more left out, had they not dedicated the song to him in the first place.

"Do we really have to do this *twelve* times?" He demanded.

" 'YES'!" They all shouted back, before starting up again. On and on it went, until they reached the final day, all nearly out of breath.

"On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love gave to meeee—twelve drug dealers!"

"Eleven busted lighters!"

“Ten damn detentions!”

“Nine girls I fancy!”

“Eight pissed off teachers!”

“Seven Lily’s fretting!”

“Six of Mary’s exes!”

“Five failed math tests!”

“Four tea sugars!”

“Three boring swots!”

“Two stinky trainers!”

“AND A MOONY IN A REALLLLYYY BAAAAAD MOOOOOOD!”

He let them finish and then clapped begrudgingly along with the rest of the room. A few of the lunch ladies even cheered for them and there was some whistling, but Remus just shook his head in disbelief until the clamour finally died down. He glanced around for Regulus, wondering what he might’ve thought about the whole thing, but did not find him at his usual table. It worried him enough to make his stomach twinge.

“Well?” James cried. “What’d you think?!”

“Why you would want any of those things for Christmas, is beyond me.”

“Yes, but did you like it though?” Lily asked, still breathless.

“ ‘Like’ is a subjective term.”

“What an ungrateful bastard!” Marlene snorted from her seat next to him. She poked him in the arm with the end of her fork and he flicked a carrot at her.

“Come now, no need for that, Macdonald. Everyone knows it's only a defence technique,” Sirius said from across from them. “He’s so humbled by our amazing singing that he doesn’t know what to do with himself, so he resorts to half-assed quips and sarcasm.”

“Cheers to that,” Mary said, raising her glass. As his friends shared in

a toast, Remus joined in too, though rather unenthusiastically. He'd sat across from Sirius on purpose, hoping that a lack of closeness would deter him from his relentless thoughts. Rather, all it'd done was make things worse. His boyfriend was a few precious feet away, beaming with the excitement and thought of returning to London the next morning, and all Remus could see was Regulus' face, impressed onto his brother's with that same expression of calm worry. He knew Regulus didn't want to return home—he saw it in the soft moon-grey of his eyes. But either out of reluctance or fear, the proud Black son would not admit it.

And then there was the fact that Regulus knew *everything.*

He *knew.*

Unable to stop thinking about it, Remus kept going back and forth over whether he should tell Sirius. On the one hand, Sirius might be able to do something if he could only see the camaraderie of it. Regulus *had* kept their secret after all. Maybe he could use it as a launching point—offer his brother a real way out like James had done for him and ensure his silence by way of ally-ship. But Remus knew better; the chances of the two brothers reconciling before their departure time on Saturday morning were rather slim. And besides, he wasn't sure it was entirely fair to ask Sirius in the first place. Why should he have to feel guilty over the fact that he was finally free to do as he pleased with his chosen family while Regulus had to return home to the one they'd been left with? Sirius had done his time—dealt with the consequences—and when push came to shove he'd defended Regulus. He'd gotten scars doing it.

Did Regulus not defend him also? He burnt that letter. It must count for something.

So formal, the voice had become. Remus almost missed the crudeness.

Get fucked.

That was more like it.

Do you even believe in karma? You called Regulus the coward, but the only real coward here is you. Not telling anyone is as good as hurting him yourself.

You're wrong, he thought after. *I'm not Regulus' keeper, and he doesn't want me to be.*

No, I'm exactly right. *You're always sticking your nose in where it don't belong but then as soon as you hear something you don't like you piss off. You just don't want to feel what they feel. This is exactly what Lyall was talking about. You're selfish. You're a brat. You. Don't. Care.*

I care about Sirius! He doesn't owe anybody anything! And if I push Regulus anymore than this he could tell people! We'd be ruined.

Nah, if you really cared, you'd tell Sirius the truth. You could help Regulus. You're hiding it because you're a coward.

Shut up! I've enough to deal with without you butting in too.

Telling your own brain to shut up. You ***are*** *loony.*

"Moony, earth to Moony?" James said from his other side. "You good, mate? "

"Yeah," Remus croaked, shaking off the unease.

"We should've called you 'Moony' because you're always drifting off into space," the dark-haired boy chuckled, before dropping into a whisper; "So what d'you think, should we play the tape for Lily tonight?"

"Er—I thought you were gonna give it to her on Christmas?"

"Well yeah, but then I thought it might be nice to play it with all of us together. You definitely gotta be there at least. What—bad idea?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm sure the others will want to hear. And I know you just wanna show off."

James grinned guiltily. "You should be a cop. You always know what people are thinking."

Remus wished it were true. Maybe then he could tell Sirius with utmost confidence that Regulus truly needed his help. Without it, he was just banking on pure intuition, and he'd been plenty wrong before.

"Alright, alright, finally the moment you've all been waiting for!" Marlene declared, hopping up from her seat. She whipped out a piece of paper and cleared her throat formally. "I've collected the petitions and totalled up all the signatures, and I'm proud to announce that we finally have a winner for our battle for gender equality!"

"Who?!" Mary and Sirius demanded.

"First... *Drumroll please!"*

They all started hammering their hands on the tabletop, filling the room with commotion.

“And the winner is... No one—it’s a tie!”

They all baulked for a moment and Sirius leaned in. “Between who?!”

“Lottie *and* Remus!”

James reached over and clapped an arm around Remus’ shoulder. “Way to go, Moons!”

“How?” Lily demanded. “I mean, Remus I get—practically had an entire army of eighth year girls behind him, but Lottie?! You didn’t pass out a single petition!”

“Not at Hawkings she didn’t,” Marlene grinned.

“I just mentioned to Clyde that it might be cool if he took Marlene’s little appeal around the village a little,” Lottie shrugged. “For tiny townsfolk they’re really quite progressive.”

“You’re still seeing him?” Peter gaped.

“We meet for tea on occasion.”

“I can’t fucking believe it,” Sirius said, sounding genuinely impressed. “Only you, Lot.”

She blew him a kiss as Mary leaned across the table. “Wait, does this mean they both get a lap dance?”

As tempted as Lottie seemed to be by the idea, they did not all break out into a suggestive caper at the cafeteria table. Remus still couldn’t look Sirius in the eye as they made their way back to the dorm, but he blamed it on his fatigue.

“I still think you should let Ms. Pomfrey take a look at you,” Lily was telling him. “It’s been days—that’s far too long. If your fevers still haven’t gone away it could mean an infection. You could get sepsis.”

Remus shook his head, burying his face in his muffler and trying not to slip on the icy path. “S’fine. It’s just a cold, it’ll go away.”

“You should at least lie down,” James said. “ ‘Pops’ isn’t even on until seven anyway.”

That he could agree to. Casting a rueful glance at Sirius’ back, he decided he needed a break anyway, and some time alone in the dorm room would be a welcome relief.

You’re selfish and vile.

Piss off, he told the voice.

When they got back to Godric, all of his friends peeled off their winter kits and shuffled into the warm common room while Remus excused himself. Sirius, not one to just accept and move on, stopped him by the stairs.

“Are you really not feeling well? ‘Cause I could—”

“Nah, go on. I’m just gonna lie down for a bit. Maybe take a bath.”

“Okay, I’ll come get you when the show starts.”

Checking to make sure they were alone, Sirius quickly kissed him before slipping away. With him gone, Remus made the climb to the fourth floor alone where he peeled off his clothes. Too tired for a bath, he took a damp towel to the winter sweat clinging to his neck and torso and collapsed into bed instead. Not long after his teeth began to chitter with fever and he drew the covers up to his nose to ward off the chill. He wasn’t sure when he’d fallen asleep, but when he awoke he was slick with sweat again. A quick glance at the clock told him that seven had come and gone, leaving him even more lightheaded and exhausted than he’d been before his nap.

“Feeling any better?” Sirius asked, making Remus jump. He was lounging back on his own bed across from him, a piece of paper in front of his nose, which he set aside as Remus blinked awake.

“You were supposed to wake me up," Remus said. He sat up, clutching his forehead as all the blood rushed to it. "What happened with the show?

“Didn’t want to wake you. You didn't miss anything anyway. Biggest name was Wings, but Elton John co-hosted and he wasn’t entirely terrible.”

Remus nodded at the run-down. “What’s the paper for?”

“Oh this?” Sirius drew the paper back from his nightstand, casually fanning himself. It looked like the same one from days before, Remus recognised the crest now. The Blacks. “This is old-hat, my good Moon. Had it for a while now... Just can't seem to get rid of it."

Remus tipped his head in question, and Sirius shrugged haplessly.

“It's a letter from my parents, letting me know that I’ve been officially and forthwith ejected from the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black.”

“You mean—?”

“Yep, arrived on my birthday with the post! Took me several weeks to open it though. Apparently since I’m eighteen now, there’s no more rule saying they have to take care of me. So that's that. I’ve been officially dis-*owned.* And you know what? Good riddance.” Straightening up, Sirius scrunched the letter into a tight ball and tossed it toward the wastebasket sitting outside the bathroom. The ball bounced off the rim and rolled away, and Sirius clicked his tongue in disappointment.

“He shoots, and he sucks…”

Remus stared at the ball. From his position it was just peeking out from the corner of James’ bed—like a badly hidden secret.

“Sirius, there’s something we should talk about…”

Sirius hopped up from his bed and crossed the room, using the posts of Remus’ bed to swing himself onto its end with a cheeky look. “What’s that—you trying to cash in on that lap dance already? Figured you’d want to wait until you were properly awake, but I might be persuaded.”

“It’s about Regulus.”

“Ha. Good luck getting a lap dance out of him."

“Enough with the bloody lap dance!"

Sirius’ smile vanished. He crossed his arms.

“Fine, since you’re so up in arms already. What's the matter with him then?”

“It’s just—he’s been telling me some things… Or he hasn't, but he's... I

think it's bad, Sirius."

"Go on then, don't keep us in suspense."

Remus knotted his fingers together in his lap. He felt a bit woozy, and sticky all over from sweat, and with Sirius looking at him the way he was, he was starting to wonder if bringing Regulus up at all had been a fatal mistake.

"I'm not sure what it is, but I think there's something seriously the matter with him."

Sirius snorted lightly. "Well, that's nothing new. Suspect there's plenty to diagnose, sour as he is."

"He misses you."

"Ha! That's a good one."

"Okay, so he didn't say that *exactly,* but I can tell that he doesn't want to go home for Christmas."

"Alright, so why's he talking to you about it?"

"Huh?"

"You!" Sirius snapped. "Why's he telling you all this over me?"

"Sirius, this isn't about me. I think *you* should be the one to talk to him, that's all I'm saying. Make him see that you care. *Not*—Not take on any extra burdens, just… maybe say something that might comfort him?"

"Reg doesn't talk to me," Sirius scowled. "He won't—I've tried! Little git only turns away when I do."

"What if I were to go with you then? We could head over to Salazar right now. Make him listen!"

"Or what, bury his head in a snowbank? Potter's right—your brain's on the moon, Moons."

Remus resisted the urge to groan. The more he spoke about Regulus, the more urgent everything seemed to feel.

"He needs someone, Sirius."

“What he needs is a therapist. We all do. Forgive me, but I don’t see how this is my problem.”

“It just is! He’s your brother!”

“Yeah? And what has he ever done for me?”

“He kept your secret!”

Sirius drew back like he’d been slapped and Remus snapped his teeth together, forcing a huff out through his nose.

“Regulus knew about you and Miles, Sirius.”

“How?” Sirius’ voice was breathless; staggered with shock. Guilty, Remus dropped his head and stared down at his hands.

“He found one of your letters.”

“You mean he *stole* it.”

“He was a kid.”

“He’s a liar!”

“Oh come on, Sirius! Stop taking the piss!” Remus reached out to grab him, but Sirius just pulled away. Hurt but undeterred, he plunged on. “He kept your secret for years—didn’t tell a soul!”

“He told you, didn’t he? Was probably cracking up just thinking about it. Me and Miles—hell! Must've been calling us fudge-packers to those fucking friends of his every time we turned around.”

“He didn’t! Literally no one knows! Don’t you think Barty would’ve told the whole world by now if he had? Told everyone about us?”

He realised his mistake a second too late, when Sirius’ eyes shot wide, turning more white than grey.

“You told him about us…?”

“No, he guessed! He guessed because he knew about Miles, I was just trying to reassure him—”

Sirius ripped away, practically falling off the bed in his haste to put as much distance between the two of them as possible.

“WELL, GREAT!” He roared; “AS LONG AS REGGIE’S *REASSURED!”*

Now he’d done it. How could he be so bad at this? Desperate, Remus threw off the covers and pushed to his feet. He staggered, but Sirius wasn’t about to wait for him to catch up. He had to chase him across the room, and even then Sirius wouldn’t look at him.

“Sirius, I know what it’s like to not feel at home with your family,” he said—begged; “I know what it’s like to—”

“How?” Sirius snarled. “How could *you* possibly know, huh? You think your dad resents you because—*what?* You hate going home? Because you’ve got delinquents for friends, and you've been kicked out of a few schools for setting some rubbish bins on fire? You don’t know anything—*how could you ever know how this feels?!”*

Tell him, the foul voice keened; *Tell him right now. Throw it in his spoiled face!*

“Sirius, I’m not—”

“I am such an *idiot!”* Sirius laughed, turning to pace back and forth before James’ bed. “I am *so* stupid! And to think that I actually thought you were coming around! That you were gonna tell me you were ready! New Years—HA! What fucking rubbish! Thought that maybe—”

“Sirius!”

“—We could finally cut all the bullshit and just start living like everyone else! I–I thought that what with McKinnon knowing—*oh!* But I should’ve known, really! It figures my own *boyfriend* would have an easier time talking to my brother about *my* past relationships than he does talking with me about *OUR* current one! That—That it’s fine for you to talk to others about us but when I even think about it I’m emotionally crucified—!”

“Sirius, this isn’t fucking about us!”

“Of *course* it’s about us! It’s about the fucking fact that you can’t admit to yourself what we are—*WHO* we are—but you’ll just spew whatever convenient bullshit to get my brother on your side!”

“ ‘Side’?! Sirius, what *fucking* side?”

“Whatever bloody side you’re on! Which clearly ain’t mine! God—I

tried to talk myself out of it, you know! Told myself it would be useless to just wait around until you're done bloody denying it!"

"Denying. What."

"Us!" He lashed. "Denying *us!* You still don't get it—we're not Lily and James, just nervous to tell our friends because it would be a little embarrassing—*we're gay!* Bent as a nine bob note! A couple 'a fairies lost in the closet!"

"I'm not gay, Sirius!"

"Oh yeah! So you're not gay—whatever! You've still done some pretty gay shit anyway."

It cut—cut like a knife to the bone. And Remus seethed.

"You're not making any sense," he growled. "You're pissed because I'm gay but then not gay enough? Make up your bloody mind!"

"I don't care!" Sirius spun around with a hiss. He was clutching one of the records, arms shaking like he wanted to throw it but couldn't quite bring himself to. "Be whatever you want, but I told you! I refuse to be someone's secret! I won't do it again, not even for you!"

"But before you said—"

"I know what I said! But maybe—just *maybe*—I want what Lily and James have! Maybe I want all of it—everything! But we can't have everything, can we, Remus?"

"Why do we have to have everything anyway?" Remus whimpered. "Why can't we have this much?"

"Because," Sirius started, his voice deadly low, "because I'm selfish. And when I think of my life, I want *everything.* I want what everyone else has! I want my love to be painted in the sky—I want a *legendary* love!"

"You want that more than you want me?"

He could see the way Sirius ground his teeth together, straining the muscles in his neck. Finally, he turned away, pressing both hands on top of his stereo and leaning into it. "Yes, that is what I want," he whispered.

Remus stared after him, aching all over. "But I love you," he said.

“Oh, you love me, really?”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like *what?”*

“Like it’s small… Like it isn’t worth anything.”

“You said it, not me.”

For a split second, Remus forgot himself. It was a vicious anger, one that demanded to be felt, and to drain it all, he turned toward Sirius’ bed and kicked the baseboard so hard, the wood cracked. It might’ve helped him feel less, had Sirius not flinched so badly that he dropped the record. The vinyl disc hit the ground with a clatter, escaping its cover and rolling across the floor to rest by Peter’s bed. Remus stared after it, ashamed.

“Sirius—”

“No. No more.”

“You can’t—” Remus ached. “You fucking… You told me that I was the *sky!”*

There was a flash of a shiver in Sirius’ shoulders, but he would not look at him. Instead he turned back toward the stereo, one hand clasped to the side of his neck.

“I guess that’s the thing… You never agreed to be *my* sky.”

At a loss for words, Remus looked blindly toward the bathroom. The distance between them, which while fighting had felt wider than any canyon, suddenly felt too close to breathe. He stumbled toward the doorway but as his hand clasped over the knob he felt the inexplicable feeling of dread wash over him. If he left things as they were now, he was afraid everything really would be over.

“Sirius, please don’t do this—”

There was a sudden knock, and a second later the bedroom door opened and James popped his head inside.

“Everything alright, you two? What was that banging noise?”

It was Sirius who answered first.

“Moony tripped,” he replied coolly. “What’s going on, Potter? Where are the others?”

“Downstairs still,” James said. “We’re finished with cards I think, but Pete wants to crack into that bottle of Tokay he's been saving and Mary keeps going on about a game of questions. I told them to hold off for a bit though—see how Moony’s doing first.”

“He’s fine,” Sirius snapped, facing James with his arms crossed; “Been all busy barking his head off.”

James appeared confused and came into the room a bit further, but Remus stopped him with a hand.

“It’s fine, James, I’ll come down in a second. Just… gonna shower first.”

“Alright…” he said, then; “Black?”

Sirius waved him off harshly, before advancing on the door and ushering his best friend out. The door clicked shut behind them, and Remus was left alone. With nothing else to do but make good on his word, he yanked the bathroom door open and stripped out of his pant bottoms. He could weep in the shower.

The water he kept cold, which quelled the burning in his skin but only worsened the trembling in his core. He thumbed the chain necklace looped around his neck. He'd never taken it off—was now the time? What did one do with such gifts during a break up? Was this even a break up? Remus didn’t know. He didn’t know anything.

When he was finished he avoided looking in the mirror, disinterested in the solemn, dark-ringed expression he would find. Eventually Lily came to check in on him, concerned, and the only way he think of distracting her was to agree to join her downstairs with everyone else. The stairs sucked as usual, but it was getting late and the common room was already reasonably sparse. His friends had sequestered the set of sofas in front of the hearth—as was their right as leaving students—and waved when they spotted him slogging over.

“You feeling better then, Remus?” Lottie called, and he nodded to her while taking a corner seat next to Marlene. He didn’t look at Sirius, who was sandwiched between James and Mary with a beer in one hand.

“You’re just in time for the good stuff!” Peter grunted, fighting against

the wine stopper of his bottle of Tokay. Lottie eyed him before snatching the bottle with a sharp *'give me that'* and whipping the cork out of its neck. They all cheered as the liquor began to flow, and Marlene handed him a mug.

"Here, put some real hair on your chest."

Remus hummed in response and sipped. It tasted like plums.

"Everything okay?" Marlene asked quietly, reading his mood. "Black's been sour as a grape ever since he came downstairs."

"Sorry, Cherry, but not now."

She puckered lightly but nodded and turned back to the group as Mary took control.

"So! Twenty-one questions, right—we're all in agreement?"

"Yesssss!" Lottie trilled.

"You don't have to play if you don't want to," Marlene whispered. Wordlessly, Remus nodded and she smiled softly before tilting her head onto his shoulder. "Go on then, Snatchy, ask your question!"

Mary glared at her. "Alright, fine! My question's for the *pétasse* over there! Marls—how's Remus in bed?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but he's an absolute stag in the sheets!" Marlene declared, holding Remus' hand up and kissing it for good measure. Mary laughed, but nodded fairly and gestured for Marlene to ask her question.

"Lottie! Did you or did you not hook up with that drug dealer in town —what's his name—Colson?"

"WHAT?!" Peter shouted, making his sister shove him quite sharply.

"His name is Clyde, and I did *not,"* she answered haughtily, "but that doesn't mean I *wouldn't."*

"You mean Clyde peddled that petition for nothing?" Mary leered.

" 'Nothing'? You and I have clearly never snogged."

Everyone moaned with laughter and Remus took another sip of the Tokay. It warmed his insides some, but it was taking all of his

concentration not to let himself shiver with fever next to Marlene.

“My turn,” Lottie announced. “Sirius, is it true Kimmy asked you to father her child last year?”

“Are all these questions going to be about sex?” Lily blagged.

Sirius ignored her. “No. She asked me to father child-*ren.* The crazy bird wanted three. Even had the names picked out. Bradford, Constance, and Eldric.”

“Thank god she dumped you first,” James quipped. “Those are horrible names.”

“And what are you and Evans planning on naming your first sprog? ‘Prongs Junior’?”

“At least that has some ring to it. ‘Eldric’ is just begging to have his head flushed down the toilet.”

“Hear, hear, Potter!”

The two clinked glasses and drank, while Remus watched. It made him vehemently jealous—how easy it was for Sirius to put on his mask in front of others and pretend it was all okay.

Then Mary reached over and slapped Sirius’ knee. “Your go, Black!”

Sirius cast his eyes about the room, swirling his cup.

“Alright. What’s something you’ve never told anyone else?”

There was a pause and then Peter leaned in. “Who're you talking to?”

“I’m talking to Lupin, a’course.”

Suddenly Remus’ heart was thundering in his ears. Marlene perked up, quick to come to his aid.

“Remus isn’t playing," she said.

“He never said so,” Sirius retorted, staring directly at him now. “Can’t chicken out once the question’s been asked.”

“Remus isn’t *feeling* well,” Marlene insisted. “Ask someone else.”

“Thanks, but I’m asking Lupin.”

Remus was afraid to open mouth, else he might scream. His hand had seized over the rim of his cup, threatening to shatter its flimsy edges with the strength of his panic. He knew what Sirius was doing—what he wanted to hear him admit. It was purposeful.

“C’mon, Padfoot, try Pete instead,” James prompted, but Sirius would have none of it. He only leaned in further, his every limb taunting.

“Tell us, Lupin."

No.

"What's the one thing you’ve never admitted?"

Stop it.

"The one thing you’ve never said out loud?!”

I won't say it.

"Go on, *fess up!"*

Marlene threw herself to her feet. “That’s enough, Sirius! I told you, Remus isn’t playing—”

“I’m not my father’s real son.”

He felt frail saying it, but his voice carried, abruptly silencing Marlene’s rant and making every one of his friends turn to look. Suddenly it all felt very silly—this *one thing.* The secret he’d been too afraid to say aloud since that last day with Hope in her hospital room; when she’d told her eleven year-old son that the real reason his father didn’t love him was because he wasn’t his father at all.

Ah. Karma.

Lily spoke first, but it was just his name. He could hear the sympathy in her voice. The pity. He couldn’t stand it, so in a fit of self-destructive rage, he ripped the wound open further.

“Yeah, that's right! I’m a bastard!” He sang, ironically up-beat. “My dad *hates meee,* and it’s because every time he looks at my face, he sees some other bastard’s kid… And—And get this! When he doesn’t see that guy—whoever the *fuck* he was—he sees a reminder of his dead *fucking* wife! Who apparently everyone thinks killed herself. So that's cool, yeah?”

Vos non lupus, baby.

Remus laughed venomously and downed the rest of his drink. His friends still sat stunned, but he refused to look at Sirius. He wouldn't.

"You're all staring with your gobs open but this is great for me—really! Finally get to admit it, don't I?! That's it, everyone! That's the last 'a the Lupin secret stash! Someone call the papers! Alert the media! It's all out now!"

Marlene slumped down on the sofa next to him, frowning, with tears in her eyes. It was clear she knew exactly what had just happened, but he refused to accept her pity either and pulled his hand away when she reached for it again.

"Lu—" James stopped himself, then; "Remus, we didn't mean to—"

"Nah, don't sweat it, Prongs, all's good in love and war, innit. My turn then? Alright! Mary, how *do* you get away with wearing your year nine skirt to every French lesson? Is it to boost your marks, or is Mr. Dupont just that much of a pervert?"

The quip wasn't fair to Mary, but she didn't so much as look bothered.

"Remus, it's alright if you—"

"God! Why's everyone so bloody nervous all of a sudden? Black asked a question and I answered it! There—the one *truthful* thing I've never said aloud. And now you all know. Actually feels good… Yeah, feels good to *come out* with it."

No one relaxed, and as he glanced around he caught the expression on Sirius' face. It looked to him like horror, but then there was that pity again.

"I'm going to bed."

Pushing up from the couch, Remus slammed his cup down on the table next to him and all but ran from the room. He just wanted to be angry, but he could feel the sobs building up in his chest, the kind that would ache and leave him breathless for hours. It'd been so long since he'd felt them—Sirius' influence—but now there was nothing left to keep them at bay. Behind him, he heard his friends whispering.

"Sirius, how could you?"

"I didn't know! ... I-I… I didn't know..."

By the time he made it to his room, Remus was biting his lip to hold back the screams.

* * *

That night Remus dreamed. Or whatever the verb was for ‘nightmare’. It all felt the same.

He was back in the hospital, which he hated. It always smelt too clean, the lights too bright, and people were always telling him which way to go, where to sit, when to keep his voice down. All he wanted was to see his mum, and sometimes they would say he couldn’t even do that. Then Giles would have to lead him back out of the too-clean, too-bright corridors, sometimes calm, other times kicking and screaming, which he only did because he knew he wasn’t allowed.

This day wasn’t like one of those days. He was eleven now and hadn’t kicked and screamed in ages. Except for that time a few months ago when that horrible Butler Frederick had taken the radio away. That was well deserved, of course. It was his mother’s radio. Frederick had no right to remove it, the bastard. He was gone two weeks later anyway.

No, today wasn’t like then. Today the hospital had called. Remus hadn’t been able to make out all of what his father was whispering to Giles before they caught him eavesdropping, but he managed to overhear some of it.

Bad night. Treatment’s not effective anymore. This is it.

He didn’t understand, mostly because he’d yet to imagine a world where the treatment wouldn’t work. To him, there was only a world where Hope was healthy, at home all of the time and throwing wonderful Sunday teas at which Remus would get to stuff his face with however many jam tarts as he pleased. There was also a world where she was sometimes confused, and thought a Thursday might be a Saturday, or forgot that she lived in their house, or that she’d left the kettle boiling and let it burn one of the kitchen staff. Finally, there was the world where Hope was in and out of the hospital. Where wires and tubes covered her arms and body and she was sometimes too tired to open her eyes, but would squeeze his little hand to signal that she knew he was there.

But a world where there were no jam tarts or kettles or tubes? That world didn't simply exist.

She was awake in her hospital bed when they arrived. She had a silk scarf wrapped up around her head, hiding the spots where her beautiful blonde hair had come out in clumps from something Giles called 'radiation'. It always sounded terribly frightening to Remus, but it was supposed to make her better, so…

The radio was playing next to her bed. It was a hospital radio, so the speakers would sometimes crackle like the cap of a fizzy drink, but he still recognised the song. It was one of Hope's favourites.

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
And where have you been, my darling young one?

There were a few tubes, but not enough that she couldn't speak, which was good because she had plenty of things to say. Perhaps if Giles had stayed in the room with him or Lyall hadn't had that meeting to make, then she wouldn't have said them at all. But they were both gone, and she was there, and he was eleven.

"I'm sorry, my darling. I'm so, so sorry…"

* * *

No one tried to wake him. They didn't have to. At shit-all hour, Remus got up, dressed, and carried his trunk as quietly as he could down to the common room. There he rolled a cigarette and smoked it to ash near an open window, and when that was done he rolled another. He repeated this until sun-up, when his lungs felt so singed he doubted he could speak if he tried.

No one bothered him and his friends never came looking. At eight o'clock he picked up his trunk and began lugging it down to Castle Hall, where he found a small crowd of eager students, all of them excited to return home for the holiday. As he stood off to the side and watched as the haze of their breaths floated up into the sky, he imagined what it would be like telling James that he couldn't stand coming to his for Christmas anymore. There would be a bit of fruitless arguing—promises of apologies on Sirius' behalf—but he would eventually give in, and then Remus would be left to go back home. At

least the estate would be empty. But empty meant quiet.

No, not quiet—silent.

Agony. That's what it felt like. He so badly wanted to throw his friends' kindness back into their faces, but a dam had been broken—all of his secrets were spent. He felt hollower than hollow, as though the entire world were seeping into his chest cavity, dispersing everything that made him 'Remus Lupin' and splitting his matter up into a million different pieces until he was nothingness all over again. Aside from Giles and the dogs, the estate had nothing that would help put him back together again. All that was left of him was there—with his friends, with Sirius.

He could go to Tomny. He should. Tomny would understand. But then again, Tomny was in the East End, and there was Lee… and the Potters had been so kind and… *shit—shit!* It was all shit.

Across the berm, he spotted his friends waiting by one of the buses. James and Peter waved tentatively, and he nodded back. Sirius was drawing circles in the snow with the tip of his boot. Unbothered.

So go then, Vicious Moony seethed. *Go and make his life miserable too. Show him how it feels.*

Yeah, maybe he would.

"Hello, Remus."

Sheila's voice was soft when she said his name. It felt like a hug from a mother almost, but then again he couldn't remember what that felt like, really. He turned to her, and Sheila beamed at him while wearing an effervescent orange peacoat. She looked like a smiling traffic cone.

"Are you excited to be going home for the holidays?" She asked him. "I hope your father's taken some time off."

It was almost ironic.

"Yeah, loads. Enough to vacation in the Riviera with his new wife."

Instantly Sheila's good mood vanished. It might've been the rawness in his voice or the fatigue on his face, or perhaps after two and a half years of seeing each other every day, she was just able to tell what his misery looked like.

“I didn’t know Lyall had remarried.”

“Yeah, last autumn.”

She frowned at him. “Are you alright, Remus? What’s wrong?”

“Did you know?” He asked her, finally forgoing any needless pandering and cutting straight to the bone. Just like Sirius.

“Did I know what?”

“Did you know that Thaddeus Dean was my dad when you gave this to me?”

She looked down, to where he’d pulled the rumpled photograph from his pocket. Remus hadn’t looked at the thing in months, and yet the image felt as familiar as the back of his hand.

“Remus, I…”

“Don’t lie to me.” He thrust the photo at her again. *“Did you know?”*

She seemed to shrink away from it this time, like the truth might bite her. When she spoke, her voice was a reedy whisper. Thin.

“I wasn’t entirely sure. Hope never said and… But when I saw you that first day in my class, it was uncanny." She let out a shaky breath, her voice snapping. "It was like seeing him again. After all these years —*Tad.* A bit taller, skinnier in some places, but the same nose—same eyes.”

He felt the trembling return, but without fever.

“Why did you give this to me…?”

His teacher’s mouth fell open with unsaid words, but they were just excuses, and so he shoved the photograph back into his pocket.

“Remus—” Sheila said quickly, “there’s something else I should tell you.”

“No, thank you,” he ground out, turning toward the buses. “Goodbye, Mrs. Buchanan. Happy Christmas.”

Chapter End Notes

So... maybe this wasn't the end of exam treat you wanted, but at

least the Christmas carol was cute though, right...? pfft I'm sorry, I like angst, what can I say?

I hope those of you who didn't see my big reveal coming can think back to all of the foreshadowing I've been desperately sprinkling throughout the fic. I swear it's there, but if you don't believe me, check out chapters 2, 33, 50, and especially 61 & 66. There's even more than that though.

Edit; If you can't remember who "Thaddeus Dean" is, check out chapter 61.

If you're that distressed, feel free to head on over to my tumblr and yell at me <3 (srsly, it's where I answer any and all questions lol) and hey,,, next chapter Christmas, right? haha... ha...

Chapter 83: Coda

Chapter Summary

Coda /ˈkōdə/ *noun*

1. The concluding passage of a piece or movement; an expanded cadence.
2. An ending, with the freedom to start again.

Chapter Notes

The irony of the song opening this chapter just kills me, idk.
And a note to everyone who was worried about Remus' health, he is FINE lmfao. He does not have cancer or any other terrible illness you lot have been dreaming up. I don't like angst *that* much.

No C/W for this chapter, but it's not exactly uplifting either. Hang in there *smooches forehead*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm on the top of the world, lookin' down on creation;
And the only explanation I can find;
Is the love that I've found, ever since you've been around,
Your love's put me at the top of the world…

- "Top of the World" The Carpenters, 1972

Mrs. Potter had just about passed out in the foyer when she saw James and the bleached skunk stripe lining his sweeping fringe, but it was nothing compared to the look she gave Remus.

"Remus, *beta,* are you alright? You look positively ill."

He didn't deny it, and neither did any of his friends. James and Lily had been silently fretting over him since Scotland, passing him handkerchiefs to dab the sweat on his forehead and stuffing him with hot tea from the train's trolley cart. Only Sirius remained stoic; Remus didn't care—let him sulk.

"Just tired from the train," he said. Then he wobbled while taking his

boot off and James had to reach out and steady him.

“Giles is still in the drive talking cars with dad,” he said, eyeing his mother uneasily.

“M’fine, James."

Mrs. Potter stepped forward anyway. “May I?”

Remus nodded reluctantly, allowing her to press the back of her hand to his forehead.

“Arey baap re… You’re burning up. Perhaps we should have Giles take you home until you’re well.”

“No, please. I’m fine, really!" He insisted. "No one else has caught anything, I’m just tired—just need some sleep, and I… I would rather not go home.”

Effie looked at her son warily before sighing. “Alright, but it’s straight upstairs with you. You’ll take James’ bed while I prepare something that’ll warm you up. And we’ve a neighbour two houses down, Dr. Ostrowski, we’ll have him take a look at you.”

Remus didn’t fight it. He’d already decided on the train that anything was better than returning to that empty estate.

“Here, let me get your trunk,” James said, ushering Remus out of the way while Mrs. Potter retreated into the kitchen.

“And you should take your jacket off, it’s wet from the rain,” Lily insisted, already peeling it off him by the collar.

“Guys, I told you I’m fine—” He’d meant to step over James’ guitar case, but like the klutz he was, caught his toe on the edge and nearly sprawled on the foyer carpet for a second time. He might have gone down on his face had a hand not shot out and steadied him. Alarmed, Remus turned sharply to find Sirius holding his elbow. They locked eyes for the first time since their fatal game of questions, and Sirius quickly released him, turning away to fumble with the buttons of his coat.

More affronted than he would’ve been had Sirius just let him fall, Remus drew himself up to his full height and turned for the stairs. He’d already told himself that should he choose to stay, Sirius was not his prerogative. Not his problem. He was there for his friends, and

Sirius Black was not his friend.

No less than ten minutes later, Remus lay curled up under the covers of James' fourposter, staring up at the poster of Farrah Fawcett he'd yet to remove from the roof. He knew he should be happy Mrs. Potter had agreed to let him stay, but lying there, in an unfamiliar bed, made him feel suddenly panicked. Cagey. Like he needed to flee. *Idiot*—coming back to the Potters' had seemed like such a good idea on the train, when the mere thought of returning to the Lupin Estate had left him rushing to the toilet to vomit. (Though that could've just been courtesy of Lily's personal mixture of turmeric and ginger tea—heavy on the turmeric.) Now he felt guilty. Who was he to weasel his way into his friend's home and ruin everyone's holiday? Just because he and his boyfriend had had a nasty break up...

Had he and Sirius broken up? It felt like it. Remus had never been more angry with anyone in his entire life, save perhaps his parents. Why couldn't Sirius ever listen?! If Remus was the walking time bomb then Sirius was the match ready to set him off. Maybe they were bad for each other after all. Maybe they should've just stayed friends. Though really, Remus couldn't remember what it felt like to just be Sirius Black's friend.

"Effie, have you seen my boots anywhere? Should need to salt the drive, I think."

"In the hall cupboard, dear!"

"Right, right... Effie, have you seen my muffler anywhere? Bit nippy out."

"On the stairs, dear!"

"Yes, yes... Effie, have you seen my spectacles anywhere? Can't bloody—"

"On your head, dear!"

"Oh my..."

Potter Cottage was a big house, and in big houses sound tended to carry. As he laid awake, listening to the distant hum of happy reunions and novelty holiday tunes playing off the radio, Remus could feel a familiar itch to disappear creep back in. He imagined them all downstairs, sat down by the warm hearth and sharing all the bits of themselves Effie and Monty had missed since September. The girls' prank on Halloween, Sirius' birthday, the time capsule and Marlene's petition. He could hear laughter, the occasional motherly

condemnation. James' good-natured reply, Lily's timid agreement. *Sirius.*

Remus couldn't take it anymore. The entire thing had been a mistake. Sirius wasn't miserable, he was happy! Happy to be home with family in a space big enough that he didn't have to look at Remus all hours. Remus' plan had failed, he needed out.

Throwing off the covers, Remus sat up in bed and reached for his jumper. He'd have to leave his trunk, it was too heavy to lug down the street with him, but what good were books and things anyway if you didn't even know where you were going?

It got noisier as he emerged into the hallway. Already out of breath, he wheezed lightly as he descended the stairs, but could still hear the sound of Lily and Mrs. Potter's happy voices drifting up from the kitchen. The others were clearly in the parlour, and he briefly caught word of a football match being discussed. Trying his best to block it out, Remus searched the hall cupboard for his scarf and coat. He'd just finished lacing up his boots when James came skittering down the hallway, heading for the stairs. With a tray of homemade soup balanced in his hands, he'd almost swept past him, but froze at the last second. Foot on the first step, James looked surprised—and disappointed.

"Moony, what are you doing?"

Remus sighed, like a burglar caught in the act. "M'gonna head out."

James only blinked at him.

"Huh?"

"Gonna go... now. I'm leaving, James."

"You're leaving *now?* Without telling anyone? What... Did you call Giles or something?"

Remus shook his head, utterly shamefaced, and the look James gave him was horrible.

"Where were you even gonna go? To the East End?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but James just cut him off;

"Remus, are you *mental?* It's dark out—gonna be real late soon!"

“Shh!” Remus groaned, desperately. “S'fine. I know my way around.”

“That’s not the problem!” James huffed, setting down the soup tray. “What’ll I tell Mum? Or Lily?”

“Just tell them that I got Giles to come get me or something. That I was too sick."

“Mate, you *are* sick.”

“Then don’t tell them anything. Say you never saw me.”

“You actually expect me to lie to them? Not a chance. Just stay, we’ll —we’ll figure something else out.”

“James, I can’t.” *I can hear him laughing and I thought I could handle it but I can’t. It’s killing me.*

“Moony, if this is about what happened yesterday, Sirius has already told me he’s sorry. Sorrier than anything. He didn’t mean to push you into… whatever that was. None of us knew anything about your dad."

"I know, that was sort of the point."

James frowned deeply, and took a step forward. "I don't know how it's been for you," he said, "and I won't pretend either. But Remus, if you thought for even a second that we’d think any less of you because of it —then you’d be dead wrong.”

It was good of him, but Remus had never been as good as James Potter. He stepped back, closer to the door, and raised a hand to ward him off.

“James... Please. I can't do this tonight."

“You can't go! People are gonna be coming around for the holidays soon. People who want to meet you guys! My cousin Ajay’s coming back home to visit and he’s got all these crazy stories about America. It’ll be a good distraction, and when you’re better, well… Then we'll do it your way. Heck, we’ll even go find Tomny together if you'd like.”

“No offence, Prongs, but I don’t want to sit around listening to Ajay talk about the Red Sox and the Yankees. I need to—”

“Don’t be a shit friend, Remus.”

It was the nastiest thing James had ever said to him, but it didn’t

matter. His dark eyes softened immediately and he stepped forward, placing a hand on Remus' shoulder to give it a gentle squeeze.

"Stay," James said again, "stay and get better."

He wanted to say no. He wanted to throw his friend's kindness back into his face—be that shit friend who ran out on them the moment things went bad, but if the situation had been reversed, Remus couldn't see himself doing any different.

So, Remus allowed James to help him out of his coat, and together they made the long trek back upstairs. He ate the rasam Effie had prepared and only bothered James once about Farrah, before changing into his night clothes and slumping back in bed. James hadn't dawdled after that, a small mercy, and when he left he turned on the radio.

"Just try and relax some," he told Remus, before shutting the door. Remus stared after it, mentally comparing its size to that of his bedroom door back at the estate. It was a horrible feeling, but at least the radio helped some.

'It's a livin' thing,
It's a terrible thing to lose;
It's a givin' thing,
What a terrible thing to lose…'

Lily appeared sometime later, setting a cup of water on the bedside table and carefully laying down beside him overtop the covers. She noticed the poster immediately, but before she could comment on it, Remus spoke.

"He's still got one of you up over his bed at school. Kisses it every morning… Sirius put it up."

"I remember," she said, smiling up at the roof of the four-poster. "Funny, that Sirius. Though not always…"

A dour feeling came over him.

"Lils."

"I know you're sick, so we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. But I can tell that all this has been on your mind for a while now.

You've been a bit odd lately, Remus."

Odd like a cuckoo clock.

He pushed the memory away. It felt like a lifetime ago. "Yeah, well—sorry for being so odd."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know."

She took his arm.

"Remus, I know what Sirius did was not kind, but I wish you'd talk to us. You don't have to take on everything alone, you know. You've got people here who want to help."

"Thanks, Lils, but I really don't want to talk about it."

She nodded solemnly, and then slid her hand further until it was cradling his palm. Her fingers were soft, and Remus just felt clammy.

"I didn't come up here to badger you. I just wanted to let you know that the others are getting ready for bed. Monty wants them up early to help rake the leaves from the lawn. If you'd like, you can sleep in the guest bedroom with me. We don't have to talk about it."

As she spoke, Remus cast his eyes over the cots, already set up for what might have been a fun night of boyish antics. *Could've been,* had he not cocked it all up so badly. He could barely look at Sirius now—being in the same room with him for even a moment would just send him running again.

With a wordless nod, Remus sat up in bed and allowed his friend to help him hobble out into the hall. That night, he laid awake thinking about how Lily's hair looked like dark whips of fire as it spread out across her pillow. It felt almost odd to see her sleep—the closest he'd come was the time she'd nodded off in James' lap in the common room, and then also that night in the girls' room, after she and Snape had had their final falling out. Funnily enough, Sirius had preoccupied his thoughts during both instances; and now, despite the slightness of her frame and the quiet kitten-like breathing, he had to keep reminding himself that Lily was not Sirius. The constant pang was a sorry reminder that without even saying the words, he and Sirius were over. They hadn't so much as glanced at each other on the train—hadn't said a word in either's direction since the fight in the common

room. How long had it been since they weren't able to look at one another's face and read everything written there?

Guess you both got what you wanted, the vicious Moony said. *No more hiding now.*

No, Remus thought, as he turned his back on Lily so she wouldn't wake up and see the damp on his cheeks.

Not like this.

* * *

Remus spent the first several days of holiday in bed—Mrs. Potter's orders. He was fed soups and masalas that could've cleared even the worst sinuses, and James and Peter came by frequently to add to the growing pile of records they'd left next to the beside turntable. They didn't ask him about what had happened back at school, and he saw neither hide nor hair of Sirius. It was a boring existence but at least he wasn't being forced to go home. He'd rather let Lily play nurse than any of the maids back at the estate. At least at the Potters' no one was a stranger.

Though she was not happy to hear that they were sharing a room, Lily had managed to convince Effie to let Remus stay. She tended to him like an army medic until he'd finally snapped and said he could dab his own sweaty forehead. When Dr. Ostrowski arrived on their second day, Effie had shown him upstairs where he introduced himself in a deep Polish accent. He used a tongue depressor to check his throat and waved a narrow light across his eyes for so long that Remus was sure he'd go blind.

"Any discomfort or tightness in diaphragm?"

"No."

"Hm. Try deep breath."

Remus did so, and stubbornly resisted the twinge in his sternum. He did wheeze a bit on the exhale however, and the doctor peered at him sceptically.

"Have you been coughing up phlegm?"

“Yes.”

“What colour?”

“Yellow,” Remus answered, before coughing sharply into his elbow.

“He’s been coughing going on a week now,” Effie added, while she and Mr. Potter stood by the door. “Fevers every night.”

After taking a moment to listen to his heart beat, Dr. Ostrowski pulled the stethoscope from his neck, turning back to the worried couple.

“He has chest infection. Probably started as cold, then mutated. I will give prescription for bacteria. If is viral, should resolve on own.”

Effie’s shoulders slackened with relief while Mr. Potter fit the end of his pipe into his smiling mouth.

“So I don’t have to go to the hospital?” Remus asked anxiously.

“Not now. Keep eye on symptoms. If get worse, let me know.”

Snapping shut his medical bag, the doctor stood up from the bed and allowed Mr. Potter to show him out.

“Never thought a chest infection would be good news,” Mrs. Potter said, coming forward to change the damp flannel on his forehead. “We’ll send the boys out to pick up the prescription.”

“I can go myself,” Remus insisted.

“I hope you’re joking.” She drew the covers up, then leaned down and kissed the top of his head. “Drink your tea, and make sure you eat up all of that soup. I’ll be back to check on you in a little while.”

And that was how it went for Remus. Endless rounds of doting friends, antibiotics, and warm meals. Just dreadful, really. Despite the fact that he was mostly bedridden, he could tell when Potter Cottage began to get a whole lot busier. The front door would open every now and then to the sound of cheerful greetings and pattering boots. Cousins came in from all over the countryside, filling up the home until every nook and cranny was occupied. He finally met the infamous Ajay, who arrived the same day he’d flown in from Boston and strode straight into the room with James while wearing a Harvard University pullover.

“Sorry you’re feeling so crap,” Ajay said, after Remus had shot upright

in bed and nearly keeled over trying to make himself look presentable. “Cuz told me you like music though. You heard of Van Halen?”

Ajay was cool, Remus decided. He brought James several records, most of them by American bands none of them had even heard of. Remus listened to each one on repeat for hours. Later, when he was feeling halfway decent, he even managed the occasional trip downstairs to mingle or share a meal. The Potters’ dining table had extended ten-fold to make room for everyone, but Remus always made sure to sit opposite to Sirius for meals. Unfortunately, this often meant contending with James’ younger, less tactful cousins.

“How did you get that scar?”

“Hamsa!” One of James’ uncles hissed; nearly choking on his supper. He said something in Hindi that sounded a lot like ‘behave yourself’, but Remus wasn’t fazed. He turned to the girl, rubbing the bridge of his nose pointedly.

“Picked a fight with a samurai. Nasty stuff. But don’t worry, I made sure to get him back. Took both eyes out with a single chopstick.”

She squinted like she didn’t believe him while everyone else at the table shared a chuckle. Remus spared a glance at Sirius, but he was not smiling. Instead he nudged James, and asked him to pass the butter.

As nice as meeting the Potters’ extended relations had turned out to be, Remus was not out of the woods entirely. The cough had ebbed, but his fevers returned with vengeance in the days leading up to Christmas. Lily continued to come and go from their bedroom with copious amounts of tea in hand, as did James’ vast family.

"Mummy says rock music melts your brain," Arun said. He was only eight, but seemed to consider himself very knowledgable in most things.

"Oh, it does," Remus agreed. "Sometimes I have plug up my ears just to keep it from leaking out." He stuck both pinkies in either ear and puffed up his cheeks, making Arun and his six year-old sister giggle.

"You two aren't supposed to be in here," Lily said, emerging through the door with a tea tray and a book tucked under one arm. "Remus is still sick. Do I have to tattle to your parents?"

Quickly, both kids leapt down from the bed and shot out the door,

giggling some more and they slammed it behind themselves.

“Sounds like a circus down there,” Remus called.

“It is. More of James’ aunts and uncles just arrived,” Lily said, as she set the tray down on the bedside. “Did you know he has two cousins named Aarush? And three named Stephen! Anyway, they all say to get better soon. They’re saving you a portion of the driveway to shovel whenever it decides to snow.”

“As if London gets any real snow.”

She smiled and passed him a cup of tea. Remus matched it meekly, and stopped in inhale a much needed whiff of Mrs. Potter's famous chai. He had no idea what that wonderful woman put in the stuff, but it worked magic where sleep was concerned.

“You should go and visit,” he told Lily, while sipping the drink. “I’m not dying of tuberculosis, you don’t need to tend to me like a wilted daisy.”

“Nonsense. Monty lent me a book and I thought you might like it, that’s all. Now shut up and drink your tea while I read to you.”

He appreciated her, but could tell that the hovering was just Lily's way of keeping track of him. There was no way that James hadn’t told all of them about his disappearing attempt, and though it made him feel like a coddled child, he didn’t fight anymore than necessary. The alternative meant going home, and though he would certainly be left alone at the estate, it wouldn’t mean peace.

On the forth morning, Giles arrived to check in.

“Remus, darling,” Mrs. Potter called through the door; “Giles is here.”

She stuck her head inside, but Remus only pretended to be asleep, and after a bit more cooing, he began to hear their hushed voices in the hall.

“Should we wake him?”

“Don’t bother, Effie. Best to let the little blighter sleep. Thought I might take him home ‘cause he’s been so sick, but now that I know… He’d probably rather stay.”

He did. He couldn’t go back to that house. Not now, and not ever. *Vos*

sunt non lupus. He did not belong.

In the end they didn't bother him, and Mrs. Potter left a thick envelope on his bedside, along with an assortment of gifts to be opened on Christmas. A few were from Giles, but most were from his father and Sandra. Remus resisted the urge to glare at them, but he did chance upon opening the envelope, which turned out to be a card showcasing the beautiful Monaco beaches and several hundred pounds in cash. Sandra had written a short note wishing him happy Christmas, but there was no note from his father. Just a swirling set of initials; *L.L.* Apparently Remus hadn't the need to hustle his classmates with his poetry after all.

Trying not to let the chilly gift turn his stomach, he tore the card in half and shoved the money into the deepest pocket of his coat. Perhaps he'd burn it later.

If overhearing Giles and Mrs. Potter's conversation had done anything, it'd proved his suspicions; for a long time Remus had wondered if Giles knew that he was not his father's legitimate child. He'd never had the courage to ask—couldn't even stomach imagining the face he'd give him—but now that the answer was clear, he wasn't sure whether to be hurt or angry. So… he became neither. Remus simply pushed the thought away, along with all the rest of life's disappointments.

While sitting alone in his and Lily's bedroom, he carefully took stock of the presents Giles had brought. Not all of them were for him, in fact a good portion were gifts. Most had been picked from a catalogue; a guitar strap for James, a new camera case for Lily… simple things, really. He'd paid for all of them himself using the money from his poems, and now they all sat at the foot of Remus' bed, swathed in red and gold wrapping. One of them, perhaps the largest, felt all for naught now. He tried not to think about it.

It became easier to avoid Sirius as the house grew more crowded. While James' uncles helped Mr. Potter change burnt out Christmas lights or salt the drive, the mums puttered around the kitchen like a flock of busy hens, speaking Hindi to one another and English when Mrs. Pettigrew came around. There was no mistaking her for Peter and Lottie's mum, not with her stout stature or head of peach-blonde hair. She greeted all of them enthusiastically, shaking Remus' hand and dubbing him the 'handsomest stalk of wheat she'd seen in all her years'. She was kind, with eyes like Simeon and the same sort of vivacious mettle as Lottie. Perhaps somewhat predictably, she was not

one to hold her tongue, and like her children, seemed to let loose any and all thoughts that popped into her head.

“I never did much care for that old Jim Callaghan, but this Thatcher woman… I shudder to think what she’ll have to say if she ever gets into office.”

Yes, she was rosy and predictable, but if there was one thing Remus was not expecting from Mrs. Pettigrew, it was the whole-hearted encouragement with which she had for their music.

“Now, I’ve been talking to Rod,” she said one morning, after rushing over to help Effie decorate several cakes; “that is, Charlotte and Peter’s father—and I think that having you boys perform at the New Year's party would be spectacular! Christmas is for thanks and carols —good food and all that fuss, but I don’t see why we shouldn’t have a little live music to ring in the new year, hey?”

It’d surprised them to say the least, but as word got around that the home-grown ‘Marauders’ would be making a special guest appearance on the final night of the year, they had no choice but to acquiesce.

“I think it’s a champ idea actually. We haven’t played anything outside of a practice since Padfoot’s birthday,” James said, once they were all crowded around the kitchen table together, using a needle and thread to string coloured popcorn onto garland.

“And Sim’s gonna be back by then,” Lottie added. “He’s spending Christmas at his girlfriend’s, but he says he wants to see you all play.”

Girlfriend—sure, Remus thought to himself; *Nice cover, Sim.*

“You mean he wants to see us make fools of ourselves,” Peter grumbled, fighting to get his needle through a particularly stubborn kernel.

“You won’t make fools of yourselves,” Lily insisted, as James leaned past her and smacked a hand on the table.

“Daisy’s right! This is our chance to show our parents we’re serious. If we put on a good show, then they’ll have to give our gap year some thought.”

“Lupin doesn’t even have his bass,” Sirius said blandly, speaking about Remus as though he weren’t sitting a mere two seats over. “What are we even gonna do with two acoustics and no microphone?”

The revelation seemed to dampen James' spirits a bit, and he glanced at Lily.

“Is there nowhere we can borrow what you need?” She suggested. “Maybe find a rental shop?”

“This close to Christmas?” Remus echoed, looking anywhere but at Sirius. “S’fine. I’ll just sit this one out. You guys can get by for one performance without a backing bass.”

“No way,” James scoffed automatically. “Marauders go on as a whole, or not at all. We’ve still got a few days until everything’s shut up, maybe we could… *Oh!* Ajay used to have tons of mates into music—one of them’s got to have a bass lying around somewhere.”

“You could ask one of them to lend it out!” Lily agreed.

“Yeah, and in the meantime, you can just play rhythm guitar, Moons. You’ve better timing than me anyway.”

“Problem solved!” Lottie cheered, as Remus nodded along in indifference. Next to him, Peter flicked the stale popcorn kernel away and picked up another, this time licking his fingers and shutting one eye.

“Guess we best get to practising then,” he said, before promptly stabbing the needle into his thumb.

The holiday busyness kept them distracted at least; when they weren’t liberating Peter’s parlour and driving Mr. Pettigrew mad with all their noise, there was always party prep to be done. Someone new to meet. A meal to be shared… And on those mornings where James was away on some lovesick adventure with Lily, and Peter was off visiting Moira, Sirius and Remus made sure to sequester themselves in different rooms.

Remus *also* tried not to let this bother him. After all, he’d never felt so angry with someone in all his life—a sentiment he made sure to repeat to himself on the daily. He and Sirius had continued to brush each other aside at every meal and practice and every time Remus was reminded that no matter what he’d promised him, Sirius’ impulsive anger had gone too far this time. He’d all but dared him to publicly confess to something he’d told him—he’d *told* him—wasn’t true.

Why’d you do that? He’d asked the Sirius in his head, over and over again.

Why'd you do that?

Why'd you do that?

Why'd you DO THAT?

Why is it never enough for you?!

Enough… It was almost laughable now. Sirius Black did not know the meaning of the word 'enough'. It did not exist within his vocabulary, and if it did, it certainly did not apply to him. It was never about enough, it was always *more.* Not enough to be bisexual—just *gay.* Not enough to have this—to need *everything.* And in his bitterest moments, Remus came to realise that that was all it was. Sirius had accepted that his boyfriend could be 'bisexual' because it was more than he'd been before, but eventually that must've just felt insufficient. It wasn't a sin to be one or the other, but to be stuck in between? To be *insufficient?* Well… that was just not good *enough.*

He did not know whether or not Sirius had made good on his word to tell James he was gay, and he did not ask. Instead Remus waited, expecting some sort of change—even just a subtle shift at the way James looked at his best friend—but in the end there was nothing. He couldn't decide if that meant James knew and did not care, or that Sirius had held back. It was maddening. He wouldn't have ever imagined that not knowing whether James knew, would somehow be worse than him *actually* knowing. It made him want to run away again. He had no more secrets to punish them with, and no matter how many times James apologised on Sirius' behalf, no matter how many times Peter or Lily told him they were sorry—Remus was not. The only thing Remus was sorry for was how long it'd taken him to realise that whatever he and Sirius had been was doomed from the start.

You could just leave. Find Tomny. What's really stopping you?

He didn't really have an answer. Maybe he needed a push, but James had already told him not to be a shit friend, hadn't he?

Well, I think that ship's already sailed, mate.

* * *

Friday 23rd December 1977

“Are you sure you won’t come ice skating with the rest of us?” Lily asked, as she stood in the doorway of Remus’ bedroom, a concerned look upon her face.

“I can barely walk on my own two feet—now you want to put me on ice too?”

“I would’ve thought you’d be good at it! Long limbs and all…”

“Go already, before I sneeze on you,” Remus threatened, ushering her out of the room. They got about three steps before Lily had whipped around again, grabbing him by the shirt sleeves.

“Okay, but—Marlene’s already told me she managed to get us all tickets for that ‘Star Fight’ film or whatever.”

“You mean ‘Star Wars’.”

“Yeah, that’s the one! Technically it’s not out until the twenty-seventh, but there’s this cinema in Mayfair that’s doing a special holiday showing tomorrow on Christmas Eve! Lottie and Peter have already said they can’t come—they’re making the drive to collect Simeon, so promise you’ll go if you’re feeling better?”

“Promise. Now let me nap, woman.”

She smiled, but paused once more, this time with her palm on the doorknob. “James played me your guys’ song last night, by the way.”

Remus sighed, already embarrassed. He knew James had wanted to play ‘Lily Bloom’ for her on their last night at school, but then he’d gone and buggered the whole thing up.

“Hope it wasn’t too lame.”

“ ‘Course not! I only meant to say that it was brilliant.” Lily threw herself forward into a hug. “Thank you. It’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

Blushing, Remus murmured a shy ‘you’re welcome’, and then as they pulled apart; “You made sure to give James a kiss too, yeah?”

“Many kisses.”

“Oh, s’good then.”

Lily's expression softened. "Remus, are you sure you're alright?"

"It's just a tiny infection, Lils."

"I don't mean you being sick. I mean… here." She touched the place over her heart, her green eyes sad and soft. "None of us blame you for not telling us about your dad, but it's been days now… And you and Sirius are—"

"There is no 'me and Sirius'," he snapped. "I need you to stop asking."

"I would, except now Sirius refuses to talk about it with anyone. Even James."

"Sounds like a him problem then."

Oh, Remus—he could see it in her eyes. Thankfully she didn't say it. Instead she just gave him another hug, and whispered into his shoulder;

"Just know that when you're ready to talk about it, we're here."

She was kinder than he deserved, they all were, but all it took was another stilted dismissal and Lily finally left him be with his radio—promises of their prompt return following her on her way out.

The house was quieter after that, what with most of James' relatives off on final holiday errands. It was a brief lull; in mere hours every inch of the Potters' cottage would be stuffed with merry well-wishers and party-goers. For now though, it was just his moping self and the queen of the house, who eventually did come knocking.

"Remus, dear, may I come in?"

He sat up, mumbling in the affirmative while tucking away the book he'd been reading and turning down the radio's volume. A second later Mrs. Potter was sticking her head inside.

"Still feeling a bit peaky?"

"S'not so bad anymore," he said. "Cough's almost gone."

"Oh, good."

Mrs. Potter slipped inside wearing her kitchen apron, her hair up and out of her face as always. She glanced over the single gold-wrapped present still sitting on the foot of his bed before perching herself on

top of the covers and drawing it into her lap to toy with the bow. Remus tried not to look so earnest. Most of the gifts Giles had dropped off had already been placed beneath the tinsel-clad tree in the salon, courtesy of James, but he'd kept one, wondering if he should give it at all. He knew what was inside. A brand new pair of Doc Martens. Size nine. Too small for himself.

"All ready for Christmas then?" Effie asked, eventually setting the present aside.

"Yeah. Did you need any help in the kitchen then? I probably shouldn't touch the food, but I could do dishes or—or something."

"Oh no, don't worry yourself, dear. We spent all day yesterday prepping. Should be a good turn out for the party tonight. Which you *are* invited to attend, by the way, provided you're feeling better."

He sniffled for effect. "Maybe, yeah…"

Mrs. Potter smiled kindly and pat his leg. "Don't feel pressured. You just focus on getting better. I did wonder though, if you're feeling up to it, would you mind if we had a little chat? Just you and me."

"About what?"

"Well, to be frank, it's about what you said when you arrived. I wanted to wait until you were well again, but since this sickness of yours insists on sticking around I thought now might be good, considering we finally have a bit of quiet around here."

He looked down at his lap uneasily, but Euphemia Potter was hardly the dithering type. She looked him in the eye whenever she spoke, and did not allow for cowering.

"James told me a bit about your fight with Sirius," she started. "He said it was spurred by something you said about your father. Is that true?"

Well, it wasn't *wrong*.

Remus nodded reluctantly.

"And is your father the reason you don't want to go home?"

Suddenly the dots were starting to connect.

"It's not like that."

“Hm. Like what?”

He struggled to find the words. He didn’t want her to misunderstand. “Like… Well, I’ll be eighteen in March,” he tried instead. “Won’t matter after that.”

She gave him a smile that felt a lot like a frown, and Remus knew he’d said the wrong thing.

“Remus, *beta,* I make it a habit not to pry, but is there anything you'd like to tell me? Or anybody? … I know how hard it was for Sirius to talk about his family but—”

“I’m not like Sirius,” he answered sharply. “My dad, he… Lyall doesn’t hit me.”

Another smile, and Remus wanted to top himself.

“I understand.” She stroked the bed covers gently. “But you know, there are other ways people can hurt us that don’t leave any exterior wounds. They can hurt us with words, or ignore us when we really need them. They could... take advantage of our love, or forget us. And it can happen to anyone, even very strong people. Even those who might seem well cared for. It’s called neglect, Remus.”

Neglect. It was an ugly word. It seemed to hang in the air long after she’d said it, and yet Remus couldn’t bring himself to agree. He wasn’t *neglected,* he had everything. He had so much, that he’d had to lie about having nothing just to fit in. He’d worn their clothes, shaped his mouth to fit their words, and yet he’d still gone home to gilded window panes and marble floors. Remus Lupin wasn’t a *have not,* he was a *will not.*

"I'm not neglected."

"Remus, *beta—"*

"I'm not!"

Aren't you?

No, no, no... *Go AWAY!*

How many times have you wanted to scream at him... All those times... Look at me.

No.

Please, look at me.

No!

LOOK AT ME!

"Remus."

She moved toward him, using that soft, motherly tone he was not used to, and Remus flinched. He hated himself for it the moment he saw the reaction of it reflected in her face.

“I’m sorry. I-I didn't mean to—”

“No, *I’m* sorry,” Mrs. Potter said firmly. “I believe I may have overstepped. I didn't mean to panic you.”

“He doesn’t neglect me,” Remus said again, because what else was there to say? “He raised me. Kept me, even after she died… And he never hit me, either. Not once. He just—He wants to make good on his investment.”

“Remus—"

Oh no.

"Children are not investments.”

He hated that. The way she said his name. *Remus, Remus, Remus.* He wished she would stop—that she would go away.

“He only took away my allowance," he blabbered. "I was angry—I was being a brat.”

“Everyone’s a brat sometimes.”

“Not me. I'm bad all the time. I tell him I hate him—all of the time. He got remarried and I hate her too, even though she doesn’t deserve it. I make life hard on purpose—I run away. I lie, *all of the time.* And I smoke cigarettes and take drugs. I’m a bad friend to James, I won’t go to university, and I don’t care about any of it! ... If you were smart you’d kick me out.”

Effie shook her head. “No, Remus. It’s not your fault.”

Remus. Remus. Remus.
Remus, my darling.

Remus, my baby.

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
And where have you been, my darling young one?

He put his head in his hands, curling in on himself and yanking on his hair just to feel something. He should've gone after all—should've run away—told James to fuck off. He hated all of them, especially *her,* and now Effie was ruining all of it. She slid from the bed and knelt down beside him, not touching but close enough to make him tremble.

"It isn't your fault."

Stop. Please stop.

"Do you understand, *beta?* It's not—"

He couldn't. He wouldn't.

"—your fault."

"Stop!"

It took every ounce of him to say it, but when he whipped his head up only meaning to swear at her some more, he was instantly shattered again. It was her eyes. So like James' eyes and yet for a moment… oh… right. *This.* It was this—this feeling. Remus had forgotten what a mother felt like. Not to be looked at, but looked *after.*

He was come apart instantly.

"It's not your fault. You're a good boy. It's not your fault."

For so long she held him, repeating these words in his ear as he cried into the front of her apron. She stroked his hair and kissed his head, murmuring these words. Through it all she smelt of Christmas and home cooking, of teakwood, P&G detergent and poinsettia flowers. She was kind and it killed him *and he hated her* but she held him anyway; sitting on his sweaty bed sheets and rocking him back and forth like she might a baby. She sang to him too, and though the words were in Hindi and he did not understand, Remus wept. How he'd missed lullabies.

Afterwards he felt only numb. The embarrassment crept in slowly, but she didn't release him until he could sit up on his own without sniffling. There she stroked his face some more; patting the damp from

his cheeks while Remus stared down at the covers.

“Thank you. I’m alright now,” was all he could think to say.

She kissed his forehead. “Of course."

“I’m sorry for making you take care of me like this.”

“No. Do not ever apologise. You are welcome here. Monty and I always talked about having more children—siblings for James. I’m glad to know that he went out and found them for himself.”

Remus had no words to that, and so she smiled kindly at him and pat his leg over the covers as she stood. Beneath the shame, he was grateful—she knew when her job was done and did not dawdle. Another coughing fit overcame him as she approached the door, and Effie shook her head.

“I’m going to send up some more tea for you. See if we can’t knock that cold right out of your system. You took your medicine already, yes?”

He nodded.

“Good. Then you just relax. Let me know if there’s anything you need. Anything at all.”

“… Thank you, Mrs. Potter.”

“You’re welcome, *beta.”* She pulled the door shut behind her and Remus sagged back into the pillows, grinding his palms into both eyes. He felt rubbed raw, and his runny nose was worse than ever. He wondered if seeing him cry had made her feel better—like she’d accomplished some great thing in getting him to acknowledge a pain he’d only ever sought to ignore. He felt guilty for not trusting her, but such was instinct. She was an adult, and adults had caused most of his problems—or they used to. Lately he was doing a fine enough job on his own.

But neglect? That was a new one.

Mrs. Potter clearly didn’t know what she was talking about if she’d thought he’d been actually neglected. If she could’ve seen the way Tomny or the rest had grown up then she would’ve seen that Remus walked on a carpet of clouds. He’d always told himself he was better off—that he’d never wanted for money or food or clothes. A dad was a

luxury, and he had enough of those anyway. He was fine.

After about twenty minutes of trying to sleep while the radio hummed distantly on his bedside, Remus finally sat up and tossed off the bed covers. He sneezed into his elbow, and as he did, the disc jockey's voice filtered through the speakers;

"And that was 'Silver Lady' by David Soul. Now coming at you with some ABBA! Here's 'Take a Chance on Me'! ... 'If you change your mind, I'm the first in line! Honey, I'm still free, take a chance on m—!'

"Oh shut up."

Remus clapped his hand down on the radio's off switch, before tugging a jumper over his head to ward off the chills that never seemed to leave him. He reached for the box of tissues on the wardrobe dresser, but found it empty. Grumbling, he trudged over to the bedroom door and threw it wide, only to narrowly avoid running headlong into Sirius.

"Sorry—!" He wiped his face quickly, desperate to not let Sirius know he'd been crying. "Was gonna use… the… loo…"

Sirius recovered quickly. He was holding a tea tray in his hands while worrying at his bottom lip. "Effie said you were napping… Guess she lied. But she asked me to leave this next to your bed."

Remus looked down at the tea set, which smelled strongly of mint and peppercorn. Sirius pressed it into his chest and he took it, suddenly aware of his ragged bedhead and the frog in his throat. "You didn't go out with the others?"

Sirius shook his head. "Been working on something. Didn't want to disrupt the flow. And besides, I'm not much one for skating anyway. Too cold."

"Oh. Do you mean a song?"

"Maybe."

"Is it... any good?"

Sirius shrugged, looking sheepish. "Maybe."

"Cool..."

Neither of them said anything for a long moment, and after glancing

at the floor, Sirius turned to leave.

“Wait.” Remus clutched tightly at the tray. “Don’t you want to talk or something?”

“Talk about what?”

Ugh. “Any of it?”

Sirius crossed his arms over his chest. “Didn’t seem like you wanted to talk,” he replied sharply. The reaction made Remus bristle a bit.

“I didn’t.”

“Why bother now then?”

“Because you were outside my door? And because it’s… convenient?”

The corners of Sirius’ mouth turned up humourlessly. “ ‘Convenient’. What an apt choice of words.”

“I take that to mean you’re still angry.”

“Yeah, I’m still angry.”

“Well, I’m still angry at you too,” Remus countered.

“Fine. No one said we had to be sorry to play in a band together, but I’m not playing stupid apology games anymore.”

Remus ground his teeth together. “So where does this leave us?”

“Guess we’ll find out.”

Sirius turned again, but Remus wouldn’t allow him the last word. Not after everything.

“You told James’ mum about my dad,” he said suddenly. Sirius stopped dead at that, and seizing his opportunity to sink teeth into flesh, Remus set the tea tray aside and stepped out into the hall. “You told her about the things I told you in confidence. About my dad.”

“You didn’t just tell me about your dad,” Sirius said stonily. “You told all of us.”

“Not *that,”* Remus growled. “I mean the rest—Lyall. All the stuff he’s said.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I did. Are you pissed off over that too then?”

“I should be, shouldn’t I? She thinks I was bloody neglected now!”

“Weren’t you?”

Remus swallowed thickly. “Not like you.”

“Oh, is it a competition now?” Sirius mocked. “The age-old game of ‘who’s daddy likes them the least’?”

“In that case, I wouldn’t bother if I were you. You’re a sore loser, and I’ve got *two* dads that don’t want me.”

“You said it, mate, not me.”

It was like watching a trapeze artist teeter on a tightrope. Remus couldn’t look away, even as the rope trembled and he was left holding his breath in anxiety. It was that roller coaster plunging down, down —only now, he could see the rocks at the bottom.

Unwilling to crash, he turned back to his room.

“Lupin.”

He almost ignored him out of sheer stubbornness, but Sirius had always commended every shred of his attention. When Remus stubbornly looked back he found Sirius with his back turned, a hand reached out toward him with its palm upturned, open and seeking. He wouldn’t look at him, but it was his hand he offered. Like a truce. It almost made Remus nostalgic.

Take me back to July,
Bright, beautifully bold;
Now it’s December,
And I’m turning cold…

He’d written the song for both of them. For so long it’d meant everything, and then when they’d fought it’d begun to ring hollow. And yet there they were anyway.

Looking away, Remus reached back and took his hand. Sirius gave it a gentle squeeze; so faint, more like a caress than anything else. Then he was gone, descending the stairs and dropping out of sight to the floor

below.

That evening, Remus did not venture out of his room. Instead he opened the bedroom window, feeling the December cold ice his bones and remembering what I'd been like to sit with Sirius on this corner of the roof. It was not a fond memory, no matter how many times Sirius had let him kiss him or what had come after.

"Bloody freezing in here," Lily hissed, when she'd come in for bed. She fetched a spare blanket from the hall cupboard and buried them both under its plush warmth before turning out the light.

"How was your day?" She whispered, hair haloed against her pillow. "Did you talk to Sirius at all?"

Remus shook his head at the question. "How was skating?"

"Good. We went to Hyde Park. I wish you could've come. Potter always claims to be a sports god, but he fell three times."

"Bet you had a laugh."

"Me and half the rink. It's what he gets for showing off." Lily hummed quietly. "Are you feeling any better?"

"A bit."

"Does this mean you'll go out with us tomorrow?"

He considered. It would be nice to see Marlene, and at least with that many of them, he and Sirius could avoid getting stuck together.

"Alright."

She grinned at him. "I love you, Remus."

"Love you too, Lils."

Lily fell asleep quickly, tired from the day's events, but Remus remained all too awake. He waited until the house had finally settled and all of its occupants were sure to be sleeping, and then grabbed the present Lily had moved from the bed to the top of the wardrobe and crept downstairs. Outside, he found that the staircase's railing had been encased in tinsel and the soft glow of the tree lights could be seen before he'd even stepped into the salon. Beneath the real Fraser Fir, which Mr. Potter had cut down himself on the edge of the property, was a large array of presents, all lovingly wrapped and

bound, just waiting for the morning they'd be torn open by eager hands. Remus went to place the gold-wrapped gift amongst them, but stopped short at the last second. He peeked at the tag.

To Sirius, From Remus.

He ripped it away, crumpling it in his palm. Then he tucked the gift back under the tree.

* * *

Christmas Eve, 1977

Mrs. Potter sighed, examining her thermometer. "You still have a slight fever. Perhaps we should take you to the hospital after all. See about some stronger antibiotics."

"No!" Remus urged. "I'm fine, I don't need a hospital."

"Remus, it's important to take care of your health."

"I'm practically all better. Honest."

She scowled like she didn't believe him, but by then James was already grabbing Remus by the shoulder and shaking him vigorously.

"Come ooooooon, Mum," he moaned. "Moony's been stuck in bed since we got back and it's just one evening! After tonight you can stuff him with kadha 'til it leaks out of his ears."

"Thanks for that image," Remus scoffed, before looking back at Effie. "I'll be alright, Mrs. Potter. Thank you for looking after me."

"You promise to dress warmly? Not like this one…" She eyed Sirius, who had decided upon his leather jacket without so much as a pair of mittens.

"You can't wear a muffler with this, Mum, it'd totally kill the look."

"No hanging outside in the cold," she ordered Remus. "Don't want you sniffling come Christmas."

"Promise."

James swooped in a second later; “Don’t worry, Mum, it's only a matinee—we’ll be back before your Christmas Eve party turns into a pumpkin.”

Mrs. Potter remained sceptical, but in the end the tickets were already bought and not even her overbearing kindness would keep Remus from missing out.

“Here, take Monty’s scarf, it’s much warmer!” She insisted, as they all donned their coats in the foyer. Remus let himself be bundled, while James and Lily stood by, trying to hide their sly smiles.

“What?” He asked Sirius, mumbling through the wool; “No jokes?”

Sirius looked him up and down. “I had some. Don’t much feel like giving you the satisfaction now.”

They finished by scoffing at each other, and then followed each other out to the driveway where all four of them piled into Mr. Potter’s sedan. He was kind enough to drive them to the nearest tube station, which was already bustling with last-minute holiday shoppers and those just looking to get home. From there they took the train the rest of the way into the city and hurried down to the icy London pavement to meet Mary and Marlene outside the theatre in Leicester Square. Both girls were bundled up tight and standing close together to avoid being jostled by the hundreds of other fans waiting in line to get a chance to glimpse the film taking the sci-fi genre by storm. Despite the weather, some were even in costume, and everyone was yammering excitedly about ‘death rockets’ and ‘sky-walkers’ and whatnot.

“It’s like a bleedin’ rock concert,” Sirius whistled, as they slipped in line behind the girls.

“Hey, no cutting!” Someone shouted.

“Bite me, Suspender-Stanley.”

“Don’t you look snazzy,” Mary commended, “and not at all like you’re about to freeze your bollocks off.”

“Be a mate and lend me your pockets, Macdonald?” Sirius begged, too cold to argue. Mary obliged, and he slipped his arms around her, pushing his hands into her coat pockets as though he were holding her from behind. Mary seemed pleased enough at this, and even smirked at the pair of young girls ahead of them who’d turned around to ogle the handsome boy in the leather coat.

Remus was not bothered. He'd fallen into step with Marlene, who seemed to be shivering as well, but upon closer inspection, was actually bouncing up and down on the spot from pure excitement.

"How'd you swing the tickets for this anyway?" He asked her.

"My brother!" Marlene exclaimed. "He's got a friend who works at the theatre. It's my Christmas gift."

"You didn't need to spend your Christmas gift on us," Remus frowned.

"As opposed to what—going alone?" She shook her head. "This is way better anyway. Last year Michael got me these god-awful earrings from Biba."

"Earrings are nice…?"

"Only if you've got the holes to match." Marlene lifted the edge of her wool cap, revealing bare earlobes. "Anyway, how're you doing?"

"Fine. Chest thing's almost gone."

"That's good, but I sorta meant what happened with Sirius."

Remus took a deep breath. There was a throbbing behind his eyes that was just shifting from a mild discomfort to a gnawing affliction. "It's done, Cherry," he told her.

"You talked then—made up?"

"No. *We're* done."

"Is that why you're still wearing his necklace?"

Alarmed, Remus pressed a hand to his throat, but the necklace was covered by a jumper and a coat, not to mention Mr. Potter's scarf.

"How did you...?"

"I guessed." Marlene dropped her gaze, looking sorry. "Has Sirius at least apologised?"

"We've moved on," Remus huffed sharply. "I'm over it."

"Shit, Remus. You can't just forgive him! He—" She dropped her voice; "He tried to get you to out yourself. Before you were ready! I

mean, who even does that?"

Her vexation toward Sirius placated him momentarily, but then that same surge of guilt rose in his gut. Briefly, he considered telling her about all the times Sirius had made his own feelings about coming out crystal clear, only to dismiss them without a second thought; but really, Remus didn't fancy rehashing the conversation in public.

"I don't care anymore. I just want to forget about it."

Marlene looked like she wanted to argue, but then an excited cry went up in front of the theatre, and the line finally began to move.

"Here we go!" Marlene said to the rest of them. "Best be quick or we'll get stuck at the front and have to stare up at the screen the entire time."

"God forbid," Sirius drawled; "I can't wait to see nerd history in the making."

Most of them went into the dark theatre with very low expectations and when it was over, all filed out again, the booming film score practically chasing them up the aisle by the heels.

"Well, that was surprisingly… not terrible," Mary said.

"Just admit you liked it and move on," Marlene blagged.

"I wouldn't say I 'liked it', but that Solo fellow wasn't *too* hard on the eyes. I might be coerced into seeing a sequel if we get at least one shirtless scene."

"You're such a…" Marlene scoffed. "Fine. What about the rest of it then? What about Leia?"

"The whiny princess? Meh."

"She wasn't whiny! She was a soldier—a rebel! Honestly I'm amazed a man wrote her character. Competent *and* beautiful."

"My god, did it finally happen? Did you fall in love, Marls?"

"Oh shove off."

"I liked the laser swords," James said, waving his hand around with a whirring noise and playing at chopping Sirius' arm off at the shoulder. Playing along, Sirius clutched his arm and moaned terribly, before

bouncing back and shooting finger guns in James' direction as he fled through the throng of giddy movie-goers.

"I'm gonna go find the lav. Meet you outside," Remus said to Lily, before excusing himself to the theatre toilet. He hadn't said anything (mostly because Marlene would've crucified any of them for chatting over the film) but somewhere between the exploding planet and the exploding spaceship that looked like a planet but was decidedly *not* a planet, his fever had crept back in full force. It left him hunched over a bathroom sink, breathing hard as he tried not to throw up. Everywhere smelt of stale popcorn and BO, and he felt light-headed just from standing. At least the theatre had been dark, but Remus was not look forward to the chilly ride home on the tube.

"Don't be a bloody jessie," he told himself; "you just need to make it back. You can pass out in your room, fucking toff."

When he finally emerged from the bathroom—nearly running head-long to a man wearing green face-paint and a pair of antennae—he found his friends waiting for him across the dark street. Despite the late hour, people were still bustling around, most of them avid fans or loiterers looking to pick a pocket or two. Even in the dim light given off by the theatre, Lily must've noticed how pale he was, as she turned to him and peeled off a glove to check the temperature of his forehead.

"You ninny, you're burning up again. That's it, we're taking you to the hospital."

"You mean you're *still* sick?" Mary gaped.

Remus groaned and pushed Lily's hand away. "I'm fine. It's Christmas Eve, let's just get to the train and go home."

"I can ring dad from a booth and ask him to come pick us up from here," James offered.

"No, don't bother, I can make it. I'm not—" he surveyed his friends, counting only four. "Where's Black?"

"Maybe you should look into the hospital," Marlene pressed, taking his arm quickly. "It's on our way, Mary and I will take you! Come on, let's go!"

Marlene meant well, but it was too late. He'd already spotted him a short ways down the street, standing on the corner. Sirius—talking to

a girl. A pretty girl. She must've come from the film as well, but she didn't look like she smelt of popcorn or BO. She wore a long coat and a winter hat, dark hair braided down her back. And Sirius... he was standing in that self-possessed way of his—all legs in his dark jeans. And he was smiling. Then when the girl reached out to bat playfully at his arm, he didn't move away.

Suddenly Remus missed the annoying robots and the dark corners of the theatre. His hands seized at his sides and everything began to ache, especially his head.

Sirius was talking to a *girl.*

Sirius, who was *gay,* was talking to a *girl.*

Sirius, who he'd been in love with and dreaming of moving in with up until a week ago, was *talking* to a *girl.*

Now he knew he was going to throw up.

"There he is," James said, spotting Sirius a second too late. "Five quid says she complimented his jacket or something. Hold on while I go get the tosser. Oi, Black!"

As James started his merry way down the pavement, Remus began backing up in the other direction. Marlene clung to him, her platform boots scraping the pavement as she tried to pull him back.

"Remus—Remus, come on. Don't worry about that, he's just being stupid!"

"What's the matter?" Lily demanded, the picture of concern.

But Remus couldn't speak. He was turning over in his grave and he wasn't even dead yet. He was so not done moving on. He hadn't even packed yet. He was still wearing Sirius' bloody necklace, for Christ sake. Why hadn't he taken it off?!

"I—I need to go," he stammered.

"What you *need* is to go to the hospital!" Marlene pushed. She kept a tight hold on his wrist, but Remus was still looking at Sirius. Sirius who was turning as James approached, holding out a hand in gesture to the girl, speaking as though he were introducing them.

Oh god, he knows her name.

With a sharp twist Remus had freed himself from Marlene's grasp and turned, marching away.

"Remus!" Mary cried after him. *"What the*—come back!"

Lily shrieked too, wailing his name like it was a curse;

"Remus Lupin, where do you think you're going?!"

But Remus only covered his ears, taking the first corner he came upon and high-tailing it up the lane. He wouldn't be caught—he refused. He would not be the person Sirius looked to after being chatted up by some random girl off the street.

Without being fully conscious of where he was going, he caught a train from Charing Cross to London's east side and never looked back. As a result, he'd gotten on a no-smoking car by mistake. Irritated, Remus began instantly searching his pockets for a desperate fag anyway and nearly shat himself when he whipped out a wad of cash Lyall had given him and scattered half of it on the train floor. The notes scattered and he scrambled to collect them, before promptly switching cars. West of the Strand you'd likely get shivved for carrying that much dosh on you. Not that he wasn't already making about a dozen other mistakes. He was already out walking alone after dark, half-delirious with a fever while the other half of him was delirious with Sirius. And he was wearing a coat worth more than a month's wages at any dock along the Thames. The money in his pocket felt like a small burden in comparison to the rest, but at least if he got jumped he could throw the money one way and run the other.

As he made his way up the twisting streets, Remus realised with proper irony what a circle his life had become. Before Hawkings he would've done just about anything to return to the End, and he *had.* But he'd never imagined how often he'd be slinking back.

When he reached it, the flat's building looked the same—crumbled, rusted, and wet from the December rain. The light over the front door's entryway was out, but he buzzed the flat's number and was relieved to find that the ringer actually working again. Then a girl answered and Remus nearly stopped breathing.

" 'ello, wotchu want?"

It was like hearing Tonya's voice all over again, except this girl sounded sing-song, the voice of someone high on more than just life. Tonya never sounded like that, even after a dozen lines, she was too

charming.

"Helloooo...? Th is Maxie with the hash?"

“No," he croaked anxiously. "I'm not Maxie, I'm... M'lookin’ for Tomny.”

The intercom clicked off and Remus briefly considered cutting his losses and taking off. He wasn’t sure he could get away with another confrontation with Lee fully intact.

“ ‘oo’s this?”

Not Lee. It was Tomny’s easy brogue that cut through. Hearing him nearly made Remus lightheaded with relief.

“It’s me, Tom."

There was some silence, undoubtedly Tomny collecting every thought that had just shot out of his head, then; *“Meet me under the balcony.”*

Remus did as he was told, skittering down off the front steps and rounding the front of the building, staring up at the dirty second-floor balcony as he rocked back and forth on his heels. It was hard to make out Tomny’s expression as he slid the door open, but he could see his breath coming out in little puffs of haze under the moonlight. Noise followed him out, the sound of plenty of people partying it up inside. Remus kicked himself—it was Christmas Eve. Of course he’d have people over.

“You’re mental coming ‘ere in the middle ‘a the night,” Tomny lashed at him from above. “How’d you even get past Stepney?!”

“You know how it is... No one bothers with a skinny kid.”

“Wish that were true.” Tomny sighed, before rubbing his shoulders harshly. “Fuck—s’cold out ‘ere. You come all the way from Blackheath?”

“No, Finchley.”

Tomny swore again and Remus felt a pang of guilt.

“I know you got people here, a–and I’ll go if I need to. Just needed to get out and cool my head, really. Didn’t know where else…” He winced; “… sorry.”

Tomny pinched his forehead, but waved him off. “No, don’t go. Jus’ stay out of sight for a sec. I’ll get rid of ‘em.”

“You really don't have—”

“Shaddup!” There was the noise of shuffling feet, and then; “Don’t freeze, posh boy.”

Obediently, Remus hunkered down in the shadows off the side of the front yard. It took about twenty minutes, during which his breathing had gone from slightly laboured to sounding as though he’d just run half a marathon. He was sweating an obscene amount inside his coat, but by then people had started to pile out of the front of the building. The rowdy group shambled out the door together, laughing and swearing as they kicked open the rusted gate and made their way up the lane. Remus thought he might’ve caught a flash of Seesaw among them.

“Nerve ‘a that Tom!” One of them cried. *“Kickin’ us out on Christmas like fuckin' tweakers on his doorstep.”*

“You are a tweaker, tweaker."

"Fuck off!"

"M'gonna head over to Geddy’s. You wankers comin'?”

“Oh shit, yeah! He’s got the good stuff anyway…”

Their chatter receded with them as the group trudged further up the lane. Remus was almost tempted to follow, if just for the chance to overhear something familiar, but then Tomny was there, nervously calling out for him in the dark.

“I’m here,” Remus rasped, rounding the dead blackthorn bushes that lined the front garden.

“Blimey,” Tomny cursed, coming down the wet steps in naught but his socks. “You look like death if he got hit by a train.”

“Try a Boeing seven-thirty-seven.”

“I don’t even know what that means.” He took Remus by the arm. “M’on then, little swot. You’ve already ruined my high, might as well getchu inside.”

Every single floorboard in the building creaked as they made their

way up the stairs to the second floor. It was what happened to old, unkempt buildings in the winter. Frost had made its way inside, covering window sills and door hinges. They passed the row of post boxes, painted over with graffiti tags. A dead plant sat at the base of the stairs, its pot filled with more cigarette butts than dirt. Remus hadn't realised how weak he'd become until he had to practically let Tomny carry him up the stairs. It was slow-going, as he had to stop every fourth step or so to catch his breath.

"What's a'matter witchu, Lu?" Tomny grunted; "You actually get jumped on the way over or sumfin?"

Remus took another step and winced. Even his lungs had started to ache out in the cold.

"Ngh—sick. Got a chest infection."

"Fuck. You taking any meds?"

"Mhm... Left them behind."

"Bollocks."

Remus grimaced, nearly missing the next stair. "Sorry for interrupting your party."

"You didn't interrupt anything," Tomny huffed. "Those guys been 'ere goin' on three days now. I was getting ready to chase 'em out. Feelin' a bit 'humbug' as of late anyway."

That makes two of us, Remus thought bitterly.

They managed to get inside eventually, and thankfully it was warm. The flat smelt of stale cigarettes and the musk of many bodies, but Remus didn't care. Tomny carried him across the threshold and dropped him on the living room sofa—which was dingier than he remembered—before squatting down in front of him and reaching up to lift his eyelid with the pad of his thumb.

"You sure you ain't tweakin'?"

Remus shook his head. "S'just a fever."

Tomny tsked and checked his other eye. "And what was it you were doin' in Finchley?"

"Friend's place. Had to get out. Some… stuff's happened."

With another heavy sigh, Tomny released him and leaned back. “Can’t believe you came to *me* for medical help. Thought you public schoolboys were s’posed to be smart.”

“Jus’ wanted to see you,” Remus said honestly.

Tomny gave him a long look, like he couldn’t decide what insult fit him best. In the end he said nothing at all, just dropped his head and began unlacing Remus’ boots for him.

“Missed ya too, plonker.”

Feeling a bit weepy, Remus stared down at the top of Tomny’s head. The gold had faded from his hair as it always did during the cold months, leaving it soft and brown like a fallen leaf in autumn.

“Orright, up yeh go,” the older boy said, once he’d gotten both boots off. Snaking a hand under his armpits, Tomny pulled Remus to his feet and helped guide him down the hall toward the bedroom.

“Thanks,” Remus wheezed, as he collapsed down on the edge of the bed.

“You should drink something,” Tomny said as he straightened up. He left and came back with a coffee mug, passing it over with a little smirk. “Hope you still like the taste of London tap water.”

Remus gulped it down. “Tastes like home.”

Tomny nodded awkwardly and pressed his hands into his back pockets. “Well, you can stay ‘ere until yer feelin’ better. I’ll take the couch. No problem.”

"I don't mean to take your bed."

"You gonna make me tell ya to shut up again?"

“In that case,” Remus smiled meekly, “I hope you at least cleaned the sheets."

Tomny flicked him on the forehead. “You’ve clearly got jokes so guess that means yer gonna be jus’ fine.” Taking the empty mug, he mumbled something about medicine and turned to the door.

“Thank you, Tom.”

Tomny froze in the doorway, looking back at him. “You still got that

scar, I see. S'not going away. It's stubborn… like you." He chuckled quietly. "You know, you could'a called first."

"I know," Remus nodded. "I'm sorry if I let you down."

"Nah. You know me, don't expect nuffin. Can't let me down if I'm expectin' nuffin, yeah?"

"Then I let the others down. I'm a shit friend."

At that, Tomny turned around and strode back into the bedroom. He stopped just before Remus, and placed a hand on his forehead, smoothing his hair back. "Be a shit friend then. You can fix the rest in the morning. When you're feeling better."

"Not sure that's how the world works."

"No, it is. Don't cha know? I know everything." Smirking, Tomny pushed him back onto the covers. "Sleep. I'll be right out 'ere."

He disappeared into the hall, leaving the door open a crack so that yellow light from the kitchen's hob could spill onto the floor. There was a light clatter of glassware on metal, then rushing water from a tap. Eventually Remus heard the faint sound of someone humming, and recognised the tune immediately.

"Mmm... You say goodbye, and I say hello… Hello, hello… I don't know why you say goodbye, I say hello..."

A lump formed in the base of his throat and Remus drew up the covers up to his nose. It was warm, comforting. The radiator was buzzing. Everything smelt familiar—like Tomny.

You say goodbye... I say hello...

Remus shut his eyes. Before he knew it, he was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

'Arey baap re' is a Hindi phrase that comes close to 'oh my god'.
The first song on the radio is "Livin' Thing" by Electric Light Orchestra, 1976.
Rasam is a South Indian soup while kadha is a variation of chai or black tea. Both are considered effective against sickness!
Biba was a women's fashion store in London.
'The Strand' is a major thoroughfare in London.

We have two more Christmas chapters left. Let's see how this resolves itself, yeah? Mwah.

Chapter 84: Christmas, 1977

Chapter Summary

Back at the flat for Christmas. Some has stayed the same, and much has changed.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY PRIDE DARLINGS!!!!! I hope you all tell someone you love them this month, and feel that love in return. You have it from me <333

Note: There's always a considerable amount of slang in these London chapters, so check the end notes before reading if you need to.

C/W: For domestic abuse (brief violence, nothing extreme) as well as hard drugs (cocaine) and addiction. Mentions of knives and blood, as well as violence. (No one dies or is seriously maimed, I swear.)

Also the wonderful r_moonpie has lovingly taken on the task of translating Cadence into Português brasileiro. You can find the link here and find them on twitter an tiktok @r_moonpie <3 I am open to any/all translations, I just ask that you message me on tumblr or tiktok first!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one knows what it's like,
To be the bad man;
To be the sad man,
Behind blue eyes;

No one knows what it's like,
To be hated;
To be fated,
To telling only lies;

But my dreams, they aren't as empty,
As my conscience seems to be;
I have hours, only lonely,
My love is vengeance that's never free…

- “Behind Blue Eyes” The Who, 1977

If you’d have asked, nine times out of ten, Remus Lupin would've told you that he did not dream. This was a lie of course, because everyone had dreams—Remus just barely remembered his. Every morning he woke up with the wisps of the night’s recital slipping away into the forgotten void, and he would go about his day thinking he had not dreamed at all. And really, this was how he preferred it. He had no interest in imagining that he could fly, or that he’d lost all of his teeth at once, or woken up in a room full of people completely starkers. In his later years, it’d even become a point of pride *not* to dream.

But you know what they say, the more you chase a high, the harder it is to achieve.

The memories came all at once as they tended to, tugged to the surface on an invisible line made of sickness and drugs. It was as though admitting his deepest secret had drawn them forth like an angry mob to the hanging. They came to him in night visions—cruel and lonely dreams built to fuck with his head. On those nights, he might have preferred the impossible. He’d have taken any hideous monster or man-made horror over the trudged up memories of his tiny, helpless self. It was like a trick—he was getting pranked by his own brain and he couldn’t even find the words to describe it afterwards. He simply woke up, memories made of the shape of his shirt buttons or the smell of a cooked meal dancing behind his eyes. Going from darkness to light as though he were leaving the theatre of a film without any meaning.

Just as a sad, sad film.

* * *

“Here, darling, open this one next. ‘To Remus, love Mummy and Daddy’.”

He took the gift eagerly. His fingers were small and round. Young, then. Inside the wrapped box he found a pair of gloves, made from hairsheep leather and fitted especially for those tiny fingers. He tried them on, mostly to make his mother happy, but when Hope slid the next present toward him, Remus quickly tossed the gloves back into their box to be forgotten.

“This one is from Mummy,” she grinned. It was a fully transistorised record player, complete in his own little plastic carrying case.

“It’s got five records even,” Hope preened, pointing to the outside of the box; The Four Seasons, Petula Clark, Herman’s Hermits, Peter and Gordan, and *yes!*—The Beatles.

“He’s never going to sleep now. He’ll be listening to that thing all night,” Lyall said, sitting behind them in one of the salon's expensive carven armchairs. He had a glass of sherry in one hand. Remus stared at it, and the glass winked at him in all the colours of the glittering Christmas tree.

“Music is enriching,” said Hope, as Remus forwent the winking glass and began tearing into the turntable’s box. She was sat on the rug beside him, hands folded neatly in her lap like a true lady. She looked pretty too, with her hair and makeup all done-up despite the early hour. It was astonishing, considering she'd only left the hospital the week before. Remus couldn't remember how he knew that.

Parallel to his wife, Lyall wore well-fitted slacks and a dress shirt, suited like he was ready for a day in the office rather than a holiday off. He was handsome too. Remus hoped he'd be handsome like that one day. For now all he had to wear were pyjamas with cowboys on them. After all, it was Christmas morning and he was only nine. *Nine...* It was to be expected.

“Are you happy, darling?” Hope smiled, as Remus fiddled with the player’s plug. He nodded, surveying the rest of his gifts. None of them came close to the turntable.

“Can I play it?” He asked, raising the Beatles’ 45. Lyall got to his feet a second later, his sherry glass empty.

“In your room,” he said, but when Remus scrambled to his feet to do so, Hope stopped them both.

“Hold on, darling, there’s one more!”

Remus could hardly believe it. There was *more?*

As Lyall slowly returned to his seat in the armchair to observe, Hope slipped across the room. “It’s a secret present!” She called, before pushing a large box out from behind the salon chaise. It was wrapped in all red, with a large gold bow on its top. Remus was elated instantly, and as his mother dragged it over the rug toward him, his

fingers itched to release the gift from its paper prison.

“Who’s this one from, then?” Lyall asked.

“My aunt,” Hope answered simply, before depositing the gift down in front of Remus. “Go on then, darling. Open it!”

Remus wasted no time. He tore into the wrappings, eyes immediately shot wide. “A car!” he exclaimed, admiring the pictures along the front. “It’s a car!”

Hope joined him on the rug once more to admire the toy, folding her legs primly beneath her so as to not crease her skirt. “An RC car, how exciting!” She said. “And look, it runs on petrol, just like Giles’.”

Unable to wait anymore, Remus wrenched open the top of the box and began digging through the cardboard inside. He was excited—he was always excited on Christmas! But if he’d been paying any attention, he might’ve noticed the sceptical look on his father’s face as he inspected his empty sherry glass.

“Which aunt of yours was it then?” He asked Hope. She did not look at her husband, just continued to pet Remus’ hair.

“Aunt Justina.”

“Your mother’s sister?”

“Mhm, yes. The one who lives in Holyhead.”

“I remember. Just didn’t think Justina recalled much of Remus. He must’ve been, what—three months old the last time she visited? Certainly never sent gifts before.”

Hope’s voice turned tight; “Maybe she saw it and thought of him. He’s already ten.”

"You mean nine?"

"Yes, what did I say?"

Lyall sighed. “I just don’t understand how Justina could’ve arranged for such a thing. Not after being diagnosed with dementia four, *five?* Years ago…? Is her hospice in Holyhead as well then? Odd, considering I send the cheque to Blackpool every month.”

Remus looked up at his mother to find Hope’s expression to be very

severe. She was smiling, but it did not quite reach her eyes. “Call it a Christmas miracle,” she replied, before grinning eagerly at her boy. “Remus, do you like it? Shall we race it around the garden?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, it’s freezing out,” Lyall said. “Remus, go play your records in your room. I need to speak with your mother.”

Remus might’ve argued, but he was having a hard time deciding which present he liked more. In the end he was quite agreeable to the record player, but just as he went to shut the lid on the RC car’s box, he noticed a little note slipped just between the inner wrappings.

“Remus, what’s that?” Hope asked, as he withdrew it.

“A card,” he said. “It’s got my name on it, Mummy.”

“Give it to me.”

Remus just about jumped. Behind him, his father had shot to his feet, towering down over the rug. His voice had gone stoney, like he was angry, but Remus couldn’t fathom why. The sudden shift had shocked him so badly he forgot to listen, and Lyall just reached down, grabbing him tightly by the wrist. It twinged immediately, and Remus whimpered.

“Remus Lupin, I said give it to me!”

“Don’t touch him!” Hope chirped, reaching across Remus and snatching the card away. She was on her feet in a second, and Lyall released Remus to chase her across the room.

“Hope, give me that card.”

“It’s Remus’ card—he deserves to see it.”

“For Christ's sake, it's Christmas. Don't go all batty on us now. Hand it over!"

“I won’t give it to you,” she replied, venomously. Then without a shred of hesitation, Hope tossed the little card into the fireplace. It was consumed instantly, leaving behind only curled paper ash as a reminder that it was even there in the first place. Seeing it burned, Remus thought that he should feel bad, but it was only a card, wasn’t it? And they’d had so many cards delivered over the holiday…

Lyall let out a heavy breath. “Remus, take your records upstairs.”

He gave his mother a quick look, before grabbing the little plastic record player and heading toward the salon doors. His slippers squeaked on the hallway wood, but the door had scarcely shut before he heard shouting.

"How dare you bring that son of a bitch into my house."

"It's Christmas, Remus deserves a present! God knows you're never around long enough to ask him what it is he wants!"

Remus clutched the record player tightly to his chest, frozen in place in the middle of the hallway. He liked all his gifts, he wanted to say. Even the gloves. He *liked* them.

"I want to take Remus away from here for a while," his mother said. *"We need a break. And he deserves more than—"*

"You will not take him anywhere! He's my son!"

"He is not yours! He's never been yours and we both know it! He's too gentle. And I wake up everyday grateful that he is nothing like you! If I could I'd take him from here myself!"

"You are sick. No court would give him to you, and the fact that you keep on pretending that this ridiculous fantasy of yours could ever come true is ***sick.*** *It's time to grow up, Hope! Remus deserves structure, he deserves a home!"*

"He deserves a father!"

Remus knew he shouldn't, but it'd been so long since he'd heard his parents shout like this. *How long...?* He crept back toward the salon door, pushing it open a crack. Inside he could see his mother, her back still turned toward the fireplace. He couldn't see his father, but he heard him.

"You try to take him from me, and I will have you put back in that hospital and throw away the key."

Hope bared her teeth. She had tears running down both cheeks. "So you'd keep us both here—imprisoned?"

"No. Leave if you want, but my *son* stays."

"You don't even want him!" She wailed. "You just want us all to stay here and be miserable! You're too afraid to be alone!"

“I won’t have you ruining anything else—not this home, and not Remus!”

“He’s already ruined,” Hope goaded. “He’s afraid of you, Lyall. He cries for you at night when you’re not there, but then come daytime he can’t even look you in the eye! You’ve ruined your son."

"*I've* ruined him?"

"Yes! He’s scared of you, Lyall. He's scared of you and he *hates y—”*

A hand shot out, quick as lightning, and caught Hope across the face. She yelped and collapsed to her knees on the rug, and Remus felt a gasp lodge itself in his throat. The record player fell from his hands, knocking the salon door open as it clattered to the floor. Lyall turned on him in a second, and all Remus could see was his mother crying as she cradled her cheek. In all his childhood, he had never seen his father hit anyone.

“Daddy…”

Lyall set his jaw, staring at Remus with a horrified expression. Finally he turned to Hope, still crying quietly, and bent down to her, helping her up.

“Darling, stand up. I’m sorry. Remus is… He’s—”

She lashed out all at once, shoving him away with a vicious snarl. *“Don’t—!”* She swore, before marching away from him. Lyall did not stop her, even as she took Remus’ arm and hauled him from the room. The last thing Remus saw of his father, he was staring into the fireplace. With his shoulders hunched like that he almost looked like a bear. *A bear of a man...*

They went straight upstairs to his bedroom, where Hope tucked him in despite the fact that it was still morning. Remus hadn’t the words to tell her, and afterwards she sat by his bed, gently stroking his dusky curls.

“Remus,” Hope started meekly; “If–If Mummy were to go somewhere, would you be a good boy and stay here? It’d only be for a little while.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just to see a friend.”

“Can’t I come with you?”

“Oh, well you see, it’s not really a trip meant for children. You’d be so bored.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” *Fight back. You're not gentle, you're not a good boy.*

His mother smiled and kissed his head. “It’s just a short thing. Really. It’s more of a…” Suddenly Hope began to choke up. She sniffled and wiped her eyes, forcing a smile. “Never mind, darling. You just get some rest. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

Remus glanced at the curtains—at the daylight peeking through them, didn't she see?—but his mother was already kissing his cheek. She left him without another word, and afterwards Remus sat up in bed, wondering if this meant he wasn’t allowed to leave his room for the rest of the day.

* * *

Someone was poking his cheek. *Bugger.* Why did he always have to be such a menace in the mornings? Worse than James...

“Ngh… Sirius… piss off…”

“No pretty boy ‘ere, m’fraid. Only me, sunshine.”

Holy—

Remus shot upright in bed. “Tom!?”

Tomny started laughing immediately. He was kneeling beside the mattress, already dressed like he was going somewhere with eyebrows drawn up in that wry way of his. “Glad to see ya can still sleep like the dead some nights,” he said. “You were moaning ‘a bit though. Bad dream?”

“Something like that…” Remus clutched his face, feeling haggard. It’d all felt so real. He could remember the dream, but the harder he thought on it, the blurrier the memory became. Like a stone slipping beneath the surface of a rippled lake. He pictured Hope’s pretty face. Did she know then that she’d be dead in a few months?

“Ugh… What time is it?”

Tomny shrugged. “Around noon. Didn’t wanna wake ya. You looked so peaceful.”

“Piss off.” Remus rubbed his face again. It was noon then, hours since he’d run off on his friends. Were they worried about him? Angry with him? He hoped they hadn’t bothered looking, that they’d just gone back to James’ and forgotten all about him.

“Hey.” Tomny poked him again. “Did’ya forget what day it was?”

Right! It was—

“Happy Christmas, Lu.”

Remus looked up to find himself presented with a plate stacked high with pancakes. Tomny grinned over the edge of the dish, before setting it down in his lap.

“There you are, flapjacks fresh from the griddle of yours truly. Made ‘em the American way, with syrup and everyfin. Well? Look good, don’t they?”

They did. And despite the fact that Remus’ stomach was in knots, he accepted the fork and took a bite. An immediate regret.

“Yeah," Tomny winced, after watching him grimace. "Didn’t 'ave any milk in, so I had to use water. No good?”

“No, s’not that… Just… s’a bit salty, Tom.”

Tomny groaned, snatching the plate back. “Shit. Could’ve sworn I’d used sugar. Ah well, never claimed to be one ‘a them Michelin chefs.”

Remus gave a half-smile. “Between the two of us, we’d burn toast.”

“Already done—can’t you smell it? It’s got that air of… ah, shit. I dunno the French word for toast.”

Sirius would know, Remus thought mildly. *Or Tonya.* Suddenly a coughing fit overcame him, and he hacked into his fist while Tomny stood by, looking uneasy.

“You good?”

“Fuh—F–Fine!” He wheezed, collapsing back into his pillow. Tomny leaned in after and clumsily pressed his palm to his forehead.

“Damn, you’re still warm.”

“You’re supposed to do it with the back of your hand.”

“Who’s the patient here?” Shoving his hand into his coat pocket, Tomny withdrew a small bottle of pills and set them on the nightstand. There was already a cup of water waiting for him, in a mug missing its handle.

“Take two of these,” he said.

“What are they?”

“Medicine, 'a course. Why, you expecting something more fun? Ha—Jokes… Should help with the fever though. Always got some downers kicking around too, if ya wanna sleep some more.”

“Tom, you didn’t need to buy medicine for me.”

“Pish. You think I was jus’ gonna let ya go out like Flacky? I’m not some poor bum anymore. Besides, got ‘em from a real doctor an’ everything—or he *is* a doctor, yeah, jus’ not licensed. S’medicine though, swears.”

Feeling a bit sore, Remus picked up the bottle to examine it before shaking a few pills out into his palm. He tossed them back and chased both with the water, before gesturing to the other side of the room. “Oi, pass me my coat?”

“Yeah, right. You’re not going outside like this. You’ll keel over and I’ll jus’ have to carry yer sorry arse back up those bloody stairs.”

“No, just pass it to me, dickhead.”

With a short *‘hmph’* Tomny turned and reached for the coat, which he’d abandoned on the half-busted chair in the corner of the room the night before, along with Remus’ boots. Once he passed it over, Remus began rifling around in the pockets and withdrew a folded up wad of cash. It was the money Lyall had gifted him, and when Tomny saw it his eyes bulged.

"Holy shit. Yer lucky ya didn't get jumped with all 'a that on ya, Lu."

Remus shrugged, then held out the wad. "Here. Take it."

"Wha...?"

"It's yours."

"Like 'ell it is. What're you doin' throwing that much dosh around?"

"It's for you," he insisted. “Call it a thank you. For everything you've done for me."

This time, Tomny eyed the money suspiciously. “Never asked ya for any money... I get on jus’ fine on my own, y'know.”

“I know,” Remus huffed, “but you’d be doing me a favour by taking it. Spend it on debts or girlfriends, maybe some damn milk—I don’t care. Call me posh or spoiled or whatever, but just take it... *Take it.* Please, Tom.”

Tomny appeared agitated, but after Remus shook his arm at him again he finally reached out and slid his hand along his wrist in one smooth movement, like a dealer pocketing his dough.

“Yer tryin’ to get me framed for embezzlement or summick, I know it.”

“ 'Course I am. Gotta keep you on your toes somehow.”

Tomny smiled lightly before looking down and adjusting the front of his own coat. “Listen, I—er—have to head out for a bit.”

“On Christmas?”

“Work never stops. Especially not for no ‘Father Christmas’ chap. ‘Sides, the holidays are busy. People get sad, and sad people, well, they…” Tomny trailed off, and suddenly Remus felt stupid.

“Right. Don’t worry about me. Do what you gotta do.”

With a gentle smile, Tomny reached out and ruffled Remus’ hair. “Orright. You just stay ‘ere while I'm gone. In fact—try going anywhere and I’ll have ya sectioned. Changed the locks last month so no one’ll come waltzing in. There’s a can ‘a soup on the stove, just heat it up, sleeping pills are in the bathroom cabinet. Borrow whatever you want too. There isn’t much else in for food, but have at ‘er. And I’ll bring back your damn milk.”

“I’d almost think you’d turned into a mum,” Remus mused, “if not for your poor attempt at breakfast.”

Tomny glanced at the plate of failed pancakes before smirking. Next

thing Remus knew, he was being mauled by a hug.

“Aw—I’m just so happy to see ya, Lu!”

“Ugh—gerroff, you sop!”

Still beaming, Tomny stepped back and pointed a stern finger at him. “Eat. Sleep. *Stay.* I’ll be back later.”

Remus threw his coat, letting it smack against the door as Tomny slipped out. Tomny whistled as he made his way down the hallway, knocking his fists along the walls, and a few minutes later the front door banged shut and Remus was alone with only the sound of the whirring radiator for company. He took his medicine, and then the downers, because what else was there to do? And after a quick change of clothes, could already feel himself slowing.

When he awoke again it was already nighttime. He’d slept through Christmas, but somehow, Remus wasn’t all that bothered. The flat was quiet again; the kitchen light out and the bedroom blue cast from the tiny window that peeked out into the side alley. He felt better—miraculously; it was the first time in weeks he hadn’t sweat through his t-shirt while asleep.

A snore echoed from beside him. Turning over, Remus found Tomny asleep on top of the covers next to him, still in his clothes and hair completely sleep-mussed. He wasn’t the same sort of beautiful sleeper Sirius was—he was drooling a bit—but he was familiar.

“Tom…?”

Immediately Tomny’s eyes shot open, making Remus’ heart seize up. He squinted at him in the darkness, before his hand came up—unceremoniously slapping him on the forehead.

Remus blinked. *“Ow?”*

“Oh good,” Tomny yawned. “Yer fever’s broken. Try... mmm... Try sleepin’ sum more…”

With a weary grunt, Tomny turned over and Remus was left to stare at the broadness of his back. His shirt was frayed along the collar and his shoulders clung to the fabric. He was fair, even a bit freckled. Familiar.

Remus slept.

* * *

This time he was fourteen, sitting outside the headmaster's office and glaring at the floor. There was a thick knot in the floorboard between his feet, and when he shut his right eye it looked a bit like Giles' when he was angry. To pass the time, Remus switched back and forth, shutting one eye and then the other to see the expression change. The game was mindless, but it at least helped to distract from the twinge in his knuckles. Normally he'd be given some ice, but relief was reserved for misunderstood boys—not violent ones. He'd really stepped in it this time.

"You must understand, Mr. Lupin, it is one thing for boys to create rabble amongst one another—boys will be boys, as you know... But to attack a teacher…"

Remus almost smirked. He could still remember how it felt to stand over that miserable biology teacher. See the astonishment on his face —spit at him. *You like that? You like hurting kids?! Then how 'bout I give you another, you dirty fu—*

"I realise the gravity of the situation, Headmaster, but there must be something we can do to solve this."

His smirk vanished. He wished Lyall had not bothered to leave his meeting. He wished he'd left him there to rot. He didn't care if that made him ungrateful, or—

"As you well know, Remus is troubled. He lost his mother at a young age, and has never quite been the same."

Fuck you, fuck you, FUCK YOU!

"—But he is bright. A clever young man. I have no doubt he would continue to excel under the college's strict tutelage. These poor marks, the lashing out, it's simply a cry for attention. I'm afraid I haven't quite found the best way to satiate it, but I trust you'll understand when I say that I only want the best for my son."

"Yes, I understand, Mr. Lupin. But Remus' case is—"

"St. Joseph's has been good for him, and you have my word that I will personally oversee his penance. I'll do anything in my power to ensure he

lives up to the standards of your exceptional institution. Should anything else be in order, I may... feel the need to inform you that the Lupin estate has been in the market recently for a such an institution to sponsor. A fine one. And St. Joseph's is more than fine. I hear it's just been ranked the leading boy's school in the country as far as academics."

"That is… true."

"And the board places a high value on physical sport as well?"

"Of course. We at St. Joseph's believe there is benefit to feeding the mind as well as the body."

"I agree, naturally. Boys like Remus stand much to gain from the basic run-around. It is true that your students boast the highest Oxbridge acceptance rates of any secondary school or college, yes?"

"Come now, Mr. Lupin, you already know the answer to that."

"Forgive me, Headmaster. I jest. But I've heard rumour that the gym's roof needs to be redone. If there's anything we can do, sir, I implore you not to hesitate…"

There was silence, and Remus ground his teeth together. Lyall was going to buy his way back in, of course he was.

"Be that as it may, Mr. Lupin, my hands are tied," said the crotchety Headmaster; *"Professor Wright has been with this college for many 'a year, and is a well-respected part of the academic community. He's agreed not to press charges under the condition that Remus is expelled from St. Joseph's, and a few other sparing reparations are met. I'm sorry, but outside of that, there is nothing more I can do."*

The silence that followed sounded a lot more like the pounding of a gavel. He'd been sentenced, and the sentence was exile.

Good riddance.

The office door opened, and Lyall Lupin stalked out into the hall. He shut the door after himself, before stopping next to Remus' chair. Even with his head bowed in misfortune, he was still a ginormous man.

"Get up."

Remus didn't so much as play at hesitating. He'd gotten what he'd wanted since September—a first class ticket out of the stuffy boys'

college—but that didn't mean he was out of the woods entirely. He followed his father down the hallway, then the looming staircase, where they finally crossed the hall's foyer and passed beneath the painting of Jesus and Saint Joseph that hung over the school's front doors.

By then Remus was dragging his feet. He could see Giles at the head of the school's drive, standing stoically beside the Rolls with his hands crossed in front of him. Closer still was Lyall, his back to his son as he walked. Remus hadn't seen either of them in weeks, and as they descended the school's front step, he imagined the ride home to Blackheath and the words just came tumbling out.

"It's not my fault! That teacher's *dirty*. He makes us slam our fingers in our desks or stand the entire day if he catches us talking out of turn. He uses the strap and never lets you go to the toilet during lessons, no matter what you say. He's always giving you detention for no reason, and he humiliates you the moment you say the wrong answer, and—"

"That's enough!" Lyall roared, whipping around and grabbing Remus by the shoulders. "I've heard enough!"

"It wasn't me! It wasn't my fault! That shitty teacher went after another kid, I just—"

"You *just,* Remus!"

"He hits us! He hits us and no one cares. He pinches you on the back of the neck till you cry—and last week made another kid eat soap until he threw it all up! I hate this place! *I hate it! I hate it! I HATE YOU!"*

"ENOUGH!"

Remus blanched. He wanted to keep shouting, but the grip his father had on his shoulders was tight enough to bruise. He had to bite his tongue to avoid whimpering, but just then Lyall's gaze drifted upwards, off over his shoulder. Remus could see it on his face; *shame, shame.* And so Lyall released him and stood back, straightening his suit.

"Get in the car."

Lyall Lupin did not wait. Instead he trudged down the gravel drive toward the silver Rolls-Royce, where Giles was waiting with the door open. Remus hung back, rubbing the soreness from his biceps. He'd

nearly missed it, but then the hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and he turned around to find several boys watching him from the school's windows. They looked like ghosts. Well-dressed, cherub-faced ghosts. In their eyes they wore a glazed layer of judgement.

You never belonged here.

Freak.

Get lost.

Remus raised a hand, and flipped every one of them off.

* * *

When he woke again, he found Tomny bent over the bedside table, cutting a small line of white powder with a razor blade. It looked like Tonya's stardust, but when Remus nudged him, wanting a hit, he was met with a shake of the head.

"Nice try. This tosh s'off limits to toffs."

"What is it?" Remus croaked.

"S'nothing. M'just taking a bump."

"Let me try."

"No, and I ain't tellin' ya again."

"Hmph. Stingy bastard."

Rolling his eyes, Tomny licked his finger to wipe up the rest of the powder and rub it along his gums. "Just go on, sleep sum'more. You need it."

"Fine. But at least give me something for the dreams," Remus begged. "Please."

Tomny stared at him for a moment, with pupils the size of a ten pence, then reached for the bedside drawer. He pulled out a fresh bottle of pills—downers, with the label torn off.

"No more than two."

Remus took three, and was asleep again before his head even hit the pillow.

This time, there were no dreams. No Hope, no Lyall, no pitiful boy caught between the two. The sleeping pills succeeded in knocking him out for almost another full day, and when Remus finally stirred again, it was to the shrieking of the flat's phone.

"Those fuckin' cunts," Tomny groaned, dragging himself out of bed and leaving Remus to turn over drowsily. He could faintly hear him in the living room, grumbling haggard answers before finally slamming the receiver down and reappearing in the bedroom's doorway.

"So… dinner?"

Remus loved Tomny, he did, but the man couldn't cook to save his life.

"How do you live like this?" He demanded, throwing away an entire bag of potatoes that had sprouted in one of the bottom cupboards. He'd found what he thought was an unexpired jar of tomato sauce, only to crack the thing open and cringe at the sour smell. "There are teenagers younger than some of the food in this kitchen, Tomny."

"You sound like Tonya," Tomny chuckled. His face fell a second later as though he'd remembered who he was talking to, and Remus gave him a gentle look.

"We're going shopping tomorrow."

A mixture of relief and amusement spread across Tomny's features. "Yeah, orright. In the meantime, how d'ya feel about Chinese?"

Together they bundled up and skipped down to the nearest take-out shop, which had supposedly opened sometime over the summer. Remus remembered the building as a laundrette and it still had the same chipped tile flooring, only now was dressed up in all red with cheap paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling and dragons and pandas displayed across every surface.

"The dim sum here's great," Tomny said, toying with his paper menu. Remus meanwhile, was still busy reeling from what he'd heard on the walk over.

"I can't believe Doss had a kid!"

“Believe it,” Tomny said. “Born at the end of November—same day as me, even! He sent me a photo, I’ll show ya later. Little blighter looks jus’ like ‘im. Huge nose, lil’ eyes—a smile like a summer’s daisy.”

“And this girlfriend of his actually let him name the kid ‘Lenny’?”

Tomny shrugged. “It was his dad’s name.”

Remus began fiddling with his chopsticks. “S’good that the two of you still talk.”

“Well, can’t imagine being a dairy farmer’s all that interesting. But yeah, he seems happy. Says he’s gonna propose as soon as he can get the money together for a proper ring.”

“I should send him something. As a congrats.”

“Like what? A box of fags? I can see it now—‘for Lenny on his first birthday’.”

Remus dipped his fingers in his water and flicked them at him. “No, you twat, like some money.”

“You must be rolling in it for reals, what with that fat stack you threw at me.” He set his menu aside and patted his pocket pointedly.

“It’s just my dad trying to pay me off,” Remus dismissed. “Wants me to go to uni after I’m done this year. But he and his new wife are in the Riviera, so he got Giles to line my pockets a bit... Didn’t want it anyway.”

"Must be nice, to just turn your nose up at free cash."

Remus frowned, and Tomny licked his lips.

"Sorry, didn't mean nothing by it. But hey... You got a step-mum now?”

“Mhm. Haven’t seen her since summer though. It’s whatever.”

“She a bitch then?”

“No,” Remus shook his head, “just a woman. She likes cars… and horses. God, it sounds so dumb.”

“Nah. Glad to hear it’s not her you’re runnin’ from.”

“Who says I’m running from anything?”

“Everyone’s runnin’ from something. And I’ll bet…” he tapped his finger on the table top; “it has something to do with whatever’s going on in Finchley.”

Ugh. Remus looked away stubbornly.

“So you wanna tell me what it is that’s chased you back ‘ere?”

“I came back to see you.”

“Uh-huh, sure.”

“I did!”

“Yeah, yeah, you love me. Now spit it out. What—girlfriend trouble?” He gave him a wry look. “Boyfriend trouble…?”

“You’re a dick.”

Tomny drummed his hands on the table. *“Whoooh!* I swears, Lu baby —sometimes I’m *too* good! Orright, what’s the posh boy done now? Do I need to break some fingers?”

“The only thing that you’re going to be breaking is your nose,” Remus warned, shaking a fist at him. “Besides, he’s not my—my boyfriend anymore…”

Tomny raised his eyebrows. Their waitress stopped by to drop off some napkins, and he waited until she was out of earshot to speak again. “So what happened then? You two break up?”

“Let’s just say that he wanted more than I could give.”

“... Like anal?”

He wanted to be angry—god, did he—but Remus couldn’t help smiling. Cringing all over, he buried his face in his hands as Tomny snorted in the booth across from him.

“Not that I blame you! The idea of something goin’ in where stuff’s only ever gone out? Yeesh.”

“Can we please just talk about something else?!”

“Well, now I gotta know! Does a bloke give better blow jobs since he’s

already got all the—uh… same equipment?"

Horrified, Remus reached across the table to smack Tomny some, only he misjudged his reach and ended up knocking over his water cup, soaking the table top and most of Tomny's lap in the process.

"Aw, c'mon Lu! Warn a mate before you finish all over his trousers."

"You fucking deserved that, you nasty wanker," Remus hissed, snatching half the napkins and soaking up his mess. He tossed the rest at Tomny, who watched him with a smug grin as he dabbed at his lap.

"If he wanted more than you could give, then you were right to end it," Tomny told him. "Get out before things nosedive."

"They already nosedived," Remus said soberly, thinking of their last night at school.

"Yeah, but nobody likes being that final thread that's left hanging on. Trust me."

Remus glanced back at Tomny sheepishly. "Tom, we never did talk much about Tonya."

"Ah, what you dredgin' up ancient history for? It's been almost a year, and I haven't heard from 'er once. Bet she's halfway around the world by now—stowin' away on any freight train that'll get her where she wants to go. So you can stop worrying, Lu, I've already made my peace with it."

"You have, then."

Tomny nodded, and it was genuine. "She was sum'um, orright. Not likely to find another one like 'er around 'ere, but who says you only get one great love in your life?" His eyebrows furrowed together thoughtfully. "D'ya know, she used to tell me that talkin' to you was like talkin' to some sort of imaginary friend or whatever. You were so far removed from all the bad shit, that I think talkin' to you made her forget everythin' else for a little while. It stung a bit when she first told me that. Made me think, 'why can't I be that person for you?'—but eventually I realised that I thought the same thing. You're a comfort, Lu. You heal people."

"No," Remus said. "I don't heal people, Tom. I'm a walking bomb. I blow up."

“Oi, no self-pity when we’re eating Chinese.”

Remus shook his head hopelessly. “I think it was easier when I thought you were mad at me.”

Tomny cracked another grin and leaned across the table, pushing the wet napkins aside to take both of Remus’ hands. “Hey, look at me,” he said, squeezing his fingers. “I’m not mad at you, never was. Not really. I just lost my head a bit there. I mean, how could I ever hate you—hate my Lu?”

Flustered, Remus scrunched up his face, but squeezed Tomny’s hands in return. “You sure you’re not a ponce, Tom?”

“Hm, why don’t you give me another smooch and we’ll see?” Clamping down on his fingers, Tomny pulled himself across the table while Remus moaned in a shrill voice and tried to pull away.

“M’on!” Tomny cackled. “Just one little peck and I’ll know for sure!”

“You’re such a—” Remus opened his eyes, just in time to spot a group of three men emerge through the restaurant’s front doors. He might have paid them no attention at all had they not looked straight at them. Reading the alarm on his face, Tomny dropped Remus hands and spun around in the booth, sagging a bit when he noticed the men. By then they'd already waltzed past several open tables straight towards them.

When he spoke, man in front carried an Irish accent that instantly put Remus on edge. He had no idea how much sway the Irish still had in the end, but it was surely enough to want to avoid them. Beyond that he was large, with a thick scar running across his chin and a nasty look all-over. He could've been a Bond villain, or at least one of the underpaid cronies. But since neither he nor Tomny were packing one of 007's pistols, it could only mean bad news.

“I thought that was you, Armstrong," the guy crooned. "What's the craic, ya wee dryshite?"

“Nice to see you too, Benny,” Tomny answered stoically. The gangster smirked at his tone, before glancing at Remus like a predator eyeing up his next meal. His two guys stood quietly behind him, and for a brief moment Remus thought he recognised one of them, but before he could place the face, Benny had already leaned in and placed a hand on the table between them.

“Yeah, we’s spotted you through the window. Thought it only courteous to drop in and say ‘ello. Happy Christmas, n' all that... So who’s this—yooer new girlfriend?”

“He’s a kid,” Tomny replied staunchly. “And we’re about to eat dinner, so how ‘bout we do this later, maybe?”

“Ah, but like me mam always say, there’s really nathin’ like discussin’ business over a fine meal. Boys—saddle in, maybe?”

Before Tomny could object any further, the group had crowded around the end of their booth and Benny had dropped down next to him with a satisfied grin. The other two stopped briefly on Remus’ side, indicating with a jerk of their heads that he should stand. Remus reluctantly did so, only to be pushed back down into his seat, now sandwiched between the two of them.

“Skinny one, aren’t ya?” The familiar one chuckled from his left side, dropping an arm along the back of the booth. Remus didn’t dare look him in the eye now; even his voice made the hair on the back of his neck raise.

“So, Army!” Benny clapped his hands together. “I ‘eard through the auld grapevine that you talked to Scotty earlier.”

As he spoke, Remus remembered the phone ringing—Tomny’s exasperated voice.

“Then you’d know that we’ve already been over everything,” Tomny ground out. “We worked out a deal. He’s gonna get his share and then some, and the rest goes to you. We just need another few days to move the leftover merchandise.”

“See, s’funny you’d say that though, considering we’s also ‘eard that chu went by Mikey’s place yesterday.”

Remus didn’t know who ‘Scotty’ or ‘Mikey’ were, but judging by the way the colour drained from Tomny’s face, he doubted either news was all that good. Benny on the other hand didn’t seem to notice, and their waitress arrived, glancing warily between the newly enlarged group as she set their food down.

“Thanks, *cailín,”* Benny grinned. “And if you don’t mind, I’ll get some o’ dahse fried noodles—the ones with the lettle shrimps on ‘em.”

She nodded before shuffling quickly away, and Benny picked up one

of Tomny's chopsticks to stab it crudely into a piece of pork and pop it into his mouth. "So, where was I," he chewed; "Ahh yeah, that's right —our lettle birdy said you'd already worked out a deal. Sahmethin' like—ah, what was it—twenty KG's? Tell me Armstrong, 'ow're you and yooer boys gahnna move *twenty feckin' KG's* of snow for Mikey when you're s'posedly still workin' on that ten for us?"

Tomny set his jaw, fists clenched on top of the table. "There's no deal with Mikey. Twenty KG's? That's impossible—must be some sort of joke. I mean, Christ, we had to wait for the cops to stop sniffin' around just to get your shit back on the street."

"Oh yeah…? Bad for business, those gardaí." Benny leaned back and began fumbling for something inside his jacket pocket. For a single terrified second Remus pictured him pulling out a blade, but when Benny drew his hand back, it was just a carton of cigarettes. He peeled the cover back and stuck one between his teeth before offering them to Remus. "Want one?"

"He doesn't," Tomny clipped.

"Shut up, Army. Let the kid answer for 'imself," Benny scoffed. "You deaf, kid?"

"That means you answer," the thug on Remus' left growled. He raised a hand, shoving his head forward, and Remus swallowed.

"… No thanks."

"S'all you 'ad to say," Benny replied casually, tucking the cigarettes away. "Got a light dere, wee pup?"

He nearly declined again, but something in his gut and in Tomny's gaze told him not to make both of them liars. With the thugs watching his every move, Remus slipped his hand down into his pocket and withdrew the first zippo he found—the silver plated one from James and Sirius. Forcing his hands not to shake, he reached across and held the little flame to the end of the gangster's cigarette before clicking the lid shut.

"Ah," Benny exhaled. "So you say there's no deal, Army—alright. S'a bit contradictory from what I've 'eard but sure, I'll believe ya. I'm all about givin' me boys the benefit o' the doubt. S'long as they're contrive and all that."

"Contrite," Remus said automatically.

“What’s that?”

“You mean contrite. You want them sorry. Repentant.”

Benny raised his eyebrows and shot a look at Tomny, who looked about ready to keel over. “Well, look a’dat, Armstrong. You got yooerself one wiff some brains this time! Where’d you find ‘im, eh? The Queen’s palace?” He leaned in to Remus. “You some lettle runaway, gobshite?”

“I told you he’s just some stupid kid,” Tomny tried again, more forceful this time; “He’s got no hand in any 'a this, so if you want to talk to fucking business then bloody talk!”

The corner of Benny’s mouth jerked and he sat back up, smiling warmly. Then he snatched Tomny up by the throat and pinned him to the booth.

Remus bolted upright from his seat in defence of his friend, but both thugs had him by the shoulders in a second, pinching him so tightly he nearly cried out. He would’ve fought them—he would’ve—had Tomny’s arm not shot out, stopping him. The look in his eyes was not fear for the hand wrapped around his windpipe, but a warning for him; *Don’t.*

"Watch it, kiddo," Benny cautioned, squeezing Tomny's throat tightly in his fist. "I think yer forgetting jus' who's house you moved into..."

Feeling useless, Remus had no choice but to slump back against the cheap leather booth. He opened his hand on the table top, dropping the wooden chopsticks he’d been clutching like knives, and Benny smirked.

“There's a smart boffin,” the one on his left snarked. Remus looked at him then, fully and up close, and finally he recognised him. It was the blue eyes that tipped him off. They were clear as glass—the exact same pair that had stared him and Tonya down in that dirty alley. Suddenly Remus felt as though he were breathing through a straw again. The scar over his nose throbbed.

“Army, Army, Army..." The gangster's voice was deadly low, even as Tomny struggled against him. "We give you and yooer boys three weeks to get the job dahne—yeh *don’t*—and then you lip me in front o’ a *kid?”*

“You’ll get yer money!” Tomny wheezed.

“For feck’s sake—no apology? Are you actually bein’ mouthy again?!” The gangster bellowed. “Dahn’t you even know who I am, *you lettle motherfucker?* I will put you in the *ground* before you even ‘ave the chance to start pissing yooerself—if I don't get what’s due! You hear me?! I'll feckin' burst ya, I will!”

He punctuated the threat by slamming his free hand on the table hard enough to make the glasses shatter. Somewhere else, Remus heard their waitress shriek.

“Tom!” Remus cried, straightening against Blue-eyes’ hold on him; “Just give him the money already!”

Tomny shook his head as best he could while pinned, mouth forming a silent plea to get Remus to shut up. Enraged, Benny shook him.

"Where's my fucking money, Armstrong?! What do you got?"

“Tomny, just fucking give it to him!”

“Shut up, you!” Blue-eyes hissed after, raising his fist. Remus flinched, waiting for the incoming blow.

“Alright!” Tomny’s cries cut between them like a strangled yelp, and he gestured desperately to his pocket. “Th—ere!” He gurgled; “T—ake it!”

Looking slightly astonished, Benny used his free hand to reach into Tomny’s coat and withdraw the thick fold of notes, courtesy of Lyall and now bound together with a rubber band. It stung to see the money clasped in the gangster’s fat fingers, but not as bad as it did watching Tomny go blue in the face in the middle of a fucking Chinese restaurant.

“Colour me surprised. Where’d a ponce like you get dis much dosh? You selling your arse now?” Benny look across the table. "You selling *his?"*

“Who cares?” Remus growled. “It’s yours now. Call it interest on whatever he owes. Just let him go—you’re choking him!”

Benny glanced back at Tomny like he’d quite forgotten the iron grip he had around his throat and slowly relaxed his fingers, letting Tomny spin away and cough sharply.

“Tell you what, Armstrong—since you’ve got yooer puppy so well

trained, imma let you off ‘fer the night.” He pat Tomny on the shoulder in a friendly manner, and Tomny quickly scrambled out of the booth.

“Lu… Lu,” he panted, gesturing desperately for Remus to join him. Remus went to stand, but was pulled back into his seat as Benny wheeled on him.

“You seem like a smart one, kiddo. A word o’ advice though—I’d drop the pox bottle. Because next time I’m naht coming back for the interest, I’m comin’ back for the whole thing." Grinning, Benny extended an arm and traced a line down the side of Remus' mouth. "Let me know if you're ever looking for a new gig, eh?"

Remus wrenched his face away, disgusted, while the gangster continued to leer at him. He stood first, and turned on Tomny sharply.

"And you Armstrong," he smiled, picking a piece of lint from Tomny's jacket. *"Go n-ithe an cat thú is go n-ithe an diabhal an cat.* You know what that means? Means, you get my money, or mark me words, I'll be spittin' on yooer grave. Understood?"

Tomny scowled. "Yeah."

"Sorry? Don't think I heard you. I said, *do you understand?"*

"Yes, I understand."

"There's a good laddie." Slapping Tomny lightly on the cheek, Benny finally turned away and Remus was roughly pushed into the aisle as the three men strode out of the restaurant, the door chime clattering after them. For a second neither of them breathed, and then Tomny was rushing him.

“You okay, Lu?” He demanded, helping him to his feet.

“Yeah,” Remus murmured, “Yeah, m'fine, Tom...”

"That fucking Benny... I didn't—*shit."*

Tomny bit his lip hard before turning his face away and pinching his forehead. Feeling suddenly exhausted, Remus looked around to find their waitress and the kitchen staff gaping at them from the back of the restaurant.

“Bill please…”

They walked home in silence, their shoulders occasionally bumping into one another as they swayed. It took Remus almost four streets to realise that Tomny’s silence wasn’t in favour of any forlorn sulking, that rather he was too busy looking out for their surroundings—his eyes trained on every dark corner and crack just in case Benny and his guys had doubled-back to wait for them. He relaxed some when the flat’s rusted gate came into view, and together they dragged themselves up the stairs to the second floor, stomping along as though their feet were encased in cement.

“Well, that was fun,” Remus said blandly as he pulled his boots off and Tomny threw the bolt into place. He wouldn’t look at him, and Remus felt a zap of anger.

“I’m only kidding—that was fucking awful.”

“I hope you’re still not planning on being a therapist,” Tomny mumbled, shucking off his coat and running a hand through his wild hair. “M'gonna crash, I think. Make sure you eat—and take your meds. Don’t want yer fever coming back.”

“You mean we’re not going to talk about what just happened? You're really just going to fuck off, just like that?”

“What’s there to say?”

“How ‘bout—what the *fuck, Tomny?!* Who *were* those guys?”

“C’mon, Lu,” Tomny scoffed, taking a package of cigarettes out of his back pocket and lighting up in the middle of the living room; “Thought you were supposed to be the smart one?”

“I’ll kill you if you make a joke out of this.”

“Good. Saves Benny the trouble."

Remus could have thrown something. Then he realised where he was —a second later and the lo mein was decorating the wall over Tomny’s shoulder.

“Orright,” Tomny said, peeking at the wall; “That’s your share.”

“Tomny, just *talk* to me! Tell me what I can do to help!”

Out of all the things he could’ve said, this was perhaps the worst.

Remus wished he'd insulted him—pushed him—made him angry, but instead all he'd done was beg. And Thonas Armstrong did not beg.

"There is no fucking 'help', Lu!" He exploded, pelting the oppsite wall with his cigarette carton. "Life does'na always get fixed jus' 'cause you want it to! No matter how *good* you are, or how *badly* you want things to go yer way—it ain't mean you'll get it! Because life's just shit! And you need to get over this idea 'a yours that you're—that you're gonna fucking *save me,* or something! Because you ain't! This is fucking reality, so get with the bloody program or GET THE HELL OUT!"

It was agony to hear, and Remus dropped his head, lips trembling as he clamped them shut. Tomny stood across from him, jaw clenched tightly, hands fisted at his sides. His pupils were huge again, though this time it couldn't be all drugs.

"Who are we?" Remus whimpered. "What's done this to us...?"

Tomny lifted a hand, wiping beneath his nose. When he breathed it was laboured, like yelling had taken everything out of him.

"Can't all be winners, mate... Some of us just get participation ribbons."

That night they laid in bed next to each other, and the space between them might as well have been an infinite chasm. Tomny had forgotten to leave the hob light on, pitching in them darkness, and the radiator kept switching on and off sporadically, leaving the entire flat in a chill. Neither of them had said anything since the argument, and Remus could feel himself sinking—going crazy in his own head, just as Sirius had said he would.

He resents you. They all do. Teachers, parents, friends…

Not Tom, Remus told the voice; *Never Tom.*

Even in his mind, it felt like a lie. Remus would resent him, had their situations been reversed. Even Saint Joseph himself would've been hard-pressed to find the space in his heart for such forgiveness. But as far as rough, street-raised, drug dealers went, Tomny was pretty saint-like.

"Tom… are you awake?"

"… Yeah, m'awake…"

Remus could've cried.

"I'm sorry."

For a while there was nothing, until a hand slid across the bed in search of another. When Remus found it, he held on tight.

"… Me too, Lu."

* * *

"C'mon, Lu, dance wiff 'er!"

Even dreaming, Remus felt as though he might throw up.

"No way, you dance with her, Lee!"

"Bloody fuck—if you two're gonna blather on for this long then I'll dance with 'er," Tomny said, pushing past both of them toward the blushing, doe-eyed girl that'd been steadily drifting closer and closer throughout the evening. Remus wasn't the least bit bothered; Tomny was tall and fit, and he was gangly and awkward. Not to mention he was only thirteen; girls still scared him a bit.

"Ah, don't worry none, Lu," Lee hollered, dropping an arm around his shoulders. "You'll get yer end away one 'a these days."

Remus bristled a bit, embarrassed, but the room was noisy enough that no one else had overheard. It was sweltering inside the hall, it being July, but they'd all eagerly piled into the dance anyway, its cement-covered walls and fluorescent lighting the only indication that they were actually in an old garage. Someone had turned those off though, in favour of flashing lights that turned the entire room into a strobing rainbow. There was a stereo in, playing music loud enough to get drunk to. Kids filled up every crevice, dancing and leaning against one another in a shared haze. It was pure party madness.

"Here, Lu!"

Someone passed him a flask. He didn't even know what it was, but it burned going down and afterwards they handed him a spliff. Round and round the circle it went, and when they were finished there was always more. Remus was off his trolley, knackered to the nines. He was up! *Up, up, up!* And with his judgement so severely impaired, Lee

even managed to wrestle him into dancing with another girl with braids in her hair. It was a slow song, and he held her waist awkwardly as they swayed. She was taller than him too, maybe a bit older, but Giles had said that he was due for a growth spurt any day now. Hopefully.

“Yeah, go Lu!” Lee cried, as he and Doss stood on the hall’s sidelines, a girl on either side of them. “Now lips ‘er!”

"Don't be so crude, Lee!" One of the girls scoffed. "He's just a baby."

"No, 'e ain't! He's a man, aren't cha?! Go on, Lu, slip 'er the tongue!"

Remus’ eyes bulged, but when he looked back to his dance partner, he couldn’t tell if her expression meant she was expecting it or too nervous to suggest it herself. In the end he settled for asking her name. *Mweer-in.* He didn’t even know how to spell it. *Oh god*—was his first kiss going to be with a girl whose name he couldn’t even spell?!

Giving Mweer-in a tight smile, Remus glanced back towards his friends in search of solace only to find that Lee and Doss had both gone, effectively leaving their dates alone on the side of the dance floor. Pulling away from his partner, he spun around, and finally spotted his friends near the back of the hall. They had Tomny between them, heads tucked tightly together with a deep glower on each of their faces. Others had joined them, familiar boys and older guys that Tomny knew. Remus had only just begun to get acquainted with the rest of the gang, but he knew the group well enough to know that things were not right. They were staring, then pointing at something—or rather, *someone.* A lot of someones.

Another group, this one smaller than theirs and all but foreign to Remus, had gathered across the room. They were glaring back with their hands in their pockets, the tell-tale sign of unwelcome party crashers. The dance was happening on claimed territory, and territory was all about reputation. The weak lost out, while the strong stood their ground.

Ditching the dance mid-song, Remus quickly shoved his way through the crowd. He reached his friends just as Tomny and Doss broke off from the group and challenged the ones up front. The threat was clear; *get out or get beat.*

For a second there was hostility; the invading boys fought back—*we’re just here to have a good time, mate!*— and Remus began to see knives come out, clutched by those willing to go down for their leader and

their turf. But it was unnecessary; the enemy was outnumbered five to one, and the entire dancehall had come to a standstill just to watch. They were muscled out by Tomny and his boys easily enough, and once the threat was finally gone, the party resumed. Remus went to Tomny, interested and concerned, and the dark mask Tomny had worn lifted instantly.

“Lu, baby! You snog anyone yet?”

He almost said yes, just to get the tosser off of his back, but then suddenly the window to their left exploded in on itself. Rocks and dirty beer bottles were hurled through the glass, shattering each of the hall's window's with a deafening crash. The music cut out, and for a while there was only screaming and shouts of confusion and anger. When the shattering finally ceased, everyone stood around, stunned. Some had been cut by flying glass—a girl was holding her hand over her eye while blood leaked out between her fingers. Remus paled seeing it, and that was when he felt the warm trickle drip down the side of his neck.

"Aw, shit. Lu!"

While Lee and Tomny crowded around him, Remus raised his hand to the shell of his ear and felt a sharp sting. He'd been cut, a shallow graze along the top of his left ear. It smarted terribly though it probably looked worse than it was. He couldn't be sure, before Tomny could check it out, another boy ran in.

“WOTCHER, SISSY LADS! COME ON THEN, SHOW US WHATCHU GOT!?”

He finished his shout with the resounding smash of another beer bottle on linoleum. It might as well have been a war cry. It was their ‘Tongs ya bass’. *It was a challenge,* and they were naught but stupid kids.

All of them started running at once, eager to exert their aggression on another. Even Tomny, as charismatic and as friendly as he was, was not immune. He led his angry mob straight out of the hall where more boys were waiting with large stones and heavy sticks in hand. They fled quickly enough, but by then it’d become a chase.

“Fuck your Hamlets, peaky bitch!” The enemy wailed. *“Fuck your Ends, sodding wastemen!”*

It was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. Remus had never

been so close to such action, and he ran like his life depended on it, in too deep to stop. He didn't know that the chase would end the moment the other boys crossed back into their territory—he had no idea where his territory even stopped and theirs began. He was drunk, high, and thirteen, and the blood was coating his neck. He did not hear his friends when fell behind, shouting and whistling at him, desperately trying to get him to stop.

"Lu! Where ya going, ya daft cunt?"

"Get back 'ere! You'll get yerself killed, you will!"

He'd outrun most of them, his skinny arms and legs carrying him up the bricked lane. If he were thinking, it'd probably be something along the lines of how proud Tomny would surely be when he caught their assailants—but there was no *catching* them. He was a kid in over his head, and he didn't realise how fucked he was until it was too late.

He'd chased the small group all the way into a council estate, where he plunged deeper and deeper into the cement kingdom, flying up and down stairs and walkways layered in spray paint and gang signs. They were warnings—*stay away*—and Remus did not listen. As he threw himself around a final bend, there they were. At least twenty boys lying in wait, each wearing their bovver boots, carrying a knife or a lead pipe with nasty expressions on their faces. *Fresh meat,* the looks seemed to say. *Easy kill. No problem.*

"That's peak, tiny man," said the one in front. "Why don't ya come 'ere a moment?"

It was not an open invitation. He stepped back.

"Oi, where you going?"

Another step.

"C'mere, little sop!"

"Yeah, we won't hurt ya!"

Another.

"Didn't cha fuckin' 'ear 'im? C'mere!"

Remus did the only thing he could think of—he turned and ran. Ran like a scared rat with his tail between his legs. In only a few seconds,

he'd gone from the hunter to the hunted, and this time he was going to be gutted for it. His ear ached—stung as it was whipped by the wind. He was afraid.

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE! FUCKING GET 'IM!"

In the dream, it was as though he was running for hours. He couldn't breathe, every time air went in, his lungs just about collapsed getting it out again. He could hear the boys at his back, screaming like a pack of wolves. A bottle smashed by his ankles, a stone hit him in the back. They'd rip him apart if they caught him—they *wanted* to hurt him. And all because of some stupid dance.

"LU! OVER 'ERE!"

The cry went up like an alarm, and suddenly boys were rushing past him—toward the fray. The immense relief that came with seeing his friends again had Remus collapsing onto a patch of grass off the side of the pavement, his legs complete mush. All around him kids were barking and wailing on one another, using everything from bricks to broken bottles as weapons. Remus could only wheeze, doubled over and looking around desperately for Tomny. Then someone came up from behind and socked him with a pipe. It only clipped his shoulder, but the pain was instant, and Remus howled, clutching his arm. For a while there was only noise, and then when things started to drift away, a set of hands grabbed him.

"NO! NO! LET ME GO! TOMNYYY!"

"Fuck! It's me, ya wee cunt!"

Remus opened his eyes. Their attackers were gone—fought off—and only his friends were left. It was Tomny who was bent over him, bleeding from the temple and grinning ear to ear.

"Boy, you sure can run, Lu," Tomny panted. "But I found ya… I'll always find ya…"

* * *

When he woke up, Remus had no idea what day it was. The clock on the bedside was busted as well, but it felt about midday. Tomny was still asleep beside him, and as he watched his chest rise and fail, Remus thought only of his friends. He lifted one hand up, tracing it

along the shell of his ear. There was a scar; how had he never noticed it before?

You're a betrayer, Lu.

Lee's voice came at him like that metal pipe. It hurt worse somehow, but he was in for it now.

Did ya make a mistake, Remus?

Don't be a shit friend, Remus.

You make me happy, Remus.

I can't talk about this, Remus.

You're the sky, Remus.

Do you cry, Remus?

But we can't have everything, can we, ***Remus?***

Remus covered his face—moaned.

"Shit…"

He knew it wasn't a good idea, but he left the flat anyway. Without Tomny. He could live without the milk, but when his cigarette carton turned up empty his day was already decided for him. The only thing that had changed about the local corner shop was the bloke behind the counter, and when Remus walked out clutching his shopping bag of fags and bottled milk, the sky over the East End was grey and cold. He wasn't entirely sure why, considering it was December, but he ended up taking the longer route back. It took him past even more council housing, where he spotted countless haggard-looking residents sitting on their patios, their pipes and cigarettes drifting smoke up into the dull air. Some read the paper, others glared at him as he passed. None seemed happy to see him.

Remus remembered what it was that had made him take that particular route in the first place when he came across the little dilapidated park in all its rusted glory. It was the place where he and Tomny had first met. Felt like ages ago now, and as he stopped to admire the ice collecting on the pavement, Remus found his legs unconsciously carrying him onto its gravel turf.

The climbing frame was the same—rusted over and likely to slice a

palm open as soon as used. The swings were also the same. Only one was usable, so he sat on it, feeling the icy chains bite into his palms. Eventually Remus pulled out the cigarettes and lit one up. He thought of almost nothing while he did it, and for a moment it felt like peace. Nearby sat a phone booth. That was new—but its walls were already tagged all over with graffiti and the door had been half-busted in.

He should call Giles. Or James. Someone at the Potters'. They deserved an explanation, even if he didn't really have one. Would Sirius answer? No, probably not… Even if he did, what could they possibly have to say to each other? 'I'm sorry?' But Sirius was done playing apology games, he said it himself. Maybe that meant they were done for good. What shite that would be come January.

A footstep crunched behind him, followed by many more, and Remus cursed himself. While he'd been stuck in his own head, he'd allowed himself to be walked up on. There were only three of them, but they wore their caps down low, and their jacket collars high. They looked about his age, but it was clear they'd grown up around the area. Here were the local neighbourhood thugs, just looking for a score.

"Hey-up," the first one said. " 'aven't seen you around 'ere before."

Remus arched a brow. "You must've not looked hard enough then."

It was a weak come-back at best, but it was enough to make each boy pause. The one in front ran his tongue across his front teeth, like he'd just found his favourite meal sitting warm on the pavement.

"Bum a fag, mate?"

"Sorry, fresh out," Remus said, tucking his carton away and taking a poignant drag.

"That's cute, but I wasn't really asking." Without missing a beat, the guy pulled a switchblade, popping the blade open as he and his friends took several measuring steps toward him.

"You sure are quick to the draw," Remus remarked, eyeing the blade warily. "Normally I get at least a few more quips in."

"Yeah, but we're in a bit of a hurry, ya see. So I'll let you pick, hand over what'chu got or we beat you 'til yer sniffin' blood. Your choice, innit."

It was in his nature to argue, but Remus Lupin was not built entirely

out of stupid. He knew not to play with knives, especially in such a neighbourhood as Tomny's. So, while the boys crowded in on his swing, he pulled out the cigarettes and tossed them at their feet.

"Yeah, that's right," the boy leered, scooping up the box. "Now be a good bitch 'n turn out the rest 'a yer pockets."

"You just took my brand-new fags and now you're gonna mug me too? Tell me, do they give thug training at the local community centre these days? Or is that only for the to the thick and stereotypical?"

"We're gonna do worse than mug ya if ya don't turn out yer fuckin' pockets, cheeky cunt!" One of the others trilled.

Remus sighed. He stood up, still clutching his shopping bag, and began rifling around in his pockets. The others waited impatiently, shifting their feet from one foot to the other.

"Hold on, I know I've got a few quid on me somewhere. Where's that darn wallet..." Remus cleared his throat, still patting himself down. Finally, he glanced into the shopping bag. "Oh! Here it is. S'all in there."

He started to hand the bag over, and the first guy reached for it, only to scowl when Remus pulled the bag back very quickly.

"Sorry, lads, I just have one question before you finish mugging me."

"And what's tha'?"

"Can you catch?"

He smiled, genuinely. And then with all of his might—Remus threw the bagged bottle of milk. It slammed into the face of his first attacker with a hollow ring, surprising all of them. The guy cried out, dropping his knife to cup both hands over his face, and Remus didn't waste a moment. Instead he turned and bolted straight for the street.

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE, YA FUCKING IDIOTS! GRAB THE BITCH!"

Now, Remus had always been fast. It'd saved him on more than one occasion, but what he made up for with speed, he lacked in coordination. As he ran, his boot came down on a particularly nasty patch of ice, and just like that he was sprawling. The boys were on him a second later, jamming him in the back with a knee and landing

a nasty shot along his jaw. He thrashed beneath them, but throwing the milk had only given him a few seconds' head start, and he'd bottled it.

"Get 'im up!" The first one snarled. "Yeah, now hold 'im still. I'm gonna see how mouthy he is while I'm carving 'im up…"

Remus struggled, but they still managed to haul him to his feet. At least there he got the pleasure of seeing Milk-face's bloody nose as it dripped down onto the front of his tracksuit.

"Looks like I messed up your jacket," he grunted. "My bad, mate."

"Don't worry," he said, spitting blood. "When I'm done wiff you, I'm gonna take yours."

Remus jerked again viciously, but the two on his arms had a tight grip. As he leaned in, Milk-face's scowl quickly turned into another grin. He used his blade to trace the scar over Remus' nose, right up into his eyebrow.

"Looks like we ain't the first ones to fuck you up, princess. I'm almost disappointed."

"Just do it then!" He snarled. "If you're gonna do it then just fucking do it, you spineless shit-eating bastard!"

"Shut up!"

One of them decked him from behind, snapping Remus' head forward hard enough that he saw stars. His teeth rattled and he might've bit his tongue, but Milk-face was grinning enough to distract him. He had a chip in his left front tooth, cut sharp on an angle. Must've been painful when it happened. Now all Remus could do was focus on it as they crowded in around him.

"Orright, little cunt. You just hold still then, or I'm gonna—"

"Yer gonna what, Ticks?"

The boys all froze; even Remus was surprised to see him. Tomny came around the corner with both hands in his jacket pockets. He had deep bags under his eyes, and his lips were dry and cracked, but he walked as though he were King of the World. To these poor, shocked boys, he might as well have been.

“Tomny…” Milk-face gawked; “What are you...?"

“You know, Ticks, if I was gonna gut somebody, I wouldn’t spend all day talkin’ about it beforehand. I’d just gut ‘im. I think you’ll find it saves time.”

“This guy mouthed off,” Milk-face—now Ticks—blabbed. “We’s were gonna teach ‘im a lesson about what happens to cheeky cunts when they try taking the piss.”

“Yeah, ‘cept this one’s spoken for. So let him go before I take your fucking thumbs instead.”

Ticks appeared reluctant, but with blood still running down his face, he didn’t look all that ready to take Tomny on. He stepped away, and a second later the other two had released Remus’ arms.

“Good lads,” Tomny said. “Now what don’t you give the kid his fags back and we’s can all go on home? In fact, if I’m rememberin’ right—you boys still owe me. Where's my money?”

Ticks visibly paled. "I... Well, we's hadn't finished getting it yet, that's all."

"Oh? So rather than get out there and do yer fuckin' jobs, you're here—harassing randos for plonk change?"

"We'll get it!" One of the others assured him. "We're good 'fer it, Tom."

"Better be, or it's your arses I'm handing over to Benny. Now hand over the shit."

Remus had never seen somebody scowl with their entire body, but somehow Ticks managed it. He wrenched the cigarettes from his pockets and held them out, but when Remus went to grab them, he was pulled in close.

“I dunno who you are, but know one thing, you fucking ponce. Big bro Tom ain’t always gonna be around to protect ya. Eventually it'll be just you and us, and then you'll regret mouthing off. You hear me, you little b—”

“Did you not just hear what I fucking said?” Tomny demanded, cutting between them both. “I said piss—*the fuck*—off!” He punctuated the statement with a sharp head-butt, slamming his forehead directly into Ticks’ already bloody nose. There was a

sickening crunch, and Ticks crumpled instantly.

“AUGH! My fucking nose!”

“Get ‘im outta ‘ere,” Tomny ordered, wiping Ticks’ blood off of his face. The other two didn’t hesitate, and after a bit more moaning from their friend, the group quickly disappeared around the park’s cement wall.

“Got a hanky?”

Remus looked back at Tomny. There was blood between his eyebrows. He was grinning.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Tom?”

“Just out for a little stroll…” Tomny bent down, grabbing the knife Ticks had dropped. He stopped long enough to check his reflection in the blade, before folding it up and pocketing it. “Good thing, too. You have this habit of getting yourself into the messiest shit, Lu.”

“And I suppose you’ll always be there to find me, and dig me out again?”

“Too right, I will.” Smirking, Tomny grabbed Remus’ face in his hands and turned him this way and that for an inspection. “They didn’t actually cut ya, right? ‘Cause if they did you know I’ll blind ‘em.”

“They didn’t get the chance!” Remus snapped, batting him away. “Now what are you really doing here?”

“Looking for you, wanker. Figured if ya weren’t at the shops that you might’ve gone down this way. Lucky I was right.”

“Well, aren’t you just the brightest bulb in the box.”

“Heh. Far from it.” Tomny pat him on the cheek. “C’mon, toffy. Let’s getchu home. I’ve still got a few beers in the fridge. And a surprise even, if ya behave.”

Remus was quiet on the way back to the flat. He’d lost his milk, but didn’t feel like stopping for another. Doubted Tomny would agree to it anyway. He walked ahead, shoulders hunched in his thick donkey jacket and hands in his pockets. He was watching the streets, Remus knew, just in case they were to come across someone who might be looking for them. They’d gotten lucky with Ticks and his boys. But

who knew who they'd tell, especially considering Tomny had broken his nose. Every now and then Tomny would glance back, as if to make sure Remus was still there.

"For someone wiff such long legs, yer sure draggin' your feet."

Remus flipped him off, and Tomny winked at him. *Bastard.*

"If you start whistling, I'll kill ya."

"Should I sing instead?" Tomny mused, then sung anyway; *"'Did you ever see a lassie—a lassie, a lassie? Did you ever see a lassie, go this way or that?'"*

Remus caught up, yanking his friend by the back of his collar until he grunted. "Stuff it."

Tsk. "Thought musicians were supposed to like music?"

"Maybe I'm not a musician then."

Tomny gave him an annoyed look, but said nothing else. From then on, they walked side by side, all the way back.

"Here," Tomny said, cracking a beer and handing it to Remus. It was cold, but so was the rest of the flat. They had to wear their jackets inside.

As Tomny retreated back into the kitchen with his own beer, Remus drifted further into the living room. He considered turning on the telly, even if just for the noise, but he was distracted soon enough.

With his beer in one hand and a rolled up fiver in the other, Tomny did a line. Remus watched and wondered how much a bump like that might cost, and how much of Benny's ten KG's Tomny had snorted himself.

"Just… give me a few," Tomny breathed, while sinking back into the sofa. "I'll be good in a sec…"

Remus didn't know what else to do other than wait. As Tomny got busy getting high, he sat down on the end of the settee and he waited. Waited for something—anything to happen. The plate that he'd used to pour the coke onto still had a small scattering of white powder at the edges. Too curious to resist, Remus glanced at Tomny, who had his eyes closed, and scooted forward on the couch. He licked his finger

and then ran it along the plate before pressing the tiniest bit against his gums the way he'd seen Tomny do before. The numbing effect was instant, but the bitter taste it came with was horrid. Rushing into the kitchen, Remus spat several times into the sink and held his mouth under the tap. The ammonia-like taste stuck around afterwards, but as he made his way back out into the living room, he spotted Tomny smiling lazily at him with one eye open.

“Hey, Lu... Tell me again why you ain’t going to university.”

“Because I’m gonna be in a band.”

“A musician after all, eh? Wow… s’cool… a band… You—uh… still doing it with that Sirius-bloke? The one you's broke up with?”

Remus let out a shaky breath. He couldn’t answer, so he changed the subject instead.

“Who were those guys at the park, Tom?" He slumped down on the sofa, tonguing the numbness from his gums. "You said they owed you. So what—that mean they work for you? Or are you their personal ‘Benny’?”

“I ain’t like that fat fuck, Benny,” Tomny grumbled, eyes sliding shut again. “They just run for me, s’all. We’re all a part ‘a the system, Lu. Working men—working cogs. It’s like the… circle ‘a life… You’s get… used to it…”

“Why won’t you ever tell me about it, then?”

Tomny was silent then, and Remus turned on him. “Hello...? Tom!”

Tomny’s eyes stayed shut, and for a moment Remus feared the worst. He threw himself forward, tapping his mate's shoulders firmly.

“Tomny? Are you alright?”

There was no response, so Remus pressed his ear to Tomny’s chest. Then, when he began to hear the telltale thumping of a heart in rhythm, his alarm turned to anger. He wrenched away, already fuming.

“Fucking arsehole—wake up! Fucking wake up, Tomny!”

But Tomny didn’t, and Remus growled, slamming his beer bottle down and throwing himself up from the sofa. He marched into the kitchen

and picked one of the dirty glasses from the sink, filling it with water. Then he sped back out into the flat's living room and doused the bastard with it.

"WAKE UP!"

Tomny stirred, even gave a little moan—but his eyes stayed shut, and Remus felt his temper boil over.

"FUCK YOU, TOMNY!" He wailed, smacking Tomny across the face with an open palm. "Get—*UP!"*

He had to smack him once more, but finally Tomny stirred. He moaned a bit louder, and just as Remus raised his hand a third time, Tomny shot upright on the sofa.

"Fuck!" He cried. *"Shit—ow!?* Did you really have to hit me, Lu?"

"It was the only way to wake you, ya fucking skaghead! What's a'matter with you, huh? What if you'd died?!"

"I'm not gonna die!"

"Seems likely enough! If all you'd rather do all day is get high, then no wonder Tonya fucking left!"

Tomny had always been an immovable thing—unfazed and serene no matter what came across his path—but the moment Remus said Tonya's name, he flinched.

"Just smack me again, why don't you?" Tomny whimpered. "Think I'd prefer it."

Hearing him like that, so small and fragile—Remus instantly broke. He slumped down on the sofa next to him, head in his hands.

"I can't do this, Tom. I can't… Like—I'm supposed to be the fucked up one. The one with all the issues. You're the one who holds it all together."

Tomny glanced down at himself, peeling his wet shirt away from his chest. "That's not fair, you get everything. Rich twat."

"I hate you. And I'm not gonna laugh."

"Why not? Laughing's easier…" Tomny chuckled weakly, then slid closer to Remus when he noticed him sulking. "Aw. I'm sorry, Lu. I

know you're disappointed. Didnae wan' you to see all 'a this…"

"Don't. I can't be the good guy, not when I've fucked up so badly. I just need you to be *good,* Tom."

" 'Cause that's not a crap-ton 'a pressure or anything… What the fuck's 'good' nowadays anyway? Didn't think there was such a thing in this world." Tomny ran a hand through his choppy hair, before grinding out a hiss. *"Augh*—fuck. High's practically down the drain… Guess we might as well have it out."

Remus raised his head, and he found Tomny staring at him. There were bags under his eyes. Deep ones. A blood vessel had burst in the left. He'd never looked so tired.

"I think I'm just embarrassed by it, right?" Tomny said, his voice low and hoarse. "It's the drugs and everyffin. Used to be embarrassed by the thieving—breaking into cars, the petty robbery. And now it's this shit. Should be normal for a bloke like me—hundreds 'a people doing the exact same crap to survive, but it's different with you. I just… don't like telling you."

"Why?"

"Because!" He snapped. "Because as far as I'm concerned, you're the good one. And I still don't want you to look at me any different—I can't take it. So *please,* stop asking. Jus' let me have this one thing. Okay, Lu?"

Remus looked down at his hands. *Secrets, secrets.* Why did they insist on following him everywhere?

"I get it, Tom," he said quietly. "Why you'd keep it a secret. It's not the knowing that's the hard part—it's everything else. Not what people'll say—but what they're thinking *inside.* That's the worst fucking part, isn't it?"

Tomny sighed. "Yeah. That's the worst part."

They were quiet for a while, just two broken kids on a patched sofa. Couldn't have had a more different start, but there they were… at the End.

"You were right," Tomny said, head tipped back and zoning out on the ceiling. "Every time you asked about Tonya, you were fucking right."

Remus' heart clenched. "I'm sorry."

"Nah, no more sorries. No more secrets..."

With a heavy exhale, Tomny sat up and turned to Remus. He sniffed a bit, wiping below his nose.

"Listen, I was a right fucking wreck after Tonya left. I lost my bloody mind, innit. But I could see how the others were looking at me, so I put it all away. I wasn't ready to let go 'a her, but she was gone. Couldn't do nothing about it. Instead I tried taking control of what I could—the drugs, the money. And at some point… I dunno, wasn't enough. I couldn't stand being 'ere without her—in my own home. So one night I lost it. Trashed the whole place. Ripped it apart and smashed up everything. 'Specially everything that reminded me of 'er."

"You didn't..."

"Fucking rights, I did. Threw the entire stereo out the window and everyffin. Figured, no one's gonna come looking for it… Still, couldn't tell anyone. Felt too pathetic. I was really down back then, but I'm better now. Swears. All the shit with the drugs—it's nuffin'."

Remus knew better than to believe him, but he was at odds with every other person in his life. He couldn't be at odds with Tomny too.

"Just please tell me you didn't toss her copy of 'Abbey Road'. It was an original pressing."

"Dunno. Was that the one with the banana on the front?"

"Nico *too?* Oh Tom… What'd rock 'n roll ever do to you?"

Tomny smiled and reached for his beer, sipping it. "Secrets fester, I think. They become bigger than they are—and then suddenly they're not just secrets anymore, they're problems. I mean, hey, look at me? I got rid of all of it, even felt a bit better—but I tell ya… still miss her music sometimes…"

"I miss her too," Remus confessed. "So much. And I—I thought it would go away, but it never does."

"Yeah… Well, when grief's all you got, sometimes it hurts worse to let it go."

The words hung between them like a hook on a line, and Remus knew

they were the truth. For so long he'd been searching for a way to let go of all the anger—*all the hate*—but who was he without it? Was he Remus Lupin because of that anger, or was he angry because he was Remus Lupin? Seventeen years, and he still wasn't sure.

"Hey." Tomny knocked his knee against Remus' kindly. "Don't stay sad. I told you I had a surprise for ya, yeah?"

"Don't know if I can handle anymore surprises, Tom."

"Ah, but you'll like this one. Wait here."

With an excited little kick, Tomny threw himself up off of the sofa and whipped down the hall toward one of the bedrooms. He was gone only a moment, and when he reemerged, he was holding not just any old gift—but a guitar. A bass guitar.

"Happy late-Christmas, lovely tosser."

"Tom, no," Remus moaned, "you *didn't."*

"Sure, I did," Tomny beamed, coming forward and setting the pristine instrument over Remus' lap. "The guy in the bob-shop called it a Teisco. Said it was almost brand new—hardly ever been played!"

Remus ran his fingers up the neck of the bass, almost forgetting how to breathe. He flicked his thumb along one of the strings and felt it vibrate neatly. It was no 1951 Fender Precision, but it was perfect for a dumb kid with very few aspirations.

"I got it on-offer, so I know it's nuffin' special," Tomny rambled, "but figured if anyone could do something wiff it, it'd be you. S'better than letting it hang in the window of that shop getting bleached by the sun, right?"

"It's amazing, Tom. You shouldn't have—*really."* He punched Tomny in the arm sharply. "Stop wasting your bloody money on me!"

"Wasn't even my money!" Tomny protested. "Used some of that dosh your dad pushed on you."

"You absolute spanner—I told you to use it on yourself!"

"Yeah, and then you went and gave the rest of it to a cock-jockey like Benny. Nothing to be done now. Can't get the money back from him and the shop's sign said no refunds, so... go on! Might as well play the

bloody thing. Oh shit—wait! I gotchu one of those new-fangled amps too, though I 'spect it's old as dust. Dunno how it'll sound."

Tomny jumped up once more and rushed from the room, coming back with a decently worn-out amplifier that he dropped on the floor next to the sofa. "Was a real bitch lugging this thing up the lane, y'know. Hope you make it worth my while."

"It's great, Tom."

"Great enough to play, innit."

Suddenly feeling very shy, Remus made to set the instrument aside. Tomny caught hold of the neck at the last second.

"What you doing?"

"I don't even know what I'd play?"

"You fucking cares? Play something—anything. Play those fucking secrets of yours."

Remus bit his lip. "That sounds mildly cheesy."

"Just play, wanker."

If Remus could have collected all of the time he'd wasted on hesitating, then he'd have been left with half a lifetime. It killed him to think about, and so for once, he allowed himself to stop thinking altogether. While Tomny graciously plugged in the amp, he fit the chord into the end of the bass and carefully turned the Teisco over in his lap. He strummed down roughly, feeling the rebound of its unstretched, untried strings, and bit his lip again. They were out of tune. He'd have to fix them—wear them down until they moved exactly how he wanted them to. It'd be almost like starting over.

As he moved his fingers along the stiff strings, not bothered by his lack of flow or general rhythm, he began to feel more free. Tomny had no idea what went into making a song, which meant *anything* could be a song, and since it was just the two of them there no one was left to question it when he began to sing.

"You say you want answers, everything and more. And I got the answers—oh, I got secrets-galore…"

Tomny laughed, nodding his head in another 'go on', and Remus

shook his head.

He didn't know where the words were coming from, he'd never even written it. He just kept playing, and the stupid chant spilled out of him like water.

"How 'bout—I fuckin' hate football? Or… any sport at all, really… And I fell in love with my best friend, though this might be the end, clearly. 'Cause I can't come out of the closet, locked up… like a—like a safe-deposit! And that's kinda sad… So there's a few secrets, finally said 'em aloud, and I ain't done yet. How 'bout—my dad's not my dad, and that's kinda sad… Yeah, my dad's not my dad. Would'a thought I'd be glad… that my dad's not my dad…"

A sharp inhale, then; "Fuck. Tom, my dad, h-he..."

Remus filtered off, his chunky licks becoming little more than slams on the strings as he descended into tears and Tomny sharply pulled them together on the sofa.

"I *hate* them," Remus sobbed into his shirt. "He hates me because he's not my dad and she—and she never told me! Or—Or she did, but then she just fuckin' went off and *died!"*

"I know," Tomny whispered, patting his head soothingly; "I hear you now."

"I ruined everything. It's all so messed up. Sirius hates me now—James and Lily must hate me! It's all ruined… and I don't even understand why it's so bloody difficult! I left them with no word—no reason, just fuckin' ran off! I dumped them to come here like I always do. And I lied—again and again!"

"People lie, Lu. They jus' do. S'a part of being human. And you're not any lesser for havin' a shit dad. It's on them—on those deadbeats—no one else."

"I hurt him, Tom," he whimpered. "I hurt Sirius. I was so focussed on making sure no one else noticed that I forgot all about him."

"Sounds like something you gotta tell him then."

He knew Tomny was right, but more talking? It felt impossible. What if things got even more messed up? What if they missed each other again? Him and Sirius—sometimes it felt like they were speaking in different tongues.

“Hey—*hey."* Tomny pulled away, forcing Remus to look at him. "You think I’d lead you wrong on purpose?”

He shook his head pathetically, and Tomny smiled.

“Then what 'chu so worried about?”

Dear god, Remus thought. This was a man he’d do anything for, he was sure of it.

“I really love you, Tom. You’re like my brother.”

“Always wanted a lil’ brother," Tomny chuckled. "Didn’t count on ‘im being taller than me though.”

"You’ve probably just gotten shorter in your old age..."

"Cheeky shit." Tomny laughed again, and then wiped the damp from Remus' cheek. For a moment they were just staring at each other, two boys with nothing left to lose. Tomny's eyes were red along the whites, and bluer than Remus had ever seen.

Anything, he swore. *Anything.*

Tomny cleared his throat. “Hey, Lu—”

There was a sudden knock on the door, loud enough to make both of them start.

“Stay here, it’s probably just someone tryin’ to drop in,” Tomny said. He stood up, already starting away before turning back. “But just to be safe—maybe hide.”

Remus didn’t need telling twice. Feeling a lot like a spineless milksop, he ducked out of sight behind the sofa while Tomny made his way toward the door. The front door creaked as it opened and Remus held his breath, releasing it only when he heard Tomny sigh in relief.

“Lee? What the f—why didn’t ya buzz the flat?”

“Piece of shit intercom’s out again,” Lee scoffed. “I swear s’like somebody unplugs it.”

“How’d you get inside then?”

“Dezzy from downstairs let me in. Now where you been? No one's heard from you in days.”

There was a light thump like Lee had tried to push the door open.

“Sorry, can’t come in—I’m… entertaining.”

“Oooh, I get it. S’that Boots girl again, innit? You been hunkered down and enjoying yourself, you randy bastard.”

“None’ya business. Now bugger off, don’t want her fainting at the sight ‘a your ugly mug. Put a real dent in my evening.”

“Easy now. I should at least say ‘ello, shouldn’t I? So where is she—bedroom?”

“Lee.”

“Orright, orright. I can tell when I’m interrupting. But you’d best come out soon or else I’m haulin’ ya off her perky arse meself. You coming out to Vint's for New Years?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Good. Can’t mope around ‘ere all the time. Cheryl’s been on watch for you, ya know. Best get out there before she realises she’s got better options.”

“Better, as in you?”

“You know me, I’m a beast, Tom. Can’t keep me down.”

There was a short chuckle—Tomny—and then a clap of hands. “Orright. See ya later then, dickhead.”

“I’ll save ya a bump. Ta.”

The door shut and Remus finally peeked out from behind the sofa. It stung a bit, to have heard Lee sound so much like his old self and know that everything had changed. So, Remus did what Sirius would do, and he cracked a joke.

“Does the Boots girl have a name, you slag?”

Tomny smirked wryly, hand still on the doorknob. “Never thought to ask actually.”

“You idiots wouldn’t last five minutes with Marlene.”

“Ah, yes, your lesbian girlfriend. Tell me about her next.”

* * *

Over the next day and a half, Remus told Tomny everything.

Every gritty detail.

He left not a shred out no matter how bad it made him look, and by the time they were finished they'd gone through all the beer in the flat and the three bottles of scrumpy Tomny had been saving for only the most desperate of occasions. Even then, their throats were dry from talking, but Remus felt better. In the beginning he'd assumed that Sirius was used to the secrets because he'd been living one for so long, but it was different for him. For Remus, secrets felt protective—like an iron wall he'd built up around himself. They kept some distance between him and the hardest parts of being Hope Lupin's son, safeguarded him against Lyall's resentment, and helped him find a place in a world that would've otherwise considered him too opulent to welcome. For Sirius, secrets were only an unfortunate circumstance of life. He found no comfort in them.

At some point they'd put the telly on, but ended up talking over the program. Tomny put the drugs away, even though it probably would've been easier to not, and instead they played cards, cooked a modest supper, changed the linens. Keeping up with the mundane things made talking easier, and eventually the radiator kicked on again and warmth began to seep back into their bones. On the 29th they took a trip to the laundrette to clean those changed linens and Remus had to hide in the toilet when a pair of local kids spotted Tomny through the window. One of them was Brecker, the jerk who'd gone with Tomny to the party last summer. It took a while to shake them, but when Remus emerged from the filthy lavatory, Tomny gave him a lopsided smile and any unfortunate twinge was quickly forgotten.

"So what yer saying is, that you're really *not*—" Tomny grunted as he yanked the phone cord from the wall; "—queer?"

Remus shrugged from his place on the floor, the Teisco strapped across his lap. "More like halfway. I'm a halfer—girls… and guys."

"Blimey. Didn't much think that was an option, meself." Shrugging, Tomny tossed the phone aside. It'd been ringing off its hook all evening and he'd ignored it every time. *Fuckings sods, they're*

interrupting Lu time! He'd say.

"Tell me then," Tomny said, picking up a fresh beer bottle and slouching down on the couch. "What's it about this 'Sirius Black' that's got you so sprung?"

"If you saw him you'd know."

"He that pretty?"

"Well, I think every girl at school's swooned over him at least once."

"Heyyyy," Tomny grinned, knocking Remus' shoulder with his beer; "And he's with you, huh? Handsome dog…"

"I dunno if he'd consider us 'together' anymore."

"Mm—nah. You know what they say, don't count your pretty, rich boyfriends before they hatch."

Remus smiled despite himself, and then looked down, busy tightening his A-string. Tomny watched happily, sipping away. It was the first day in weeks he hadn't woken up just to get high, and Remus could see it in the bouncing of his leg—the pin-point sweating along his collar. Tomny tried to play it off, but he could tell he was suffering.

"So what's it like then, being with a girl and then a guy?" Tomny prodded. "Don't it get confusing at all? I mean, you probably wouldn't forget what to do when… *you know.* That part's all instinct—*heh*—but what happens when they want different things?"

"You mean like different things… in bed?"

"Yeah! But also, you know how a girl wants to be protected, and—er… a guy, protects? Whadda do then?"

"It works the same. We take care of each other."

Tomny nodded thoughtfully. "And in bed then? I mean, since you brought it up..."

Remus scoffed, hands dropping from the bass. "I've only ever been with *one* guy. My experience isn't exactly vast."

"Not true! You kissed me that one time."

"Shut up, we've already been over that. It was a mistake. Won't

happen again."

"Right." Tomny twiddled his thumbs. "So… does this mean you were ever in love with me?"

"Sod off!"

"I was just asking! Christ, don't need to bite my head off. Never met a 'bisexual' before, alright? M'trying to put myself in yer shoes."

"Right. Let me put it this way then, if you were a girl, would you still have fallen in love with Tonya?"

"Nah, don't think so," Tomny mused.

"Really? Why not?"

"I'd be too busy falling in love with you. In all your manic-toff glory."

"Fuck you, Tom."

"Yep, that's right. Could've had my Cinderella moment." Tomny sighed, sipping his last beer with one hand and tucking the other behind his head. "Bet it'd be mighty comfortable, being 'Mrs. Remus Lupin'."

"I think the Lupin track record would disagree."

"What about the guy in the photo—your real dad?"

Remus glanced to the coffee table, where the creased picture of Hope and her friends sat amongst a collection of coins and pocket lint. He'd showed Tomny the photo and for the first time, he had not been ashamed. It was a part of him, but it was not the whole of him.

"Don't know anything about the guy," Remus said. "Mum never mentioned him really, but when Sheila gave me that picture and said they went to school together I just sorta connected the dots. He probably doesn't even know that I exist."

"Does that bother you?"

"It should, shouldn't it?"

Tomny shrugged. "I never thought having a dad was all that. Usually they're only made of shit 'n disappointment."

“Right…”

“But hey—if you do, well orright then.”

“No… I dunno.” Remus sighed glumly. “I’ve known about this guy for six years now and never even said his name aloud. He's not my dad, he’s basically a stranger. Guess I always thought that not meeting him at all was better than doing it and finding out he doesn’t want me.”

“Hm. And now?”

“And now… I think I’m still afraid.”

“Well,” Tomny pursed his lips in consideration, “I wouldn’t worry about it, mate. You can always change your mind later.”

“You think?”

“Sure. Seesaw didn’t meet his dad ‘til he was seventeen. And then he turned out to be an alcoholic dickbag working in some meat-packing plant. Yours is some posh bleeder with a name like ‘Thaddeus’. Even if he is an utter waste of a personality, you might still be able to get some money out of it, yeah?”

It was supposed to be a light joke—comforting, but what did Remus need with more money? He was going to live with his friends in some crummy corner flat in Soho and make crummy music and drink crummy beer, provided he got his shit together first.

Man… he really needed to call Giles.

“At least he ain’t bad looking,” Tomny said, picking up the photo. “Mum always used to say that my old man looked like a toe come to life. Ha. Bitter hag.”

Remus burst into laughter, and Tomny joined him. Eventually talk shifted again—Doss and his new family, brimming with promise.

“He’ll make a good dad,” Tomny said firmly. “That kid’s gonna have a chance.”

A chance. Remus had had plenty of those, and he’d squandered them all. Would Tad have been like Doss, young and inexperienced but with a heart big enough to try anyway? Or would he be more like Lyall, drowning in money and promise and somehow still dissatisfied with life. Maybe he could’ve been like Mr. Potter, kind and warm with bad

jokes that everyone knew were bad but laughed at anyway.

But no. Remus' luck had never been that good. He could only hope Tad was somewhere in the middle, not that it really mattered if he never planned on meeting the guy.

God, he missed Sirius. It would be so easy to explain all of it to him. He'd get it before he even got the words out, and then the solution would just materialise in front of them. Remus liked talking to Tomny, who was understanding and patient, but no matter how familiar he was, it just wasn't the same.

On the 30th, five days after running off on his friends without word, Remus told Tomny about the New Year's party at the Pettigrews'.

"They actually want your band to play? Wow. That's a lot of faith."

"We're actually pretty good, I'll have you know!"

"Sure, I know," Tomny laughed. "Been listening to you going on two days now—you're good, Lu. I guess that means you'll be headin' home then."

"I don't want to leave," Remus said earnestly.

"Ah, but you made a commitment. Can't go back on your word, it ain't manly. Jus' do me a favour, play a few more songs before you go."

So he did. Remus played every song in his repertoire, including the ones he'd written for the band. He let Tomny peruse his songbook and read all of it, even the really bad stuff.

"Tell me, Lu, what emotion were you trying to evoke by rhyming 'disintegration' with 'refrigeration'?"

"I was going for *chilling,* obviously. I'm just surprised you can read a word that big."

"You callin' me thick?"

"Don't worry, it's charming."

"I like it when you flirt, Lu."

"Ha—that's not flirting."

Tomny arched one handsome brow and flipped to the next page in his

songbook. “Oh? Then what is?”

His heart gave a little jump and Remus quickly glanced down at the bass to hide it. “Nice try, but I ain't falling for that. Flirting with you feels too much like emotional incest.”

He’d expected another quip, but when that didn’t come, Remus looked up. Tomny wasn’t smiling anymore, but rather than staring at him, his attention was caught by the song book. Curious, Remus leaned in to get a look at the page he’d turned to and instantly deflated.

“Oh… That’s—”

“ ‘Tonya’s Song’,” Tomny finished, before cracking a wry smile. “Of course you wrote her a song.”

“I never finished it exactly,” Remus answered, slightly ashamed. “The words never felt right. Couldn’t pin it down.”

“Yeah well, could never pin ‘er down in person either. I expect trying to capture her with words is even worse.” Tomny touched his fingers to the page. “ ‘Raven-haired… Midnight dancer…’ This is… wow.”

Remus bit his lip, but he’d had no need to be nervous. Tomny just sat up, eyes bright, and passed the book along.

“Will you play me whatever it is you have? I’d like to hear it.”

The request left him anxious again, but he’d already decided that would’ve done anything for Tomny. He could do this.

The song was simple, just three verses. It hadn’t changed since he’d written it.

You can stay up all night,
Figuring out what to do next;
Everything seems alright,
‘Til you run out of cigarettes;

Raven-haired,
Midnight dancer;
If I could give you everything,
Would you ask for me?

Star of those rainy nights,

And now our night is through;
You've asked your questions,
I've asked for you.

Once he'd finished, Remus set the bass aside. His skin felt tingly—his face hot. Everything was buzzing and his fingers were trembling, but when he looked up, Tomny was staring at him from his recliner, lips parted. He still had that little scar on his top lip.

"Blimey," Tomny murmured. "You're amazing, you are."

For once, Remus couldn't find it in himself to disagree.

* * *

This dream would be the last. Somehow, it made sense that it would be her.

In this dream he did not feel ill, nor did he feel lost or unwanted. It was the first to comfort him, and the last he'd remember having for a very long time. He felt her touch and panicked at first, half-worried she were someone else. But then he realised.

No one sang like she did. No one had ever held him like she had.

"Let us cling together as the years go by, oh my love, my love… In the quiet of the night, let our candle always burn. Let us never lose the lessons we have learned…"

Remus felt the burn of unwept tears. She was stroking his head, singing to him, so beautifully. Enough that he wanted to live in it—cling to the dream and never let her go. He had to look, *had* to, but he was afraid. What if she vanished before his eyes again?

"Remus."

Please stay. Please stay with me.

"Remus, sweet love. It's time to wake up."

No. No, please. I'm so tired.

He felt her beautiful hands on his face, and her beautiful lips on his

cheeks, and after she'd kissed each of his lashes, Remus finally opened his eyes.

"I miss you," he said. "I wish you hadn't gone."

Tonya smiled at him. "I love you, Remus," she said. "You are so loved."

Chapter End Notes

[To have someone] 'sectioned' is to forcibly admit them to hospital (thanks Becca, lol).
[To] 'bottle it' means to get so close and then mess up. Tripping at the finish line, if you will.
'What's the craic?' is like 'what's going on?'
'Cailín' is an Irish word meaning 'girl'.
'Gardaí' is the Irish word for police.
'Dryshite', 'gobshite' and 'pox bottle' all roughly mean fool or useless person.
The Gaelic phrase/insult *'go n-ithe an cat thú is go n-ithe an diabhal an cat'* translates to *'may the cat eat you, and may the devil eat the cat'*. Creatively meaning that the cat should do you in, and then the devil will do you both. If you're curious for pronunciation, here's an intimidating rendition.
'[Tongs] Ya Bass' is a sort of war cry for Scottish youth gangs and the like. Gang members would shout their gang's name and 'ya bass' to rally before a fight.
'Peak' is bad luck.
'Randy' means horny.
'Scrumpy' is a harsh home-brewed cider. Also a brand.

I swear I'm done with the super sadness! It was necessary, and is healing in the long run. Next chapter, New Year's 1977 <3

Chapter 85: Moony & Lu

Chapter Summary

Going home is always hard, especially when Lily Evans has put a hit out on you.

Chapter Notes

Note: See the end notes for an alternate POV of the final scene in this chapter.

No specific trigger warnings for this chapter, but the boys go back and forth a lot, and it carries some underlying issues with their families as well as internalized homophobia. You can tell they're hurting. But it's got its moments, I swear!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I, I will be king,
And you, you will be queen;
Though nothing will drive them away,
We can beat them, just for one day,
We can be Heroes, just for one day...

Saturday 31st December 1977

"This ain't goodbye."

"I know."

"Then stop looking at me like I'm about to head into the trenches."

"I'm not!" Remus scowled. "If anyone's headed for the gallows it's me. I'm the one going home..."

"Ah, yes. I'm sure facing down the likes of potpourri and a nice home-cooked meal does have its downsides."

"You've clearly never met Lily."

Tomny smiled at him, the distant shriek of train whistles and car announcements echoing down the Tube behind him. "When do you

leave for school then?"

"The third. We head out of King's Cross on the first train like last time," Remus said, still wondering how he was going to last at the Potters until then. And there was still Giles to contend with as well... *shit.*

"You know you can call me if things get really unbearable," Tomny offered. "Like if they forget to put out them little finger sandwiches. Or the champagne's flat."

"Prick." He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, only to pull them out again when Tomny raised his arms for a hug. They embraced right there on the station platform, while other commuters swerved around them, occasionally tossing them a dirty or otherwise bewildered look as they rushed to catch their train home for the final holiday of the year. Remus hardly cared; they'd agreed to part on good terms, him and Tom. And so he clung on, not wanting to let go. His lips brushed the worn leather of Tomny's jacket, and it was cold.

"Stop trying to drink yourself to death," he said.

"Stop trying to smoke yerself stupid," Tomny replied.

"Stop fighting with drug dealers."

"Stop fighting the world."

"Stop... Stop taking so many drugs!"

"Stop making everyone fall in love with you!"

They pulled apart.

"Though, suppose that's asking for the impossible, innit."

Remus felt his chest tighten, like a breath he'd been holding onto for too long. "Promise!" He insisted, knocking his fist against his friend's shoulder. "Promise you're gonna straighten your shit out."

Tomny jabbed him in the chest. "I'll promise if you promise!"

"... Promise."

"Then we're agreed. Shit shall be straightened. Now is there anythin' else you'd like to demand of me before ya go?"

"Yeah, just one more thing. Don't disappear."

"Aw." Tomny pat his cheek fondly. “I already told you, didn’t I? I’m not going anywhere. Still need my Lu.”

Good terms, Remus had promised himself, *not soppy, weepy messes.*

They hugged once more, and then Tomny handed him the clunky Fender Twin amplifier and began backing up toward the stairs.

"Better hurry along then, don't want to get caught in the rain. I'll see you on the third."

Remus blinked. "The third...? What—"

"Oh, and if your lover-boy is really *that* bothered, just tell 'im we shagged with the lights on. And that we saw God. See what he has to say about that."

It was horrid—completely cheeky, but before Remus could so much as utter a response, Tomny had hopped the turnstiles and vanished up the Tube steps. He was almost tempted to follow him until a train attendant appeared on the other side of the stalls, shooting an irritated look in Tomny’s direction. Rather than being hounded for the ticket he didn’t pay for, Remus picked up his bass guitar and skirted further down the platform, jumping the first train back to East Finchley. As he rode it was hard not to wonder what he was walking into, harder still not to succumb to the urge to flee whenever the train doors slid open. But he'd agreed to go back. He *wanted* to go back. He owed his friends an explanation for running off, and the Potters an apology for taking their kindness for granted. *You just gotta own up to it,* Tomny had told him. *Be a man.*

A man like who? Tomny? Lyall? Remus wasn't sure. He’d wanted to be better, and they’d all wanted it for him too. Only he'd bottled it, just like Lyall said he would. They'd warned him—*Grow up! Tell us what's going on! Don’t be a shit friend!*—but he'd never listened, and running away in the middle of Leicester Square didn’t exactly scream ‘mate of the year’ either. He had nothing with him aside from the second-hand Teisco and the clothes on his back, and up until that second it'd felt like enough. But when had nothing ever been enough?

A short ride later, he got off at the same station he and Sirius had travelled to on their way to the Potters' last summer. He'd felt out of place then, and he felt out of place now. James’ neighbourhood was not the sort one traipsed along in bearing unwashed clothes and

morning-after-beer-breath. Overhead the sky turned to rapid grey while December wind licked up his back, and still Remus marched. He passed countless cottages and terrace houses done up in all of their festive glory, the words ‘upper middle class’ all but stamped on their welcome mats. After his visit in the End, he felt the same way he had on that very first day he’d arrived at Hawkings—a yob in a sea of shining gentry. A faker. It made him want to hurry, which he regretted the instant he appeared in front of the Potters’ noble, three-floor abode. It was New Year’s Eve, which meant he’d been gone for nearly a week. Hadn’t said where he was going, hadn’t called, hadn’t delivered so much as a bloody carrier pigeon. He was in deep shit.

Don’t be a shit friend.

Remus' hands flexed around the amp's handle. *I won't. I'll go in. Beg for mercy if I have to.*

Aw, and what will you do next? Get down on your knees and kiss their boots? Beg Sirius to take you back?

It's not about that. We're still friends.

*Friends don't treat **friends** like rubbish.*

Enough! No more. You ruin everything, and I'm going to feel guilty anymore. I'm not crazy, and I won't let you turn me crazy, so just piss OFF —

“Moony?!”

There was a loud clatter, like the breaking of glass on stone, and Remus whipped around to find Sirius standing a ways down the pavement. He had oven mitts on either hand and seemed to be torn between gaping at Remus, and frowning down at the smashed platter of food he'd apparently been carrying.

"Shit!" Sirius cursed. He knelt down on the icy sidewalk to fret over the steaming glass, but by then Remus had already abandoned the amp and Teisco and dashed to his side.

"Effie's gonna kill me... I was supposed to be bringing this plate of bread sauce over from Pete's mum."

"It was an accident. I'm sure she'll understand."

Sirius whipped his head up, as if he only just remembered who he was

talking to. "You! What the fuck are you doing here?!"

"I—I..."

Sirius stood then, whipping off the oven mitts with a sharp tug. He seemed to be waiting for something—an explanation probably. Remus wished he'd have seen him first coming up the adjoining path from Peter's house. Maybe then he'd have managed to find the right words to apologise; he'd been struggling with it the entire train over. It hadn't been enough! Now he was left standing before the gates of Potter Cottage, tongue thick in his mouth.

Oh god—say something, you idiot! He's staring right at you!

"I'm back."

"Back?"

He swallowed. "Yep... And I'm sorry I ever left."

Sirius' lips parted, and Remus imagined them contorting to fit all sorts of nasty replies. The worst of them being that he hadn't wanted him to come back at all. But Sirius didn't say that, and when he raised his arms Remus told himself to be ready for a fine wallop he absolutely deserved.

And that didn't come.

Rather than beat him into the mud, Sirius' arms came up and wrapped around Remus' neck so tightly that he was yanked down to his level. With a little gasp, Remus allowed it and found himself frozen all over again. He and Sirius had barely said a handful of words to each other in weeks, and now there they were—hugging.

"You fucking idiot! You sorry excuse for an absolute—!" Sirius drew up short, pulling away all at once. "What d'you think you were on about, *huh?!* Freaking us out like that? Did you know we had to practically bend over backward covering for you? Effie almost went to the police! Then she straight tore a right strip off of Giles when he came by to talk her out of it. 'Does this all the time'—what fucking rubbish! Do you have any idea how bloody worried everyone was?!"

Remus swallowed thickly. He'd been expecting a tongue-lashing from Lily, maybe James and Marlene, but from Sirius?

"You were worried about me?"

“Of course I was, you great idiot!"

Something inside of Remus' chest fluttered. He searched Sirius' face for a hint of reciprocation, and that was when he noticed the grey beneath his eyes, the haggard look. Remus felt more stupid than he'd ever been in his life. Of course Sirius had been worried for him. He was heartbroken, not heartless. His own anger had blinded him. Blinded the both of them.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin everyone's Christmas."

"Bit bold of you to assume you ruined fucking Christmas," Sirius lashed, though the strain in his voice gave him away. "You went to the End, didn't you? You went and saw Tomny."

Remus squared his shoulders a bit, aware of the incoming fight. "I did."

"You couldn't have called?"

"I didn't think you'd want to talk."

"Fuck off. Why's it so hard for you to believe that people care about you?"

"It isn't."

"Then why didn't you call!?"

"I was afraid."

Sirius looked away, glaring down at the mess of bread sauce on the pavement, already turned cold. He seemed to be at a loss, and when he looked up again he had to wipe his cheek on his shoulder.

“What’s that then?” He asked, gesturing to the abandoned amp and guitar case. Remus was grateful for the distraction.

“Oh. It’s a bass... Long story.”

“Did you steal it?”

“No, I didn’t steal it!”

“Can’t blame me for checking.” Sirius looked him up and down, deflating slightly as his anger morphed into something more frustrated. Hurt, maybe. “Why’d you do that, eh? Why would you just

up and leave without saying anything? Andy came over to say hello, and you'd just vanished!"

"Didn't realise she was coming over to the house."

"She didn't come over to the house! Dora's sick with a cold so Ted's mum was watching her for the night. But you could've stayed! What, you hate me so much that you couldn't stand waiting five minutes just to say hello after the movie?"

Remus felt like someone had just hit him over the head with a hammer.

"What movie?"

"The fucking space movie, you prick! With the laser swords and strange, weird bear thing that made all the funny noises! Blahh!"

"Andy was there?"

"Yeah! Didn't you see us talking?"

He wracked his brain. All he could remember was a girl. A girl in a hat and a long coat—and Sirius talking to her, smiling! At the time it'd made Remus sick to his stomach. He must've been iller than he'd thought, straight delusional actually. *Andy!* The girl had been Andy! Remus wanted to top himself.

"I must've gotten confused," he confessed. "I thought she was just a random... That you..."

Sirius frowned deeply. "That I what? Was trying to get back at you by flirting with some girl I don't care about?"

"Wouldn't be the first time."

"Oh. Fine then," Sirius snarled, throwing down the oven mitts. "Think what you want. Hope you at least have the decency to tell the others your alive. I ain't doing it for you this time."

He made to go around him, but Remus reached out at the last second and caught his arm.

"Sirius, wait. I didn't mean that. And I didn't mean to take off out of the blue either, I just needed to be away for a while... Figure some stuff out."

Sirius looked back at him sharply. *“And?”*

And I still love you.

“And I’m sorry. Truly.”

Sirius puckered, the way he always did when he was rearing up for a fight. “I hate this, you know. I hate that you left. And I hate that it took for you to chat up your precious Tomny to come back. Why can't we just talk to each other?”

Slowly, Remus released his arm. "I don't know."

For a moment they were both quiet. For such a solemn conversation, it struck Remus as odd that it wasn't raining. Then, as if on cue, he heard the distant sound of thunder rumbling. The storm came in quickly as it often did the more one thought about it, and as the clouds began to churn above them, Remus felt tiny raindrops began to patter down onto the tops of his shoulders.

“Look, I’m sorry for not telling you about my dad,” he called, voice raw on the wind. “I'd never told anyone. Not even Tomny. I hated thinking about it, and the thought of telling someone, it... I still can't. When I was a kid I sorta thought that if I pretended not to know, then he'd forget. And he'd j-just become my real dad anyway. Want me... But it doesn’t work like that. Even if I really was his kid, I don't think he'd ever have wanted me. Not with who I am... And not the way I wanted him to want me."

Sirius was still looking back at him, eyes dark like the storm clouds. Remus knew he was crying, that'd he'd made himself cry, but he hoped the rain disguised it.

"I'm sorry I never told you, Sirius. And I’m sorry for using it as a punishment when I did.”

At his words, Sirius almost began to flounder. He shifted his weight, chin buried down in the collar of his jacket as though he were trying to make himself disappear.

“Fuck,” he huffed finally. "I really liked you, you know. Then I went and bottled it, didn't I?"

"Yeah... me too."

Sirius dropped his chin again. "So yeah, I didn’t know about your dad.

But... *Fuck!* I'm sorry too. What I did... What I tried to do—" He scoffed and wiped his face; "I was *so* pissed off at you, and it's like I don't even remember why now! That's almost the worst part... But what I did, it was foul. You shouldn't forgive me for it."

"I do, though."

"McKinnon sure don't. You should've heard the way she shouted at me when you ran off. Thought she was likely to kill me right then and there—dump my body in the Thames. Evans along with her, though I confess she's probably been waiting since year seven. When James and I stole her swimming costume and ran it up the school's flag pole."

"In that case I'm with the girls. You'd deserve it."

"It was kinda cute. Had little polka dots and everything."

They both laughed, quietly, and wiped their faces as the rain started down harder. Silence almost lapsed again, until Remus couldn't take it anymore.

"Can we just agree to be sorry then? Nothing else, just... I can't hate you, Padfoot."

"I can't hate you either, Moons."

Good. "Friends again then?"

It felt stupid—how could they ever be friends again?—but if the choice was between having Sirius this much, and not having him at all, Remus would take *friends* every time.

Sirius nodded, and bent down to pick up Effie's oven mitts, now soaked from the rain. "So that stuff about your dad," he asked meekly; "Is it all true?"

"That I'm a bastard? Yeah, it's true."

"Well, I already knew that." Sirius cracked a wry grin—a small one—and it was like a flash of hope. "But you really… All this time?"

"Mhm."

"Then do you know who…"

"Yeah, I know who my real dad is."

“You’ve met him?”

“No, got a picture. Sheila gave it to me.”

“Sheila?”

He nodded. “She knew my mum. They all went to school together.”

“Holy. That mean your dad—he… wow.”

"Would you like to see?"

“Y-Yeah!" Sirius sputtered. "I mean, only if you want me to...”

In that moment, Remus couldn’t have wanted anything other than to fall onto Sirius and expel every last secret. *No more,* he silently promised, *I’m done keeping secrets from you.*

"Hold on, got it right here." Squinting through the rain, he began patting his pockets before straightening up. "Oh, forgot. Left it in my —shit!"

He bolted past Sirius, to where he'd left the Teisco and the tiny Fender amp sitting idly on the pavement. Both were sopping now, but the guitar had its case at least.

"Here!" Sirius called, appearing beside him to help. He grabbed the amp and together they scarpered through the front gate, all the way up the massive drive to where they finally found cover beneath the front porch. Soaked through and sighing, Sirius fell into the family porch swing and Remus automatically slumped down next to him. When he glanced sideways at Sirius, he could see his dark hair as it curled at the bottom around his ears, dripping tiny droplets of rain onto his cheeks and neck. Prompted by their close proximity, Remus felt his hand drift upwards, fingers nearly touching...

"Hope this thing still works," Sirius said, snapping Remus from his daze. He gestured to the sad little amp sitting next to them, and Remus nodded.

"Should probably test it before I plug the guitar in. Don't want to roast my fingers."

"Good idea." Sirius flashed him a winning grin, and Remus almost regretted not taking his hand. It’d become a habit when they were alone, he realised.

“What’s his name?” Sirius asked suddenly. “Your real dad, I mean.”

“Thaddeus.”

“Thaddeus? Are you for real? And I thought ‘Sirius’ was bad.”

“No one called him that anyway! Sheila said he told everyone to call him Tad.”

"Did he and your mum used to date then?"

"Dunno. Don't know anything else about him. Not where he was born, or what he did after school, or if he's... still alive."

"Shit. Haven't you tried asking Sheila?"

"Er... No. She mostly talks about my mum, and it's always a bit— y’know.”

"Weird."

"Yeah..."

"Well, I could ask her if you want. Then you could ask me and I'd only tell you the things you wanted to know. Remove the middle man, and all that. Or I suppose, it's *adding* a middle man... Anyway, I'd promise to never tell anyone else. I'd take it to my grave, if you asked me to."

Remus smiled shyly. "I'm grateful, but right now, I think I'm sorta alright not knowing. Figure it's better than being disappointed."

"Yeah, alright."

They shared a glance, so close their shoulders were pressed up against one another, and Remus watched as a single raindrop raced down the tip of Sirius' nose. He was still watching it when he felt a finger trace the back of his hand, and for a moment he almost let himself believe that maybe...

But then the front door flew open, and Remus knew he instantly that was in for it.

"Oh bollocks."

“REMUS JOHN LUPIN!” Lily roared, rushing out onto the front mat in her house slippers. "I'm going to *MURDER YOUUUUU!”*

* * *

And you, you can be mean,
And I, I'll drink all the time;
'Cause we're lovers, and that is a fact,
Yes we're lovers, and that is that...

Though nothing will keep us together,
We could steal time just for one day;
We can be heroes for ever and ever,
What d'you say?

They weren't miraculously back together, but the apology with Sirius had gone well enough. He could tell there were still plenty of things left to be said, but there was no time to be alone, and Remus knew from experience that privacy was hard to come during a Potter holiday. He considered asking Sirius to step out with him for a while; pop off to the shops before they closed or some other excuse, but he was busy—very busy, peeling enough potatoes to get an entire Irish village through the winter. After that he was to scrub every pot and pan that'd gone into their festive supper. And then he would salt the drive, and fold the washing, and dust the parlour, and kiss Lily's feet, probably. Perhaps finally then she would forgive him for being such a massive nob.

Remus was disappointed, but didn't object. He'd already traded the front porch for the back and was now bent over a tub of soapy water, a stack of dirty dishes half the size of himself beside him. He could handle a bit of humiliation, and if he was lucky, he'd finish his chores with enough time to join his friends in one final practice before the Pettigrews' legendary New Year's party was set to commence. It pleased him to hear that the Marauders were still set to make an appearance even after his decided *dis*-appearance. He'd taken enough from his friends, no reason they should avoid showing off their hard-earned talent.

As the rain continued to pour, Remus kept scrubbing. He'd just started on a pot big enough to cook a small child in when Mrs. Potter stuck her head out the door.

"Not too chilly out here, are you, Remus?"

"Oh, no. Water's still warm too."

She smiled and untucked a blanket from her arms, settling it down over his shoulders anyway. “Dinner's in an hour. And I’m glad to see your aunt helped you kick that cold.”

He glanced up, nearly losing his grip on the pot. “Sorry?”

“Your aunt? The one the boys said you’d gone to stay with?”

“Oh. *That* aunt.”

“Yes, now where is it she lives again?”

“Er… Ealing?”

“Ealing, is it? Funny, I think I remember James saying that it was Merton.”

“That’s my… other aunt.”

Mrs. Potter smiled and he knew he was caught, but all she did was shake her head lightly. “You should know that I rang Giles, and he is *very* disappointed in you.”

“Don’t worry, that’s just Giles for ‘I love you—see you at Easter'.”

She laughed heartily, but did not bother correcting him.

“It’s nice to have you back, *beta.* Come inside when you’re finished with those dishes, hm? I have some cakes that need frosting.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Giving him a gentle smile, she bent down and planted a kiss atop his head before stepping back into the house. With his insides now properly squirmy, Remus pulled the blanket tightly around himself and did not feel the cold at all.

“I don’t have to go on with you,” he insisted later as they all filed into Peter’s parlour, where their instruments were ready and waiting for them. “I wouldn’t be offended if you’re still too mad at me.”

James whipped around. “If you *don’t* go on with us, I’ll *let* Lily throttle you.”

“At least it’ll be a quiet death. She’s still not talking to me.”

“Honestly I’m not sure I want to be talking to you either.” James

pulled his guitar strap up over his head. Next to him, Sirius smacked one of Peter's cymbals with a thick smirk.

"Lay off, Potter, he's had enough punishment. He folded your sock drawer after all."

"I don't care. He still hasn't said where it was that he went!"

"He went to the East End, ya dolt. Go on—tell him, Moony."

Remus nodded at James, who did not look pleased to hear it.

"You couldn't have given us the address?" He demanded. "Called—anything?!"

"I'm sorry, Prongs."

"Yeah, yeah," James huffed. "At least you're safe. You are safe, right?"

"Yeah. Swears."

He didn't look like he believed him, but Peter was already dropping down behind his drum kit, sticks in hand.

"You can grill him later, James, for now let's just get on with practice. Mum said people'll start arriving soon."

So… they weren't exactly Led Zeppelin reborn. Two rough-hewn acoustic guitars, one on-offer electric bass with a shitty amp for company (at least it wasn't water-logged anymore) and a set of drums that had been barely broken-in didn't make for many grand concerts, but it was hardly about that anyway. Mrs. Pettigrew had granted them full rights to her vast front parlour to practice. It meant that come showtime, it would be as easy as throwing the doors open and allowing anyone who was nearby to have a listen. Even if they did end up sounding like a patchwork disaster, no one would care, not with the the party's open bottle service.

"Starting with an Elvis number will definitely go over well, 'cept my cousin Caroline is bound to cry, she's hardly stopped since the guy bought it—but mum still thinks we should do at least one Christmas song," Peter said, after they'd run through their planned set list for the dozenth time.

Sirius mimed retching. "No way. If they wanted carols they should've called the happy-clappy brigade—not Marauders."

“You mean you have no plans to release a Christmas album one day?” James asked. “You could call it ‘Black Christmas’.”

“Funny. But I still say no. Not in front of people.”

“It’s just our families,” Peter scoffed.

“Exactly. Your *family.”* He raised his eyebrows and Remus caught on.

“Oh—Simeon! He’s back now then?”

Peter immediately rolled his eyes. “It’s been five days and you lot are still acting like I’ve got Lou Reed hidden in the guest room.”

“Simeon’s way cooler than Lou Reed,” Sirius said, then; “Fuck Pete! That nearly took my eye out!” As Peter threw a drumstick at him.

“Stop fantasizing about my brother!”

“Fanta—? … C’mere, you cheeky shit!”

“Watch the drinks!” James wailed, making a dive for the tea tray

As the pair scuffled and James played referee, Remus slouched onto the arm of the sofa, fiddling with the Teisco’s tuning. He didn’t remember much from their summer party, but the last time he’d seen Simeon they’d both had their trousers around their ankles. He wondered if it wasn’t too late to back out, but then the sound of the front door opening echoed from out in the hall, along with a familiar holler;

“Muuum! We’re back! Got those dinner rolls you wanted!”

“There you go—that’s just brilliant! You’ve bloody conjured him!” Peter moaned, brandishing his drum stool like a shield to keep Sirius away.

There was a gentle knock on the parlour’s glass doors and Simeon stuck his head inside. He looked the same—stunning baby blue eyes and dimples on each cheek, which he used to grin down at the sight laid out before him; four stupid boys and their instruments amongst a sea of festive tinsel.

“I don’t hear very much practising going on, lads. Thought I told you this morning that I expected a full rockfest when I returned?”

“Maybe stop bothering us and we’d actually get some work done!”

Peter snapped.

Simeon leaned casually on the door handle, still glancing around musingly. It was obvious he only meant to antagonize Peter, but he did a double-take when he spotted Remus and came into the room further. Only slightly spooked, Remus stood up from the sofa arm and took a quick step back.

“Oh hey, *you,"* Simeon grinned. "Word on the street was that you were gonna be a no-show. What, stop by just to see me?”

Remus opened his mouth but no sound came out. Not that it mattered. Simeon had already plunged on, patting Remus on the shoulder fondly as he peeled out of his winter coat and revealed the handsome Aran jumper and dark brown trousers underneath.

"You look like you're having fun at least. Is this what rockstars are wearing these days?" He asked, gesturing to James' brown cardigan, Sirius' dark turtleneck.

“Says you," Sirius replied. "Nice jumper, Oxbridge boy."

Simeon smirked at him, holding Sirius' gaze for a long while. He looked away first, which was to be expected—Sirius never broke eye contact first—and looked Remus up and down.

“Christ, I think you’ve bloody grown again, Lupin.” He nodded to James. “And here I was thinking you’d end up being the tallest mate.”

“There’s no competing with this one, he’s like a weed,” James replied; “Grows only two ways—up and stubborn.”

Broken from his trance, Remus shot his friend a light glare before looking back at Simeon. “Hey, Sim—er… How’s school?”

Simeon shrugged. “It’s Oxford, which is code for lots of crusty old geezers and entire lecture halls full of sods who think they’re the smartest person in the room. Which is impossible, of course.”

“Why, ‘cause you’re already the smartest?”

“And the funniest.” Simeon winked and Remus’ stomach did flips.

A throw pillow hit the parlour door next to Simeon’s head and Peter flopped down onto his stool. “Sim—goooooo! We’re busy!”

“You can get your knickers out of a twist, Petey, I only wanted to say

hello. Speaking of which—Phae, come here and meet the gang."

Another face peeked around the doorway, joined quickly by the petite body of a pretty girl with honey-brown hair and huge silver hoops in her ears. "Hello," she smiled. "Are you boys still at it then?"

"Remus—this is Phaedra, my girlfriend," Simeon said.

Remus almost started. *Girlfriend? Like, for real?!*

"Pleased to meet you," Phaedra said, waving sweetly. "You're one of Peter's friends then?"

Remus didn't even get the chance to answer; not that he could've. Instead Peter thumped his bass drum several times, glaring at them both.

"SIM—*OUT!"*

"Alright, we're going," Simeon blagged, snaking an arm across his girlfriend's shoulders and backing her out of the room. "This concert of yours better be good!"

He shut the parlour door before Peter could resort to more drumstick tossing and James turned to smirk at him. "If you're worried we're going to replace you with Sim or something you can relax, Pete."

"I'm not worried—"

" 'Cause I already asked, and Simeon can't play the drums."

"I hate you."

This time it was James' turn to scuffle. He grabbed Peter in a friendly headlock and while he was avoiding taking a drumstick to the eye, Sirius crossed the room and flicked a guitar pick at Remus' cheek.

"You're *mooning,* Moony."

"I am not," he grumbled, flicking his own pick at him. "Sod off."

"I never noticed—have you always drooled this much over Sim?"

"I wasn't *drooling."*

"Sure you were. Could've solved the drought in Africa on your own."

“Well, what about you? One step away from openly declaring your love for the cheeky git, you were. 'Nice jumper'. I mean, really."

"I was clearly teasing."

"Only 'cause you like him so much. You wish he'd tease you back."

“Fuck off, Moony.”

“Make me.”

Sirius’ eyes flashed and Remus clamped his mouth shut, looking away quickly. Luckily Sirius didn’t seem much interested in purposeful arguing or accidental flirting; he moved past him, mumbling something about the toilet, and Remus was left to slump back against the sofa.

Less than an hour or so later, people had begun arriving in droves. They brought with them spare Christmas presents and cling-wrapped dishes that left the dining room piled high with all sorts of sweet and savoury treats. Remus had missed the Potters' infamous Christmas party, which meant that everywhere he turned there was someone new to be introduced to. The Pettigrews were a small family when compared to the Potter clan, but they had friends all over. Remus spent twenty minutes just listening to some guy done on about the likelihood of the labour party taking back majority government before realising that it was local MP. He made a swift enough exit, only to be swept up into another conversation over the extended construction on the M25, and the Underground Fleet line, *and* the new NatWest Tower. It struck Remus how all adults seemed to do was complain, but despite the awkwardness and the overwhelming amount of people, he was glad to be back with his friends.

They escaped up to Lottie's childhood bedroom eventually, where Peter broke out a round of Chartbuster. It was mostly just an excuse to sit around and chug the bottle of vodka Lottie had smuggled upstairs, but Remus was winning so he had very few complaints.

“Kids, it’s time to come down and greet the rest of our guests!” Mrs. Pettigrew called, practically wailing on Lottie’s bedroom door to get them to come out.

“We’ll be down in a second, Mum!” Lottie hollered back, before downing her share of the booze and passing it along to James.

“I still don't know how you thought this would be a good idea,” Lily

moaned, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. Equally as unsettled, James lowered the bottle from his lips and heaved slightly.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“If you so much as drool on my new rug I’ll boil you in great aunt Frida’s hot cider,” Lottie threatened. She tossed the empty bottle into the bin before checking the hallway—no mother—and began to herd them all out of her bedroom one by one. Remus waited obediently in the hall, but nearly fell over when the door he'd been leaning against opened behind him.

“I hope you at least divided the swill fairly,” Simeon said, coming out to leer at them. His collar was misbuttoned, and Remus realised why when Phaedra emerged, dabbing at her smudged lipstick and gently combing through her fingers through her hair.

“Phae and I popped off to the off-license earlier, so if you’re good I've got some rum with your names on it," Simeon offered. Immediately Peter pushed forward, waving a finger at him.

“We don’t—” He cut himself off with a hiccup; “We don’t need *you* to get alcohol for us anymore. Sirius’s eighteen now!”

“Which means I’m mature enough not to turn down free booze when it’s offered!” Sirius declared promptly.

“What’s that about free booze?” One of Peter’s uncles slurred, appearing out of the upstairs bathroom and adding to the already crowded hallway. As Sirius made a humble excuse and Simeon began ushering them down the stairs for a hasty exit, Remus hung back in the bedroom with Lily, who’d stopped to watch Lottie reapply her lipstick in her vanity mirror.

“I see Peter’s still running with his ‘anti-Simeon’ dogma,” Lily sighed.

“Ugh, it’s been awful, he never stops whinging.”

“What’s with that by the way?” Remus asked. “It’s never been this bad.”

“Mhm, well—” Lottie smacked her lips together; “You know how Petey's always been a bit shite at getting what he wants? Well, it was Sim who convinced our parents to get him that silly drum kit in the first place, and I guess Petey’s never quite gotten over it. Couldn't tell you why, it’s not like Sim lords it over him. If anything you’d think

he'd be grateful. Mum and Dad never would've gone for it had Sim not been the one to convince them. Anyway, looks like it's happening again with this gap year rubbish. Petey brought it up over dinner the other night and Daddy blew a gasket."

"You mean they're not gonna go for it?" Remus winced.

"No, they will. But only because Sim told them about this friend of his who took a year off and now runs his family's entire leather-making business up in Birmingham. They ate it up. You should've seen Petey's face."

"Was he not pleased?" Lily asked.

"Not even close. He went red from top to bottom, but couldn't very well say anything without upsetting our Dad again. Now I guess he's right pissed off. Won't stop taking shots at Sim—keeps calling him hen-pecked by Phaedra. The hippocrite. I quite like the girl, myself. She's chill. And it's not like Petey's anything but whipped for Moira anyway."

"That's too bad."

"Eh, he'll get over it." Finished with the mirror, Lottie turned back to Lily and snapped her fingers. "Lils, c'mere and let me fix your eyeliner."

"You already spent hours on it," Lily moaned dramatically, letting Lottie drag her over anyway.

"Want me to do you too, Remus?" She asked after.

"Oh, no—"

"You should, Remus!" Lily preened. "For your show! It's a holiday anyway—no one'll care. It might even impress Sirius."

"Why would I want to impress Sirius?"

Without answering, both girls grabbed him by the wrist and tugged him over, forcing him down onto the vanity stool while Lottie raised her eyeliner pen, which was a regrettable electric blue colour.

"Ow—fuck, Lot! You sure you haven't had too much to drink? You know you're not supposed to operate heavy machinery while under the influence…"

“It’s an *eyeliner pen,* you twee idiot. Now quit faffing around and hold still!”

Sirius appeared in the bedroom doorway. “Moony! Something's wrong with your amp. It keeps buzzing and—oh! Lot, be a doll and do me next!”

Finished being painted, Remus stood up and quickly switched places with Sirius, blinking excessively as his eyes watered. He reached for them, but Lily appeared at his side and batted his hands away.

“Don’t. It looks good and you’ll only ruin it."

"I suppose I'll just blink through the pain then."

"Good. Because I think ‘Mediterranean Breeze’ might just be your colour.”

He resisted the urge to rub the makeup away and turned to squint at her. “Glad to see you’re talking to me again. I missed the only other sound voice of reason around here.”

“It’s a holiday,” Lily reasoned. “And I missed you too. Even if you are an absolute spanner. I should be giving you the royal silence treatment, shouldn’t I?”

“You could always start now. At least that way I wouldn’t have to hear you rag on me for not doing my winter homework.”

Lily gasped playfully, and snatched up one of the throw pillows from Lottie’s bed to smack him with it. Remus laughed, pleased that she had forgiven him, despite the fact that he most certainly didn’t deserve it.

“We were so worried,” she said afterwards, voice soft and reluctant. “Especially Sirius.”

Remus glanced over at the boy in question. He was sitting obediently on Lottie’s plush pink stool, smiling with his eyes closed. His hair had finally grown back some, and was now just curling around the ridges of his jaw. And his mouth… *Christ.* Devastatingly handsome, Sirius was. There was no other way to describe it. One look and you were just done for.

“We apologised, sort of,” he said to Lily. “We’re… friends again.”

She smiled, entirely relieved, but Remus found no comfort in it. He didn't want to be friends with Sirius—or even bandmates. He wanted to be his sky.

"And—*voila!* All finished," Lottie declared, stepping back so that Sirius could pop up from the stool and admire her handiwork.

"Looks great, Lot! We should get Potter and Pete up here too—paint up the entire band."

"In that case, sit down. I'm adding blusher."

"And that's my cue," Remus said, promptly backing out of the room.

Really, he should've accepted the blusher. Not five minutes after arriving downstairs, Remus found himself accosted by several aunties, all of them chittering away with a glass of sherry in their hand. One even tried to pinch his cheek, but he was tall enough to swerve her hand and pass it off as a neck cramp.

"You know, I have a daughter about your age."

"Oh Doris, don't tease the poor boy!"

"I'm not! I only asked if he was on the market."

"Do ignore her, Remus, she's already had far too much to drink."

"Don't belittle me, Gladys, you're just as bad. But what was I saying, Remus? Oh yes—Phillipa. She attends St. Margaret's Ladies' College in Heathrow. Darling thing—loves horses. She was awarded first in Dressage at her last competition. Oh, I know—the two of you should meet! I could arrange the whole thing!"

Remus glanced across the salon, desperate for an escape. He could see Phaedra talking to Mrs. Pettigrew, but no Simeon. Then a flash of dark hair as Sirius descended the main staircase and slipped into the parlour.

Doris leaned in. "What is it you said your father did again?"

"Dunno, never met the guy. If you'll excuse me."

Remus turned and fled the circle of women, squeezing through the crowd of bodies until he finally reached the glass doors and yanked them open. Inside the parlour, some of the noise and clamour was drowned out and he found Sirius next to Peter's drum kit, fiddling

with the cheap microphone Simeon had brought out from the garage.

“New rule—when we start throwing our own parties, no one over twenty-five’s allowed past the front door."

“What happens when we pass twenty-five?” Sirius asked casually.

“We start keeping a guest list.”

Sirius popped up from his squat, swinging the microphone around on its cord. When he walked he sauntered, and when he smiled he bit his lip, the corners of his mouth curled upwards cheekily. It was unbearable.

“So? How’d Lottie do?”

Skipping forward, he closed his eyes so Remus could see the fierce electric blue that was now rimming his lashes. A bit had smudged at the outer corners, but the makeup suited him—looked like a night already lived.

“You look good,” Remus said, truthfully. “You always look good.”

Sirius gave him a long look and swung the microphone around once more before catching it out of the air. “Well… you don’t look so bad yourself, rockstar.”

Fuck.

“You can’t do that.”

“Do what?”

Remus swallowed. “You know what.”

Before Sirius could offer another rebuttal, James and Peter appeared through the doors, both sporting eyeliner of their own and big grins.

“So, lads?” James started; “Shall we get this show on the road?”

While they were busy doing their final checks, fingers buzzing from nervousness, Lottie came downstairs to join them along her newest beau, the infamous Roger. The investment firm high-flyer came dressed up in a full suit, which would’ve been fine had it not made him look forty. Lottie had already sworn up and down that he wasn’t a day over twenty-seven, but Remus wasn’t entirely sure he believed her. At least he wasn’t balding, and Lottie seemed happy enough. She

was showing off her new diamond bracelet to anyone who cared enough to ask—a Christmas gift from the man on her arm.

“So… where did the two of you meet again?” Sirius asked sceptically.

“Roger was visiting daddy’s office and I just happened to be bringing his lunch,” Lottie recited. “We reconnected when all of us came back for holiday. It was fate.”

“She’s hard to say no to,” Roger surmised.

“I see. Does that mean you’ve already rung Clyde and let him know the good news, Lot?”

“Sirius—*shut your mouth.”*

Sirius immediately held up both hands in surrender, but Roger remained unfazed. “So why ‘Marauders’?” He asked.

“It’s a concept,” James said, busy pouring them all a final shot of whisky for good luck.

“A concept of what?”

“Er… don’t worry about it.”

The parlour door flew open and Lily stuck her head in. “Are you guys ready? Everyone’s waiting.”

James waved her over and all of them, including Lottie and Roger, raised their glasses. “To good times—” He glanced pointedly at Remus; “and to better friends.”

“To all of you tossers!” Lily cried.

“And to rock and roll!” Sirius finished, as they all knocked their rims together and downed the whisky. *“WHOO!”* Sirius gasped. “Oh yeah, showtime, baby.”

As they hid the leftover booze bottles behind the sofa and took up their instruments, the girls opened the parlour doors and eager party-goers flooded into the room. Family, friends, colleagues, and coworkers—all of them were interested. It was Halloween two-fold, and Remus just hoped they could play loud enough to be heard over the chatter.

“Welcome and happy New Year!” Sirius called, playing at being

pragmatic. “We’re gonna be your house band for the night. You have a one, Jannet Pettigrew, to thank for that—which means that any and all complaints can be directed to her immediately following the show!”

Everyone laughed, and Remus couldn’t tear his eyes away. Sirius was such a natural with people and crowds; he spun about with confidence oozing from every pore. Remus would’ve been a wreck were he in his shoes, but Sirius was in his element. *Eyes on me,* it seemed to say; *Don’t you dare look away. I’m here. I’m here.*

“We do take requests,” Sirius mused; “Provided said request comes with a tenner—nah, only joking. Though if you see a hat going ‘round I hear it’s poor taste at these things to keep your wallets in your pockets.” More laughter. “Listen to me ramble—you came for a show! Right—*right?”*

More cheering, this time with hearty laughter and accompanying applause, and Sirius grinned.

“Well, alright then. That’s James, Remus, and Pete, and I’m Sirius. And this… is ‘Jailhouse Rock’.”

* * *

I, I wish you could swim,
Like the dolphins, like dolphins can swim;
Though nothing, nothing will keep us together,
We can beat them, for ever and ever,
Oh we can be Heroes, just for one day...

A rather sozzled crowd of middle-aged aunties and a few busted strings later, they’d given two encores and everyone was left smiling ear to ear. It was a rush, Remus could still feel the ring of Elvis in his ears. This was what it was to really love music—no matter how imperfect the performance, they’d just kept playing. And the entire time, he couldn’t take his eyes off Sirius.

“Weren’t they just wonderful?” Mrs. Pettigrew declared, borrowing the microphone to shout at the crowd; “Yes! Well you all know what time it is—*half-hour until midnight!”*

As the party began to disperse again, Lily shot forward and threw her

arms around James' neck. “That was so fun! You were amazing—even better than last time!"

“It was, wasn't it?” Sirius concurred, hugging them both.

“But we got all muddled up in the middle,” Peter said irritably. “I thought we agreed ‘Paperback Writer’ and *then* ‘Metal Guru’?”

“Who cares,” Remus said happily, “we got through it.”

“It was brilliant,” Lily said again, kissing James several times on the cheek and mouth, leaving him a smiling mess.

“Good show, boys,” Mr. Potter called, as he and wife approached. “Your dedication has clearly paid off. Though I did think it was all over after James snapped that string on his finger.”

“That shit hurt for reals, dad,” James said.

"No swearing around your mother," Mr. Potter warned, before leaning in. "Save that for the after-party."

"Monty!" Mrs. Potter sighed, before brushing a hand across the back of Sirius' head fondly. “You boys really were wonderful. It’s so good to see you all together again.”

"Feels good," Sirius replied, looking straight at Remus.

He’d thought it before, but Mrs. Potter was never subtle, Sirius even less so. Excusing himself quietly, Remus returned to the kitchen, desperate for a glass of water. He had to accept several rounds of praise before he got it but luckily Sirius had followed and they were able to seclude themselves on a corner bench, where the chatter and radio music were less noisy.

"So how was your Christmas anyway?" Sirius asked. He’d somehow ended up with a glass of sherry and several lipstick marks on his cheeks, both of which had to be courtesy of some aunty.

"It was alright. Was mostly just Tomny and I."

"Still on the outs with the rest of your friends?"

"That's over with now. Can't go back."

"That sucks."

"Mm."

Sirius began twiddling his thumbs. "So are you gonna tell me what happened with Tomny or what?"

"Nothing happened. I just went to see him."

"And what... played jacks all day?"

Remus gut twisted painfully. "Why don't you just ask what you really want to ask. We've been up and down all day and I'm tired of trying to keep up."

"Don't talk to me like that. I'm not Jillian Stewart. I was your boyfriend."

"Was?"

Sirius looked away, wiping beneath his eyes. "Bloody makeup... So what do you think of Roger?"

"Ha. Classic Sirius..."

"What was that?"

"I don't think anything of Roger."

"No? You don't think he's too old?"

"I guess, but Lottie likes him."

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. "I think he's gay."

"Don't be so horrible."

"I'm not! We shook hands just now, and he's got skin softer than a baby's bottom. Then he asked me what shampoo I use."

"That doesn't mean that he's—*that he's into guys!"*

Sirius smirked bitterly. "Well, I can actually see Lottie marrying a bender. Kind of fits, right? They can share outfits."

"How is it you find it so easy to slander your own sexuality?"

"Everyone else does it, why should I hold back just because I'm a poofter?"

Remus pressed his fingers into his eyes. “You’re impossible. And a nasty drunk.”

“Maybe.” Sirius paused to sip his drink. “But I've been thinking, if we’re talking statistics, then there’s bound be a few more of us hanging around school. Can’t just be me, McKinnon, and… you. I mean, there’s obviously Barty but he might as well be a sea sponge for all the tits and ass he’s getting.”

“You’re saying Barty’s gay now too?”

“He’s right obsessed with you, ain't he? Not that I blame him.” Sirius cast him a sideways glance before polishing off the sherry. “So, who’s your bet? I'm thinking Freddie Thomas—he’s on the football team with James. That’d be a win, right? At least he’s somewhat fit. And that Darcy Williams girl—Mary said once that she was always staring at other girls in the changing room.”

“This is a sad game. And I don't want to play.”

“Why? Because *we’re* sad? Pitiable? In that case I’m gonna need vodka —you want one?”

“No, think I’m gonna step out for a smoke actually.”

“Fine. See you later then.”

Sirius stood up from the bench and drifted off through the crowd, not looking back. It was almost startling how quickly they could go from being on top of the world to fighting. It worried Remus, but he was drunk too and really did need a cigarette.

Shrugging on his jacket, Remus stepped out onto the back porch and braced himself against the cold. It'd stopped pouring sometime in the early evening, but the cold kept everything wet and icy. He moved away from the other men standing in a circle and puffing on their rich cigars and ended up around the side of the grand house, smoking alone in the dark. A part of him was angry, but he wanted so badly to move past it. He wanted to know if Sirius had told James he were gay like he’d said he would. He wanted to know if there was a chance at mending things at all. And god, did he want to put Sirius Black’s handsome face through a window.

“I already told you—you *can’t* be here.”

Remus snapped his head around. He was alone, save for the distant

party chatter drifting out from some open window, but the voice had been closer. It cut through the darkness in a harsh whisper, followed by another, this one louder.

“You promised you’d come and see me. You said we could talk!”

“We broke up! What is there to talk about?”

Too curious for his own good, Remus crept around the corner and found himself at the top of the Pettigrews’ driveway. He had to be careful to avoid slipping on the icy pavement, but when he peered around the side of Mr. Pettigrew's Oldsmobile, he spotted the pair arguing and he nearly did a double-take. It was Simeon, standing next to a stranger amongst the sea of parked vehicles. They were squared up to to one another like brick walls, though all Remus could make out of the other guy was a head of dark hair and a large nose that might’ve been handsome.

“I didn’t want to break up,” the stranger said.

"That's funny considering you *dumped* me," Simeon shot back.

"It was a misunderstanding. You know how much pressure my dad was putting on. I just needed some time."

"Yeah, well maybe I needed time too."

Suddenly, Remus couldn't breathe. *Just needed some time,* hadn't he said near-on the exact same words to Sirius?

"You can't just decide it's over like that!" The stranger keened. "I deserve another shot!"

“Who says?" Simeon snapped. “Christ—we weren’t bloody married! You're the one who called it quits. What you think I would do, just wait around until you got over yourself?”

“I thought you'd wait at least a few weeks at least! Guy's already told me you've found someone else."

"Maybe I have! Butt out!"

"Who is it? It better not be that slag Lorelei. You know she's just using you.”

“I'm not seeing Lorelei!"

"Who then? Angus? If it's him I'll pound his face into the—"

"It's none of your business who I date, Hugh! We're not together anymore!"

Remus covered his mouth. The guy was Hugh then, the one he'd caught Simeon with last summer. Holy shit.

"I love you," Hugh said. "And I know you love me too."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. I can tell."

"So you're a mind reader now too?" Simeon laughed incredulously. "You need to go now, Hughie. Go find your family, it's fucking New Year's. Don't make me call Guy and tell him what this is all about."

Hugh recoiled a bit. "Fuck you. You're a real cunt, Sim."

"How would you know? You've never even seen one up close."

The quip was snide enough that Remus expected Hugh to feed Simeon a bunch of fives for it, but rather than lashing out, he only grabbed hold of the front of Simeon's jacket and pulled them together in a rough kiss. They tussled a bit, struggling against each other like reluctant lovers, until Simeon ultimately yanked back, bringing his fist up and delivering a blow on his ex-boyfriend's cheekbone that made even Remus wince.

Hugh fell backwards, cursing as he held his cheek. *"Fuck!* … You fucking hit me!"

"Of course I hit you—my family's here, you insensitive fuck."

"Fuck your family! And fuck you, Simeon!"

"Go! Get out of here before I call the cops!"

It was obvious Hugh would've liked to prolong the argument, but suddenly a loud crash came from inside—followed by laughter. The party noise was loud enough to spook all three of them, even Remus behind his car, and afterwards a defeated-looking Hugh began to slowly back down the drive. Remus held his breath until he'd gone, when Simeon's shoulders finally slumped in relief. Too stunned by what he'd just witnessed, he stared creeping backwards the way he'd come, only to knock his boot into a decorative planter and send it

crashing onto the pavement.

Immediately, Simeon spun around.

“WHO’S THERE?!”

Utterly caught, Remus reluctantly emerged from the dark. He threw up an awkward hand and Simeon squinted at him for a moment, before relaxing.

“Oh, Lupin, it’s only you... Did you hear all that then?”

“Er, yeah. Sorry. Didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

Simeon tucked his hands beneath his armpits, looking irritated. “You really expect me to believe that?”

“… No." He winced. "But before you try and clobber me, just should know I’m trained in the ancient art of kung fu. Plus, I'm a fast runner.”

Simeon sighed, dropping his arms. “You always were the funny one.”

Remus shrugged haplessly, and considered his now-cold cigarette.

“Want one?”

“Might as well.”

He met him halfway down the drive and together they found a spot along the garden wall, where the stones were just high enough to sit comfortably.

“You were good tonight,” Simeon told him. “All of you. Could’ve convinced me that you were a real band.”

“We are a real band,” Remus replied indignantly. “Even have a few of our own songs now too.”

“My apologies,” Simeon said, giving him a little bow. “Why didn’t you play any of them, then?”

“We sort of decided that New Year’s with the families wasn’t the best time to break out our personal flavour of teenage angst.”

“That’s a shame. You’ll have to show me next time.”

"Right, sure." As they sat, Remus puffed nervously on his cig. He

almost felt guilty for asking, but he had to know. “So… who was that you were talking to?”

“Knew you were listening, little shit."

"Er..." He laughed nervously, and Simeon shouldered him.

"That's just Hugh."

"He an ex?"

"That's right. Guess he came looking for me. He's lucky I found him before my dad did. Dunno what he'd do if he found a drunk, sobbing queer on his doorstep with have the neighbourhood inside.”

Remus picked at a hangnail nervously. "Doesn't sound like it ended well between you two."

“Don’t worry about it,” Simeon dismissed. “That's old hat. I warned him not to show up tonight, but people do stupid things when they’re pissed and lonely. I’m just grateful he didn’t cause a bigger scene.”

“And Phaedra…? Does she know?”

“About Hugh? Oh yeah, she knows.”

“Oh. So she’s your beard then?”

“My what?”

Remus shut his mouth very quickly. “It's nothing. Ignore me.”

Simeon gave him a measuring look. Like a cross between amusement and judgement. “I hear you’ve been having troubles of your own lately. Your friends are worried. If you’d like, we can talk about it.”

“I don’t—”

“Or we could just smoke,” he shrugged. “Though I find that talking tends to keep you better distracted from the cold. And it sure is—*brrr*—cold out tonight.”

Remus evaluated his options. Marlene was home with her family, and he’d only just said goodbye to Tomny. As far as Queer Street went, he was low on options. Might as well knock on Simeon’s door.

“Fine. Me and this… person—”

“You can say Sirius.”

He whipped his head up. “I—Did he tell you?”

“No, but I’m not blind. You two are like a couple of romping puppies. Reminds me of myself a bit. It's almost cute."

“Funnily enough, this isn’t making me feel any better.”

Looking amused, Simeon took a drag. “Just come out with it, Lupin, no one else is around. You'll feel better, trust me.”

“Do you feel better after talking to Hugh?"

"Blimey, are you always this defensive?"

Remus frowned. "None of your business."

It made Simeon laugh at least.

"You two break up then?"

"Yes."

"And you still feel like shit over it?"

"Yes..."

“Because you still like him?”

“No—yes! God, it’s fucking mental.”

“What’s so mental about it?”

What wasn’t *mental about it?* Remus held a hand to his forehead, about ready to climb the terrace and pitch himself from the Pettigrews' roof.

“I don't think either of us wanted to break up… Not really,” he grumbled. “We just kept messing stuff up. Maybe we’re just too different. Sirius is a somebody—meant to be surrounded by other somebodies. I’m fine as a nobody—I *like* nobodies.”

“You’re gonna have to unpack that one a bit for me.”

Remus swallowed, rubbing his eyes to stifled the pricking feeling of incoming tears. He would not cry.

“It's Sirius. He’s just so sure of everything.”

“No one’s sure of everything.”

“He is! He wanted to tell all of our friends, and I didn’t. His parents know and I'd rather drown myself in the Thames than say so. Not that he's any better off. And he’s got this brother—”

“Regulus, right? Cute kid. Never smiled much.”

“Tell me about it.” Remus suppressed a groan. “I’m not gay, but I am *something,* and I thought it would be enough, but now I’m thinking it wasn’t. Not for him. That he… fuck, he thinks I’m lying.”

“Lying about…?”

“Being—” *Fuck;* “bisexual…”

“Oh! So you’re actually AC/DC? Fucking knew it.”

“What?” Remus gaped. “How would you know?”

“Duh. I called it.”

“When?!”

Simeon took a moment to consider. “Mm… Two years ago, maybe? Whenever I was at school. You just sorta… seemed like it.”

Remus began to scoff ironically, but on the inhale, sucked a large dose of smoke straight into his lungs. He doubled over, coughing while Simeon chuckled and pat him on the back.

“Oh, Lupin! Don’t tell me you’ve only just realising it yourself?”

Still wheezing, Remus shot upright. “Well, it certainly hasn’t been two years!”

“You gotta get out more, mate," Simeon laughed. "Talk to people—*real* people. Things’ll get better once you’re out of school, I think.”

“Yeah, maybe…"

“So how’d you figure it out then? Did Sirius tell you? Or did you meet someone else? Was it over holiday? That's the best time to do it. Happened to me in the Canary Islands. I was fourteen."

"Fourteen?"

"Like I said, mate, you've gotta get out more. Now what was it that tipped you off? A girlfriend want to get a bit freaky?"

"I wish," Remus grumbled. "It was a... er—ngh..."

“What’s that?”

"I read it in a... *mmnghdictionary..."*

"A what?"

"A DICTIONARY!"

“Bloody hell!” Simeon cackled. “Fuck, you really crack me up, Lupin. A dictionary? Well, suppose there are worse ways. I knew the first time I’d ever gotten into bed with a guy. Name was Ike—so fucking fit. I’m telling you, like full on—”

“Wait,” Remus interrupted; “So that would mean that you’re…?”

“Bisexual, yeah. Are we having trouble keeping up, pet?”

He shook his head staunchly and thoughtlessly went to pull a drag on his cigarette, only to find that it'd gone cold. Fiddling for his lighter, Remus cleared his throat. What a revelation tonight was turning out to be.

“So Phaedra’s really your...?”

“She ain’t a ‘beard’, mate,” Simeon smirked. “Guys are great fun, don’t get me wrong, but women are goddesses, right? They’re meant to be worshipped. Revered and adored. I love women, and most days, I'm but a humble pilgrim at the foot of their shrine.”

“Oh, Mary would *love* you.”

“Most women do.” He winked again—that infernal wink.

Remus got the cigarette going again and sat there on the garden wall, feeling present and withdrawn all at once. Would Sirius have been so reluctant to believe he were actually bisexual had he known about Sim? Probably not. The verdict made him angry all over again. *Why me? Why don’t you ever believe me?*

“You look a little steamed there, Lupin,” Simeon said. “I hope I haven’t unravelled anything. It’s okay to be nervous about this stuff, you know.”

“No, s'just… quite a bit to process.”

“You said you and Sirius broke up, right? Was it because you still like girls?”

“It was lots of things, but yeah I think that too.” He bit his lip. “How did you really know... that you could like both?”

Simeon looked up, considering the dark sky. “Seemed the most obvious thing. I like people—like knowing 'em. Don’t really much care what's between their legs.”

Remus nodded, then; “My first girlfriend turned out to be a lesbian.”

“Happens to the best of us,” Simeon sighed, setting a hand on his shoulder. He began rubbing small circles with his thumb and Remus let him, not really thinking anything of it. It was cold and he was depressed and who knew where Sirius had gone off to.

"Have you ever regretted it? Being bisexual?"

"No," Simeon said quietly. "It's opened up my world. There are so many beautiful people out there, Remus."

Remus supposed that had to be true. He took another drag, and while he did Simeon’s hand moved toward the back of his neck, squeezing tenderly. Sometime within the last few minutes he’d slid closer along the stone wall, and by the time his fingers were tracing the edge of his jaw Remus had already caught on.

"Uh, Sim? What are you..."

"Has it only ever been Black then?"

Simeon smiled at him, and something about the gentle motion of his hand had Remus ready to pour his guts.

"One other," he murmured, "but it was an accident."

"That's too bad. I know it can be hard to meet people at school. You're so isolated up there."

With his other hand, Simeon grabbed Remus by the thigh and began tracing tiny patterns with his thumb and forefinger. It was enough to give Remus goosebumps.

"Simeon, I'm not sure..."

"There's no shame in it Remus. Think of it as testing the waters. That way you could see if you really like both. I don't mind."

Simeon kept rubbing his thumb in circles beneath the edge of his jaw. Unable to help it, Remus looked him top to bottom. He didn't need to *see* anything, Simeon was certainly... but *oh god.*

“I thought you had a girlfriend?”

“Phaedra don’t mind either," Simeon smiled. "She’s probably upstairs snogging one of Potter’s cousins right now. It’s a thing. Casual. You'll see for yourself when you get to university.”

A thing?!

Simeon licked his lips, leaning in, and for a split second Remus considered just letting it happen. *Who wouldn’t want to?*

But then…

“I’m sorry.” He pressed a steady hand to the middle of Simeon’s chest, keeping them apart. “But I can’t.”

A beat passed between them, before Simeon sat back, withdrawing his hand. “ ‘Course,” he said, “should’ve realised.”

“It’s not because you’re a guy or anything.”

“Mm. I’m just the wrong guy."

"I..."

" 'Cause it's him, isn't it?”

It felt pathetic, even naive, but there was no helping it.

“It’ll always be him, I think.”

Simeon’s smile widened. “Well, I'm at least happy to be of service then. I'd be careful if I were you though, Lupin. It's dangerous to put that sort of thing out into the universe. You never know if it'll come true.”

Maybe Simeon was right, but no matter how messy things got, Remus couldn’t picture ever a world where he was never not completely gone for Sirius Black.

Flicking away his cigarette stub, Simeon moved his hand down to Remus' knee and gave it a comforting pat. Not tender, just friendly. Mate to mate. Remus relaxed a bit, trying to ignore the blush burning in his ears. He still couldn't quite believe it. *Me? Simeon Pettigrew wanted to kiss ME?!*

"Er—thanks, Sim. For... whatever that was. I think I feel better now."

"Good. And just know, that anytime you need a chat, call me. Seriously—Phaedra don't mind."

He wiggled his eyebrows and Remus snorted just as a little clatter echoed from up the drive. They both turned in time to catch Sirius staring back at them, obviously shocked. He stopped to pick up the beer bottle he'd dropped, clearing his throat stiffly.

"Sorry! Didn't mean to intrude."

Simeon withdrew his hand very quickly, and Remus shot to his feet, immediately alarmed and panicked.

"Sirius, don't go! It's not what you think, really!"

Sirius held up a hand in dismissal and turned to make his escape, but before he could, Remus leapt forward and grabbed him by the arm. "Please!"

"No, Moony, I—"

"Don't go!"

"Remus, please!"

It felt like they were falling in the wrong directions. Sirius had misunderstood, he was going to leave and things were going to be messy forever! They'd both get trapped in their own heads, thinking endlessly about all of the what if's. What if he'd forced him to stay? What if they'd never fought at all? What if he just kissed him?

What if, what if, what if—Remus was tired of it. So he didn't think—he jumped. Whipping Sirius back around, he simply cupped him around the neck, drew their bodies together—

And kissed him.

It was there instantly. The softness and the restlessness and the *rightness.* Everything was just right with Sirius. Nothing made any

sense without him. He could taste the shared tobacco on their tongues, the booze, the music. At first Sirius lagged behind like he was waiting for it to be over, but that was not Sirius. Sirius blazed ahead in all things, and simply expected Remus to keep up. He used his teeth just about much as his tongue—he was bold and brash—hungry and yet always soft. And when Sirius opened his mouth to him to do just that, Remus could've wept.

When they broke apart, Sirius looked looked first at him—mouth still parted in fresh kiss—and then snapped his gaze to Simeon, as though just remembering he were there at all. Remus also spun around, and there he found Simeon waiting for them, pushing off of the garden wall while adjusting the collar on his jacket.

"Oh, don't mind me," he said cheerily. "Just happy to be along for the ride."

He left then, as jovially as he arrived to most places, and gently pat Remus on the shoulder as he went. By the time Simeon had made it to the top of the drive, he was whistling a cheery tune.

"You… You kissed me in front of him," Sirius said, staring at him like he were awestruck.

"Yeah, I—I guess I did."

"Wow."

Remus opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. Suddenly all the thoughts were tumbling out.

"I always want to kiss you, Sirius," he blabbed. "It's like breathing. A base instinct. Every moment of every day, I want to kiss you. It's all I think about. All I *have* thought about for two years."

Sirius shook his head. "Don't say that." His eyes were shining slightly, as though he were tearing up. "You can't say that."

"I have to."

"No, you can't! 'Cause I'm not as good as you. I don't know *how* to say it back. And Moony, what I did… What I said to you before, I don't deserve—"

"It's alright, I forgive you."

“Shut up!” Sirius wailed, only half meaning it. “Fuck... It’s my turn to have a go at the great, grand confession, alright!? Even if I don't know what I'm doing, you're good enough to try for. So just be quiet for ten bloody seconds."

Remus did so, and while he waited for Sirius to catch his breath, he tried very hard not to get his hopes up.

"Look, Moony, I know I’m self-destructive. I know I'm a total arsehole! When things start going wrong, it's like I-I can't explain it. The only way I can think of it is if I'm on a plane, yeah? And that plane's going down, and you know me, I'd rather jump before it crashes. I'm gonna go down anyway, right? Might as well be on my own terms. But I'm vain too! Probably could be diagnosed a narcissist actually, and despite the fact that I’m an incredible shag—”

“Oh brother.”

“—all I want is for things to go my way, all of the time. And I want you, *all of the time!* But good people aren't supposed to want that. They don’t go fucking mental the moment their friends show interest anything aside from them—but I do! Can't help it either. It's like, I’m the same as them. All this time, and I’m no different from my fucking family. I’m no good, Moony. But I'm so mental... so fucking mental about *you.”*

Remus bit his lip, and in a small voice he asked; “How mental?”

“Completely. *Entirely*. Cut me open and you’ll find only Moony inside! There's no room for anything else.”

“That’s… sort of crude.”

“Shit. And here I was going for endearing.” Sirius laughed meekly, sniffing and wiping his nose. It was freezing out, but all Remus needed to warm himself up was to be closer to him. He stepped forward, hugging Sirius against him, until he could feel the wisp of his breath along his ear.

“I was a fucking arsehole, back at school,” Sirius murmured.

“I was too.”

“I did it on purpose, though. I just got so mad. Couldn't even think straight. All I wanted to do was fight—over Reg and my parents. And then I ended up taking it out on you."

“It's okay. I did it too. I wanted to hurt you... I’m sorry.”

“I believe you now,” he said. “I swear I do. McKinnon, she... she's pretty convincing."

"Yeah, she is."

Sirius pulled away, until they could look each other in the eye. "Moony, I promise you—whatever you are, I'll accept it. I know I messed up before, but I don’t care if you’re not gay. I just want you.”

“And I don’t care if you are gay, Sirius. But please, I gotta know. Did you tell James?”

“Nah.” Sirius sniffed again. “I couldn’t… not with how we’d left things. Didn’t feel right.”

Remus let out a breath. He didn't know whether to feel happy or sad, so he settled for relieved.

“You still can," he said. "I’ll do it with you even. I think I'm ready now.”

"No," Sirius said, shaking his head firmly. "That's what got us here. Me and my big mouth. You can't force yourself to do something you don't want to do, just because I'm throwing a fit.”

“I’m not,” Remus protested, pushing a piece of hair out of Sirius’ eyes. “If I could go back, I'd change the way I told you guys about my dad. Doing it like that—it hurt everyone, even me. But I feel better now, and I wouldn't take back doing it. Now that it's out, it's like I'm lighter. I'm glad I said something then, and I keep thinking that maybe it could feel that way with James too."

"I dunno," Sirius frowned. "Don't see much point in telling him if we're broken up."

"What if we weren't broken up anymore?"

"You mean you want to get back together?"

"Well, I certainly don't want to be your friend."

"Oh."

"Not like that! I just..." Out of words, Remus reached into his jumper, withdrawing the chain necklace. When Sirius saw it, surprise bloomed

on his face.

"You're still wearing that thing?"

"I never took it off. Not once."

He thumbed the little chain, and the pick on its end. "That's so sappy."

"Sod off. You're the one who gave it to me."

Sirius smiled, wrapping his fingers around it. "I know."

Remus felt his heart leap inside his chest. “Does this mean we’re through with being broken up?"

“Better be. I haven't been able to write anything for weeks, my playing sucks too. Even Prongs noticed. And I... Well, I sort of missed having a poet for a boyfriend.”

“I’m far from a poet.”

“Part-time then.” Sirius bit his lip, this time over a smile. “Can I kiss you?”

Hearing him ask that, to say that he wanted to kiss him; it was like a thousand pound weight had been lifted from Remus' chest. He squeezed Sirius tighter, burying his face in the crook of his neck.

“Do you even need to ask?”

There was a little sound, like a hum, and suddenly Sirius had his hands around his face again. They leaned in, eyes sliding shut and lips nearly touching, only to interrupted when a chant began inside the house.

“Ten! Nine—!"

Sirius laughed, then looked back at him. “Hey, Moony?"

"Eight! Seven—!”

"Yeah?"

“Six! Five—!”

"Let's never play the question game again, okay?"

“Four! Three—!”

"Okay, Padfoot."

“TWO! ONE! HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

The cry went up from inside like thunder, but neither of them were listening. Remus bent his head down and then it was only Sirius. *Sirius, Sirius, Sirius.* He felt his touch everywhere—on his neck, in his hair, against his torso and his legs. He couldn't get enough, and when Sirius opened his mouth to him, Remus knew he'd never be full. They laughed as they kissed, falling into the garden wall and then kissed some more. Afterwards it felt like dancing. Euphoric silliness carried them back inside the house, where they weaved amongst people and streamers and noisemakers, desperate to find somewhere private where they might finally throw themselves at one another. Upstairs was the only place without crowds of party-goers, but Lottie’s bedroom was locked and when they tried Peter’s they found him passed out drunk on his covers already.

“Bathroom!” Sirius hissed, taking his hand.

"Not this again!"

Though really, Remus had very few qualms. Nor did he object when Sirius pulled him toward the upstairs toilet and threw the door open wide. A second later, he almost wished he had.

“FUCK!” James howled. Sirius had opened the door with such force that the knob had jammed him in the back and sent him spiralling, leaving Lily to stand flushed and horrified against the bathroom sink.

“Oh, shit!” Sirius cackled; “Didn’t mean to interrupt your snogging session!”

Lily screamed, and Remus covered both eyes when he realised that she was bare from the top down, apart from the jumper she was currently clutching to her chest. Despite his injury and the glasses that were knocked askew on his face, James quickly scrambled upwards and threw himself between them as a shield.

“Mate, wanna *fuck off?!”*

“Right! Well—just wanted to let you know that Moons and I are good now, so if you two wanted to risk that sleepover in your own room, we won’t mind camping out in the spare!”

“Right, good. *Now get out!”*

Reaching past Sirius, eyes still covered, Remus managed to shut the bathroom door, which they both collapsed against, laughing horrendously.

“Potter's place should be empty now,” Sirius wheezed, when he finally got a breath in. “Do you want to—?”

“What are you waiting for?" Remus kissed him again, and murmured against his mouth; "Get on, rockstar.”

Sirius clung to him, fisting that little silver chain round his neck.

“Oh, how I fucking missed you.”

* * *

I, I will be king,
And you, you will be queen;
Though nothing will drive them away,
We can be Heroes, just for one day,
We can be us, just for one day...

Tuesday 3rd January 1978

They reached King’s Cross at half-past nine, and despite the fact that they were running slightly behind schedule, Giles refused to miss his chance to pull Remus aside and berate him for every stunt he'd pulled since he was seven.

“You cheeky little blighter!"

"I'm sorry, Gil."

"What were you *thinking?!"*

"I wasn't, Gil."

"That was very disrespectful, what you did!"

"I know, Gil."

The old driver fisted both hands in front of him.

"The Potters are good people, Remus, and you had Effie near-on in hysterics! Is it really that hard to tell someone where you're going? To realise that others might worry? People care about you! Do you understand what that means? It means that whenever you go off somewhere on your own, people get concerned! And you don't get to decide that—you don't get to decide who cares about you! That ain't how it works, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Remus said.

"Are you sure? I don't think you do! Must still have cotton in your ears!"

"I don't," he swore. "I hear you, really. I'll never do it again."

"Never?"

"Never-ever. I give you my word."

Giles huffed very sternly, then tugged the cap from his head and pressed a hand to his forehead, as if struggling to stay angry with him. He realised why right after.

"Remus, I know things with your father are complicated. I had no idea you'd known for so long, and I'm sorry I never told you. For a long time I was just the driver. Didn't feel like my place. But you're important to me, I've watched you grow—known you all your life. So whatever you need, you only need to call. Alright?"

"Alright," Remus said, before chancing his best bet. "Will you tell me one thing then, Gil?"

"What is it?"

"My dad. The real one. Do you know if he's alive?"

Giles sighed then, and glanced up, as if cursing the clouds. "Last I heard he was living somewhere in America."

"America?"

"Yes, sir. New York, if I remember right. But that was going on, six... seven years ago now. I'm sorry, son, but I don't know anything else."

Remus nodded, trying his best to find a way to compartmentalize the

information without letting it uproot every other modicum of his life.

"Thanks for telling me, Gil."

"Don't go running off to America now. You do, and I'll ground you for life. No more cigarettes and books until you're eighty."

"Your age then?"

"Oi. What'd I say about that cheek?"

Remus did his best to smile, for Giles, and nodded again. "I won't run off. Promise."

The driver let out a sigh of relief, returning his hat to the top of his head. "Right. Do have all your school things then?"

“Yeah. It’s all in my trunk. Left my amp at James'. I'll just use the one at school.”

"And you're sure you have *everything?"*

"Mhm."

“Well, I would check again."

As Remus stood on the curb, wondering what it was he could've possibly forgotten, Giles turned and fit his upper body back into the boot of the car. From inside, he hauled out a small white trunk with brass fastenings. Hope’s trunk.

“Felt a shame to get rid of it. Tried fixing it up instead. No more loose handle, see?”

He shook it pointedly before handing it over. With the trunk in his hands again, Remus felt a bit forlorn.

"S’just an old trunk…”

"Old is alright. Old makes memories. And memories are important."

He trailed his fingers along the corner edge. "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

“I'm always right. And it’s good to have more than one case. Keeps things organised. You'll see I tucked some extra things inside it too. New gloves—I know it's cold up there. Some books, and school things

too. Only what's useful, of course... You can repay me with good marks, and better attendance. Now get along, don't want to miss your train."

Remus let the trunk hang down by his side. It didn't quite feel like his but he was grateful for the gesture, and as he turned away to rejoin his friends, a strange feeling of homesickness came over him. Without stopping to think too hard, he spun back around and threw his arms around the old driver instead.

"Thank you for everything, Gil. You've been like a dad to me."

Giles hesitated, as was to be expected, but finally wrapped his thick, barrel arms around him in return. "Well, I—er… Had to raise you right! No blighter 'a mine gonna go off to school with a bad attitude."

They came apart then, and Giles ushered him ahead, eyes turned glassy.

"Best get going then. Your friends are waiting."

He went, and after they'd all said their goodbyes, the six of them made their way onto the train platform, trunks and instruments bungling against their knees with every step. James and Lily were arm in arm, Peter was looking around expectantly for Moira. Lottie was smoking, unusual for her outside of a social setting, but Roger had given her one of his own packs when they'd parted the night before and she'd accepted it tearfully along with a pair of sparkling diamond earrings to go with her bracelet. Aside from that it all felt very normal. Already the tell-tale signs of their return decorated the platform—a Finch House emblem there, a Salazar-green tie there. For once Remus relished in it.

"This is it, lads!" James cried as they approached the train. "Last time we'll be boarding the ol' railway north. S'almost enough to make one emotional."

"We still have to come back for Easter break," Lily pointed out.

"Yeah, but it's the final winter holiday though!"

Setting down his guitar, Sirius stopped to stretch and let out a pleased groan. "Prongs's right. This time next year we'll be in some flat somewhere, all on our own. No homework, no uniforms, just us and the nearest take-out shop."

“I take it the gap year’s officially on then?” Lottie drawled, cigarette still in hand. “Don’t people usually use those for travelling or work experience?”

“They’re for *life* experience,” Peter scoffed. “We’re gonna use ours for the band.”

“And they’re very common nowadays,” James reasoned.

“Mhm, sure. But I'm pretty sure our parents are likely to kill you when they find out you’ve no plans to work.”

Peter made a face, and Sirius slung a supporting arm around his shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Pete, you can just join the club. Me and Moony were thinking of putting together a support group for kids whose dads hate ‘em.”

“Sirius is the president,” Remus said, “since his dad hates him the most.”

“Then that must make you the treasurer, my good Moon, since you got two and all.”

“I’m so glad we can joke about this now,” Lily said, with mocking relief.

"My dad's in America," Remus said suddenly, surprising even himself. "New York."

"You mean your real dad?" Peter parroted. "What's he doing there?"

"No idea."

"How'd you find out?" Asked Sirius.

"Giles told me."

"That's brilliant!" Lottie applauded. "Are you gonna try and go see him?"

"Nope. I've got school, actually. And a band. You know, priorities."

For a moment they all exchanged hesitant looks, but Remus hadn't need worry. With a mirror smile, James and Sirius threw an arm around each of his shoulders.

"Rock on," James said.

The train blew its first whistle, and while the others picked up their things, Lottie smiled and stubbed out her cigarette on one of the station's brick pillars.

“I don’t see Mary or Marlene,” she said, as they all shuffled along toward the carriages.

“They could already be on board,” Remus offered. He was busy craning his neck to try and catch a peek at the end of the platform. He’d almost given up, but then his breath caught.

“No fucking way…”

All his friends stopped and looked back at him.

“Moons?”

“Just—Just hold on a sec.” Abandoning his bass and trunk, he broke off from them, dodging several people along the platform and nearly breaking into a sprint. As he reached him, his excitement soared until he was practically throwing himself into his arms.

"Tom!"

Tomny squeezed tight. And when he spoke, Remus could hear the smile in his voice.

“Thought you could skip town without sayin’ goodbye, huh?"

Pulling back, he clasped his friend by the shoulders and looking him up and down desperately. Tomny was wearing a heavy coat and a cap like normal, along with his worn bovver boots, but the dark circles had finally gone from beneath his eyes. He looked good. Remus had never been so happy to see anyone.

“Tom, what are you bloody doing here?”

“You said it was the firs’ train. I told you I’d see you on the third, didn’t I?" Tomny said, pulling a toothpick from between his teeth. "Them’s your mates then?"

Suddenly remembering himself, Remus whipped around to find all all of his friends staring at them from down the platform. He sheepishly waved them over, and after exchanging a few more dubious glances, they began making their way down the platform. King enough to meet

them halfway, Tomny held up a hand and James slowly waved back—looking as dumbstruck as Peter, while Lily and Lottie had crowded close together, giving each other that look girls sometimes got when they weren't sure whether to be worried or impressed.

"There," Tomny murmured in Remus' ear. "That one, the one with the hair. He's Sirius, right?"

Suddenly Remus remembered what it felt like to be mortified. He elbowed Tomny sharply. "Don't you dare say anything."

"Anything? Not even a hello?"

"I swear to god, Tom..."

"Mm-mm. He's certainly pretty enough, innit."

There wasn't any more time to accost him. His friends had scuttled forward, looking expectant. Remus could feel the sweat on his palms.

"Guys, this is Tom. He's a good friend. Or—more like a brother, really."

"You're Tom?" Peter gaped.

"The one 'n only." Tomny tucked the toothpick back between his teeth, then offered his hand. "Pleased to meet cha. I've heard lots about you guys."

It was James who broke free from his trance first. "Us too, mate," he said, stepping forward and clasping Tomny's hand for a friendly shake.

"Let's see then—you must be… James?"

"That's right."

"And... Peter?"

Peter nodded, still wide-eyed.

"That's Lily," Remus gestured. "And this is Lottie, and Sirius."

"Remus didn't say that you were blonde," Lottie observed primly. "He also didn't mention how nice your eyes were."

Tomny grinned, readjusting his cap. "Not as nice as yours, love."

"Ooh, I like him," she said, sweeping her hair onto one shoulder and flashing Lily a well-pleased smile.

"Are you quite finished?" Remus snarked, while Tomny maneuvered the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other with his tongue.

“My bad. I don’t mean to keep you all from your train, jus’ came to see this one off, s'all,” Tomny said, pointedly ruffling Remus' hair. "Couldn't very well let my Lu leave without saying goodbye."

“ 'Lu'?" Lily echoed. "Is that really what you call him?"

"Ever since I known 'im."

"You never told us that, Remus."

"Didn't think it was important," Remus baulked.

“Did he tell you how he used to suck his thumb in his sleep?" Tomny asked. "Twelve years old, and still zonked out like that. Had to douse his finger in chilli oil while he was dozing just to get him to quit."

“Enough!"

"No, no, go on," James urged. "I'd like to hear more. Moony never talks about himself."

Tomny's eyes widened, delighted. " 'Moony'?"

"Oh, now there's a story! Go on, Black, tell him!"

He smacked Sirius genially, who until that instant had seemingly resisted saying anything at all. Remus worried at his bottom lip, but before Sirius or Tomny could finish staring each other down, the train’s whistle blew again and all around them the platform began to empty.

"Looks like we'll have to save that one," Tomny said, shaking James' hand once more. " 'Til next time then. But it was nice meeting some of Lu's friends."

"You too," James said. "Go on, Moony. We'll give you guys a sec."

“Yeah, *Lu,”* Lily sniggered, while James swallowed a smile and stepped forward and took Remus’ trunk for him. "Heh—don't be late, *Lu."*

"Har, har, Evans."

“Cool to meet you, Tom!” Peter called.

“Yes, such a pleasure!” Lily waved.

“And don’t be a stranger!” Lottie added. “Any friend of Remus’ is a friend of ours.”

“Stop flirting with him!” Peter moaned, following the girls off.

James nudged Sirius in the shoulder. "C'mon, mate."

Trunk in hand, Sirius went to follow, while Tomny raised his cap in goodbye.

“Nice mates," he smirked, turning on Remus. "I can see why they’re important to you.”

“You’re important too.”

“Well, that goes without saying.”

“Smug bastard.”

Pinching the end of the toothpick over a playful expression, Tomny grabbed him by the shoulder and squeezed. He'd already opened his mouth to say something else, but was promptly interrupted when someone else cleared their throat. Spinning back around, he and Remus found Sirius waiting alone in the same spot as before.

“Hey, mate,” Tomny said.

“Hey." Sirius licked his lips, and Remus could tell he was trying hard to behave himself. He had that same strain in his neck, the one he got whenever he mouthed off too much to a teacher.

"Just wanted to thank you for taking care of this one. I know he’s a bit of a handful.” Sirius jutted a finger in Remus’ direction.

“Anytime.”

Eyeing Remus, Sirius then offered his hand, and Tomny glanced down at it before cracking a smile and slowly extending his own to shake.

“You’ll take care of him at school then?”

“Of course," Sirius countered. "We take care of each other. It's what we do.”

“Glad to hear it,” Tomny said. He kept up the handshake, and just when Sirius had glanced questionably in Remus' direction, Tomny yanked him forward and caught him behind the neck.

"Tom!"

"Shh!" Tomny grinned. "Just let the big boys talk for a tick, okay Lu?"

Remus couldn't see his face, but would've bet anything that Sirius was scowling. As Tomny used to fingers to tell him to walk on, he relented and stepped back several paces to retrieve his bag. From there, he could see as Tomny smiled and whispered closely into Sirius' ear. Tomny's eyes never left him, and Remus could tell that Sirius was uncomfortable. His body remained taunt, too proud to push Tomny away. This went on for several long seconds, and finally when Remus was considering walking back to separate them himself, Tomny grinned and left a deep kiss right on Sirius' cheek.

"Glad we understand each other," Tomny announced, patting Sirius once as he released him. "He's all yours, Lu!"

Remus wanted desperately to ask what he said, but Sirius had already retreated to his side, stubbornly wiping his cheek and standing close enough that their shoulders touched. Across from them, Tomny pulled a cigarette carton from his jacket pocket, tapping one loose and setting it between his teeth.

“Hey, Lu, you remember our promise to each other?”

"Yeah—" Remus croaked, before clearing his throat. "Yeah. I remember."

"Good." He smiled, then came forward and plucked the cigarette from his mouth, only to tuck it behind one of Remus’ ears. “Then I’ll see you when you’re back.”

"Okay."

Tomny cast a wry glance in Sirius’ direction. “Nice meeting you, Sirius Black.”

Sirius nodded, then reached up to take the cigarette from behind Remus' ear. Then he set it between his own teeth, and lit it with the

lighter in his pocket.

“Nice meeting you too, *Thonas Armstrong."* He exhaled, letting out the smoke in a single smooth haze. "Thanks for the fag."

Tomny grinned, and when he looked back at him, Remus could've died.

"Oh. Him, I like." And then Tomny began sauntering backwards, flashing Remus a final wink.

“Bye, Lu.”

“Bye,” Remus repeated, dumbly.

Just like that, Tomny had gone—disappearing back through the station's heavy archways with his hands in his pockets. Even after he'd vanished, Remus remained transfixed. It took another blaring train whistle to pull him out of it, and by then Sirius was already grinding the half-smoked cigarette out on the bottom of his boot. Doc Martens. Size nine.

“Hey Sirius…?”

“Mm…?”

“What did Tomny say to you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, *Lu.”*

Remus grimaced, but the smirk Sirius gave him was genuine. It turned his stomach to knots, in just the way he liked.

“No, seriously—what’d he say?”

Sirius shrugged indifferently, then; “You never told me he was hot.”

“What does that have to do anything?”

“So you admit that he’s hot?”

Remus laughed suddenly and covered his mouth when a passing man gave them a bewildered look. “No, that’s just Tom. He’s always been like that. Now what’d he say?”

“He told me to take care of you. *Or else.”*

“Oh. Well, he doesn’t really mean it.”

“What? Like I’m scared?”

“No. Maybe just a bit… jealous?”

“Ah-ah-ah,” Sirius blagged. “You forget, he’s kissed your lips, but I’ve kissed your everywhere.”

“Is that supposed to be romantic?”

“You figure it out.”

Remus picked up his bag. “I will. When we’re back at school. Alone.”

"Mm, that's what I like to hear." Sirius set his hands behind his head. “Kiss my arse, Armstrong.”

Remus grinned. “Come on, you idiot.”

They both gathered their things, and quickly turned to head for the train door. Before they even reached it, they spotted James, Lily, and Peter peering out of the window of the closest carriage, looking positively thrilled to see them.

“Did you get to shake hands with the mob boss, Sirius?” James teased as he slid the upper window open. "Did he give you a kiss for good luck?"

“Oh, shove off!” Sirius snapped. “You’re all nosey bastards!”

“Sure, we’re nosey—but why is it you’re the only one who gets to share secrets with the gangster?” Peter grumbled.

“He’s not a *gangster!”*

“Ha, yeah right. Did you see what he was wearing? Compared to him you look like you’re playing dress-up.”

“Pete, when I get into that compartment you better have made yourself scarce or you’re gonna get to see just how these dress-up boots feel going up your arse!”

They all laughed at him through the window, and as a platform attendant came up from behind to sharply usher them onto the train, Remus took Sirius’ arm and tugged him aboard. He let Sirius go first, and together they meandered down the train’s aisle way with their

trunks, waving at anyone they recognised. Eventually the train rumbled to life, and as began pulling out of the station, Sirius turned around so he could taunt his boyfriend while walking backwards.

“So like—on a scale of one to ten, how good was that Tomny kiss?”

“Wanker." Remus smacked him in the shins with his bag. "It didn’t even make the scale.”

“Ha! That bad?”

“Wouldn't you like to know."

"That's why I'm asking."

"It was barely a kiss. Doesn't count, now come off it."

“I'm just saying! If you’d told me he looked like that—well, maybe I would’ve understood.”

“Shall I call him back then? See if you could get a proper peck in for yourself?”

“Is that your prudish way of saying that you'd like to watch?”

“You’re hopeless,” Remus said, tilting his chin down toward his chest to hide his smile. Then; “Hold on, your boots…”

Sirius stopped in the middle of the aisle. He looked down at the pair of brand new Doc Martens he was sporting on his feet. “Oh! Yeah—Christmas gift. Do you like ‘em?” He grinned slyly. “Only kidding. I know they’re from you. Way to get the size perfect, stalker.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “I meant your lace’s come undone. Hold still.” He bent down, taking either shoelace and quickly tightening them into a loop. When he was finished he stood up, and was rewarded by a signature Sirius Black smirk, with eyes that said everything his mouth couldn’t.

“My hero."

"I get that a lot."

A beat passed, and Remus briefly wondered about the odds of finding an empty compartment and letting their friends think they missed the train entirely—that was until one of them came right up from behind.

“Ahem?”

They both spun, and Sirius quickly jumped aside. “Sorry, Lot. Didn’t mean to block your way.”

“Don’t mind me, just on my way back from the lav,” Lottie replied, peering at them suspiciously. “Now what were the two of you up to?”

“I was just tying up his laces for him,” Remus replied innocently.

“Oh? Did Sirius suddenly forget how to tie his own shoes?”

“Absolutely,” Sirius nodded. “Happens every now and then. Bit inexplicable, really.”

She squinted at them, arms crossed over her chest as though she couldn’t decide whether they were guilty or not. As he waited for her response, Remus mentally chided himself for worrying. Most days Lottie could be as astute as the rest of them, but he’d only retied Sirius’ boot. There was no way that she—

“So how long have the two of you been sharing pants then?"

It took a moment to understand the euphemism, but when he did, Remus’ mouth dropped open.

“What?! We're not—*We're not sharing pants, Lottie!"*

"Really? So you mean there's nothing going on between the two of you?"

"No!"

Another beat, and Lottie’s face split into a grin. “Liar.”

“He's not lying!” Sirius insisted.

"He totally is."

"Uh-uh!"

Eyebrow arched, Lottie crossed her arms and busied herself by examining her nails. “Mm, right. Well, maybe you can try that excuse on someone who didn’t just walk up behind you while you were gabbing about kissing your best mates.”

“We weren't!" Sirius blabbed. "Moony was just teasing. You've got it

all out of context, right Moons?"

"Right! I was teasing! And—And Sirius was teasing too! Right, Sirius?"

"Right! You see, heh—teasing!"

With a deep eye-roll, Lottie sighed and dropped her arms. “You don’t have to worry, I’m not gonna say anything. What business of mine is it who you’re jumping into the sack with? A word of advice though, if you’re trying to keep it a secret, maybe don’t drool over the same guy in public spaces.”

“I was not drooling!” Sirius hissed. "I was being tough and intimidating!"

Unbothered, Lottie pushed past them and simply carried on up the aisle. “Oh, and I don't blame you, Remus,” she called; “Tomny's fit. I would’ve snogged him too.”

She waved at them over her shoulder, before disappearing into one of the compartments and leaving them both dumbfounded.

“Well,” Remus started, “that’s wasn't… too terrible.”

Sirius scratched his head. “How likely you think she is to tell someone?”

"On a scale of one to ten? Ten."

"And is ten good or bad?"

"Not sure, really."

"Hm. Well, I suppose that's two down then.”

With a tiny smile, Sirius grabbed his trunk and hauled it up behind him, already moving on down toward their friends' compartment. Remus watched him, wondering just how he was supposed to feel. *Two down… Two down…* Well, maybe it didn’t sound so bad after all.

“You coming, Moons?”

“Yeah.” *Two down.* “I’m coming.”

Chapter End Notes

The song throughout the chapter was “Heroes” by David Bowie, 1977

NOTE: There is an alternate POV (Sirius) of the "secret" Tomny/ Sirius conversation available here .

Chapter 86: January, 1978

Chapter Summary

Another January at Hawkings, and Remus isn't the only one taking charge of his life.

Chapter Notes

Editing this chapter might've given me slight whiplash. Apologies if it's all over the place. As I so often say to myself whenever I hit post, just take my scraps!

Admittedly, there's a bit of shameless smut toward the middle of this chapter. I think it's pretty tame, but I really don't normally write stuff like that so you'll have to let me know how I did. As always pay attention to the '> > >' if you wish to skip over it, but if you're going to argue over whether it's ethical for me to write this due to Remus not quite being eighteen, please just... don't? It's playful and true to their character, and of course there's consent and communication. Apart from the fact that queer people have sex, and Remus and Sirius have been having sex for a while within fic, whether I've narrated it or not.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

But oh, how it feels so real,
Lying here, with no one near;
Only you and you can hear me,
When I say softly, slowly;

Hold me closer, tiny dancer,
Count the headlights on the highway;
Lay me down in sheets of linen,
You had a busy day today…

- "Tiny Dancer" Elton John, 1971

Later, on the train...

Remus had always liked lists. Lists helped keep things tidy, and tidy kept said things from going missing. It also kept one from bollixing up their entire life; who knew what, who went where, who liked who—*that* was messy, no way around it. Keeping tidy lies prevented the inevitably messy from getting even messier. It also helped keep peace of mind.

Marlene. Tomny. Regulus. Simeon. Lottie—today's list. Everyone he'd told (inadvertently or otherwise) about his and Sirius' secret relationship. It felt like a tidy record, until he thought more on it and realised that people had lists of their own. Marlene knew and was gay herself, which consequently meant that her girlfriend Nicole knew as well. And Tomny knew, because Tomny knew everything, which must've meant that Tonya had known, even if she'd guessed it on her own. Regulus had sworn up and down that he'd told no one about Sirius, but it wasn't enough. His parents had realised it anyway the day Walburga Black found those dirty magazines beneath the floorboards of Sirius' bedroom, and no matter how badly he fretted, Remus would never know the full extent of who knew. *How many?* How many other family members or evil doctors or nasty psychologists knew about Sirius' shameful little secret?

At least the Blacks were far away, he reasoned. One could hardly add names to a list without knowing them in the first place. But what about the problems closer to home? What about Lottie, the self-proclaimed queen of gossip—could she really be trusted to keep such juicy news to herself?

Suddenly it was starting to feel like Remus' tidy list had gone out the window. He spent most of the never-ending train ride back to school with his nose in a book, eyes glued to the page but hardly absorbing a word. He felt the fizzy-drink feeling return, like he was a rocket ready to launch right off the compartment bench. His more reckless side kept telling him he should just do it—whip his head up and announce it to everyone.

I'M GAY!

Or well...

Not exactly *gay.*

More like half and half.

I still like girls. Girls are great—Women! I meant women, Mary. What? No, we always meant to tell you! Y-Yeah, Sirius too. And we're sorta... No,

Lily, it isn't like that! We wanted to wait until we were sure we could trust —er, no sorry, wrong choice of words. Huh...? NO! We do trust you, but there's always... And we weren't fighting! Or, I mean we kind of were, but we're better now and—no, Lottie, I've never thought of Mick Jagger naked, but Sirius—no, Peter, I've never thought about YOU naked either. And Tomny isn't—BUTT STUFF?! ... ohmygod.

Then again—not a chance. Maybe in another life he'd have allowed the reckless abandon to truly take over rather than just get muddled in his head, but not this Remus Lupin. Not when he had no guarantee of the outcome. He'd rather it happen slowly, one at a time. Like writing a song. First the melody, then the bridge... First James, then Lily... Peter, Mary... It wasn't a terrible list. Had a lot of love, that list. Oh, maybe...

"Moony, heads up!"

A football caught the backside of Remus' book, nearly driving the spine into his nose. He looked up, annoyed, to find the rest of his friends staring back at him with happy grins. Lily sat beside James, red hair wild and windblown from having just transferred over from Doncaster. Mary was on her other side, painting the toe of Marlene's boot with purple nail polish, and Marlene was watching her with a tiny smile and one arm draped across the top of the bench seat. Lottie and Peter were bickering over the flavour of one of the cart pasties—raspberry or mulberry. While he was distracted, Sirius seized Remus' book to ignite a game of keep away, which he lost immediately when Lily reached forward to snatch it.

Everything was completely and marvellously normal.

"Fancy a game of rummy to pass the time, Lupin?" James asked, flourishing the deck of cards. "I warn you, the rest of us have been practising all holiday."

Remus glanced sideways at Sirius, who gave him a cheeky smirk, and winked.

"Sure, Prongs. Aces high though."

"Who plays rummy aces high? ... Weirdo."

They got into the station in good time, and piled onto the waiting buses that would take them down into the deep Scottish valleys that cradled their school. The snow was deeper there, much more substantial than the tiny blizzard they'd had on Christmas back in

London. That snow had melted come morning, whereas this stuff would be sticking around until Remus' birthday at least. Thankfully the pavement had been shovelled, though as Remus reminded himself, that'd probably be one of his jobs as a prefect now.

They had to wait for Filch to finish unloading the rest of their bags from beneath the bus. The girls had already gone ahead, complaining of the cold, but plenty of other kids were still mulling about, greeting each other and eagerly filling their friends in on all they'd missed over the winter holiday. Remus even said hello to Jillian, who waved at him and offered a box of leftover Christmas sweets.

"Don't let this go to your head now," she told him. "They'd just go straight to my waist, is all."

He thanked her and shuffled back into step with his friends, who were still stuck waiting for Peter's trunk to surface.

"Reckon we could start a killer snowball fight," Sirius said, eyeing the lawn greedily.

"Better not," James warned. "Here comes McGonagall."

The Headmistress strode up in a thick winter coat, greeting every student she passed while her heeled boots clicked on the shovelled pavement. When she reached them she smiled, which on her looked a lot more like the skin around her mouth pulling slightly more taunt. Remus noted with a bit of satisfaction that she didn't seem nearly as daunting anymore. Perhaps it was his latest growth spurt, or the fact that she was wearing a fuzzy fur hat that upon first glance looked like a skinned raccoon.

"Gentlemen," she said, regarding her head to each of them. "I hope you all had good holidays."

"Simply sublime, Minnie!" Sirius exclaimed. "And yours? I do hope Santa didn't find you on his naughty list this year."

The corners of McGonagall's mouth tightened, but she was above the bait. She regained her composure while tightening her hands in front of her, and for a moment Remus thought she was about to scold them.

"Mr. Black, I'd hoped we could have a little chat as well."

Sirius appeared less than thrilled to be singled out, but he nodded and followed the Headmistress off to the side, leaving the rest of them to

speculate.

"Think she's giving him detention?" Peter asked.

"Nah, that'd be a new record even for him," James said. "I'll bet something's up."

Remus didn't know what it was, but he didn't like the pale look that'd come over Sirius when he finally returned.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's Reg," Sirius croaked. "McGonagall said he's not coming back."

"Not coming back?" James echoed in alarm. "What, like at all?"

"No. Looks like Mum and Dad pulled him from school."

"Why?!"

Sirius shook his head. "She didn't say. Only asked if I was alright at yours."

"Well, of course you're alright," James answered sharply. "Reg would be too if he left that bloody house."

"I'm sure he's okay though," Peter said kindly. "They wouldn't do anything to him. He's the heir now, right?"

"Yeah, yeah." Sirius hugged his elbows, looking nervous. "Still... should probably call, shouldn't I."

"We can do it back at the dorm," Remus offered. "Call him together if you'd like."

Sirius nodded. "What do you figure the odds are that Mum has me drawn and quartered for trying?"

"Well, you're about six-hundred miles away, so I'd say it's a solid fifty-fifty."

Sirius and James snorted, while Peter just shook his head.

“Your family’s bonkers, mate."

"Pettigrew!" Filch's nasty hollering cut across the din. "Come get yer trunk!"

While Peter zipped forward to fetch his trunk, the rest of them gathered their things, eager to get back to the warmth of Godric House. They'd just started up the pavement when another person called out, this time for Remus. He turned around, and his stomach sank when he realised who it was. Only one person would wear a coat the colour of peacock feathers.

"I'm sorry," Sheila cooed gently, "but do you have a moment?"

"Does this mean that you also have a missing brother, Moony?" Peter asked. James turned to glare at him. "... Sorry. Poor taste."

"You guys go on ahead," Remus said. "I'll catch up."

Sirius appeared reluctant, but Remus could tell there was a lot on his mind already. In the end he went with the others, while Remus shuffled out of the swarm of students and toward the end of the row of buses. Sheila followed, picking at her gloved fingers, and Remus tried not to feel sorry. Between Sirius and Tomny, he'd had little space to worry about the music teacher, and he didn't much care for feeling sorry over it. He didn't know how to explain that it didn't matter that she knew Tad—that Tad didn't know him and he wasn't sure he wanted that to change. Did that make him a bad son, he wondered. A bad person? *I don't want you. I don't want you to not want me.*

But Sheila was still Sheila of course.

"Care for a walk, Remus?" She asked. "The hills behind the school gardens look so lovely this time of year."

Suddenly dreading more time alone with her, Remus indicated to his heavy trunk. "Would be kind of hard..."

"Oh. Right, never mind." She smiled, anxiously licking her lips. "I'm sorry to call you away from your friends just as you got back, but I wanted to talk to you about what you said before Christmas."

Here we go, Remus thought. Now came the part where she started reliving her glory days through him. *Please don't,* he silently begged. *I don't want what you're missing.*

"Now you've nothing to be sorry for," Sheila went on; "but I really couldn't stop thinking about it. I don't think I've properly expressed myself up until now, and I want you to know that I'm sorry if you ever thought I was keeping things from you about Tad. It wasn't my intention."

"I get that," Remus said, rubbing his neck awkwardly. "It's fine, really. I was just stressed from exams I think, ended up lashing out at you. So you don't have to worry, I'm fine. But I wouldn't blame you for giving me detention for it."

She chuckled, then looked at him like Effie did—like she didn't believe him—and Remus wished he was anywhere but there.

"He was a dry wit too," she said. "And smart as a whip. Why, when we were children, we used to imagine that—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Buchanan, but I don't really care." It was cruel, but he couldn't help it. The words just kept tumbling, one after another like cursed little dominos. "It's cool that you knew this guy once, but I didn't, and I'm not really interested in dredging up my dead mum's past. I guess she liked the guy enough to have a kid with him, but that was her choice, wasn't it? And I don't know anybody named Thaddeus Dean. So if it's alright with you, I'd rather just leave it that way."

"Oh."

"Sorry."

"Don't be," she said quickly. "Don't, really. I should've considered that you might feel this way. I never meant... Well, now I'm just repeating myself." She cleared her throat, pasting a thick smile across her face. "I'm so proud that you're standing up for yourself. It's not so easy, especially when so many emotions are involved."

"Right... Well, if I'm ever curious, I promise I'll ask. But for now I'd rather you just be my teacher."

She nodded, even more quickly than before, and Remus told himself to ignore the underlying look of misery. *I don't want it. Not my problem.*

"Well, I at least hope that this means you've finished all your holiday homework."

Remus winced.

"Oh, yeah... every bit."

* * *

In the days that followed, Remus did his best not to think about mothers or fathers or family of any sort. He felt guilty for upsetting Sheila, and then stupid for accepting the guilt as his own. Why should it be a sin to not want to know someone who'd never bothered to know him? It was like Tomny said; screw fathers! Those guys were useless, rich or poor. And what did Remus care that some guy might be out there, living a life in America with a family that had nothing to do with him or Hope? Remus wasn't *out there*—he was right there! And soon he'd be back in London with all of his mates, playing music and taking party drugs like every other great rock star his age. None of them had dads neither, or least none they were proud of. Really, he'd removed a roadblock—jumped a rung on the ladder.

Screw fathers, who needs 'em.

At least he had Sirius to distract him, though if Remus was guilty of anything, being relieved that his boyfriend's family troubles were messy enough to distract him from his own seemed like a pretty good place to start. As rumour surrounding Regulus' absence grew, Sirius began calling the Blacks' main house incessantly. In the beginning he appeared almost hopeful, and though the staff assured him that 'Master Black' was well and fine, Remus could tell the stress was beginning to chip away at him.

"Fucker!" Sirius snarled, slamming the receiver down on the fifth day. "They're not even picking up anymore! It's like they know it's me! I'll bet it's Mum, no way she'd let him talk to a traitor. I might as well start sending letters—give me more kindling to burn!"

"Keep trying," Remus urged. "Even if he can't speak to you, if he hears that you've been calling then it'll show him you care."

Sirius glared at the floor, but finally nodded and picked up the receiver. "Should try once more... just in case."

Aside from wanting Sirius to be reassured, Remus had a completely selfish reason for wanting Regulus back at school. Ever since McGonagall had told them that the new Black heir was not returning, Remus had been paired up with another boy for all prefect-related duties. His name was Anton, and while not entirely unbearable, the twelfth year Salazar student seemed to come with a perpetual cold. When he wasn't yammering on, he was sneezing—loudly enough that it made everyone in the library flinch whenever they were assigned shelving duty.

"Regulus lives just down the hall from me. Or *lived,* that was. No one's heard from him—most figure it's something with his family. You heard his brother Sirius was disowned last term, yeah? Must've done something pretty bad to lose out on all of that. I heard the Blacks are practically—*AH-CHOO!*—practically royalty! Got a house in every country, near on. Wonder what he did... Belby says he's a poof, but I think he's alright. Still, I'll wager it's hard going with a brother like that. Maybe Regulus was just too embarrassed to come back."

"Anton."

"Yeah, Lupin?"

"Shut up."

Anton did so, mumbling something about refilling his cart and finally leaving Remus in peace. He didn't mind library duty normally, but that was when it was just him and Regulus. At least *he* was quiet—got his work done, and never complained about it. Regulus was good with the kids too, even if he'd never admit it. Remus still wished he'd have gotten to see their concert at the end of first term... damn exams. He was due back in class with the sixth years next week, was he going to have to do it alone? Better alone than with Anton...

"Hi, Lupin!"

Oh no. Why won't you just go away?!

Fists clenched, Remus swung around only to find someone else waiting for him. It was Sam, the small tenth year boy who'd commissioned him for a poem before Christmas, back when he was price gouging the entire male student body. Remus had noticed his shadow had gotten a bit longer ever since the start of term, but it was the first time Sam had come up and said anything on his own.

"Hey, Sam. You doing alright?"

At the greeting, Sam turned slightly pink, as though he hadn't expected Remus to know his name.

"Alright," he answered, in more of a high-pitched squeak than anything. "That's a lot of books."

Remus glanced at the cart and nodded. "Oh, yeah. I've got prefect duty."

"Blimey, I didn't know you were a prefect."

"Because prefects are so lame?"

Sam's eyes widened behind the frames of his glasses, and he shook his head fiercely. "N-No! You just don't seem like the kind of person to... er..."

"I was just teasing," Remus said. "That's a pretty big book you've got there too. Give us a look?"

Like he'd forgotten, Sam glanced down at the large book he was carrying. His first instinct seemed to be to hide it behind his back, but when Remus stepped forward he sheepishly withdrew it again.

"It's a Greek dictionary," he explained. "I'd like to take Classics in university. Thought this might be a good place to start..."

"Maybe," Remus said, as Sam tucked the dictionary back into his bag. "And you know, I don't take Greek, but I do take Classics with Bilshin. Want me to recommend you something?"

A grin bloomed across Sam's face. "Yeah!"

Waving him along, Remus led the kid out of the aisle and down several rows. It only took him a moment to find what he was looking for.

"Here, try the plays by Aeschylus. They're gonna be tragedies, but I've always preferred them to the politics. There might be a bit of a learning curve to the language, but I can lend you my old notes if you'd like."

"That'd be great!" Sam beamed. "Do you have any others?"

He did, and so they looked together until they'd amassed an impressive collection of recommendations. Remus had only just made it to Ovid when a sharp whistle carried down the stacks of books, interrupting them. At first he assumed that it was Ms. Pince, ready to flay him alive for slacking off, but the stringent librarian wouldn't have ever made such a crude noise in her temple of knowledge.

"Hey, Loonarny!" Trish called. "Got a sec?"

He waved to her, and then pat Sam on the shoulder. "I'll leave you to it, pal. Nice seeing you again."

"Y-You too!"

They walked back the way Trish had come, and she glanced over her shoulder, looking amused.

“I see ye've found yourself yet another fan, Loonarny?"

"Only if you're referring to yourself." He smacked her hand fondly. "What's up, Trish?"

"Only wondered where you'd gotten to. Jill told me you had library duty with Anton."

"Yes, and I'm about ready to kill him."

"Ach. Wouldn't blame ya. Me, I'm stuck reading to seven year-olds all the way across campus. Like Christ, I only became a prefect for the extra study block. If I’d kent how often I would be shushing wee little bastards I'd have bolted in the other direction.”

“You haven’t heard from Regulus, have you?” Remus asked. It was abrupt, and Trish’s face fell instantly.

“You mean ye haven’t heard? There’s a rumour going ‘round that Reginald’s nae coming back this term.”

"No, I heard it," he sighed. "Just hoping someone knew something else. You talked to Crouch at all?"

“As if Creepy Crouch would talk to me. Lad's miserable most 'ah the time, s'only gotten worse since Regulus bunked off. Apparently he got intae it with Tate Bromley this mornin' though. Brom was pestering him about Black and they ended up fighting.”

"Really? Did he say anything else?"

Trish frowned. "I think he blamed Sirius."

It was not the news he wanted, but somehow wasn't shocked either.

"Shit..."

“Aye. I think it’s a shame too. Regulus seemed happier just before Christmas. Talked more, raised his hand in class—that sort o' stuff. He’s always been a quiet one, could’ve counted the amount of times I’d seen him smile on one hand, but seeing him around you was… Ah well, I’m sure he’s a'right. I mean, wouldn’t Sirius know?”

“Sirius doesn’t live at home anymore. It's why we think his parents kept him."

“Oh. Sounds complicated.”

“Just a bit.”

“Will you let me know if ye hear from him then?" Trish urged, looking hopeful. "Not in a creepy, stalkery way or anything—just… A kid like that deserves to know that there are people who care about him.”

She was blushing slightly now, but Remus couldn't have teased her if he'd tried.

“Sure, Trish. I'll let you know.”

She left him to finish his tasks and now well and truly alone, Remus began to feel the library’s silence like a steel blanket. There was so much going on—so many emotions to constantly juggle. It almost made him miss the old days, when all they had to worry about was keeping up with homework and practical jokes. Then again, those days hadn’t been any less confusing either.

At dinner Remus watched Regulus’ roommates with ongoing concern. Barty, Yaxley, and Travers sat apart from the rest of their House, heads bowed over their food and expressions grim. Barty had a fat lip, most likely leftover from his scuffle with Bromley, and Remus had never seen him look so sorry. It was hard to remember that despite his constant foulness, Barty was Regulus’ friend too.

Unaware of any plight, Marlene sat down across from Remus and began to fume.

"I cannot *believe it!"* She howled. “I cannot believe that we’re *this* far into the twentieth century and girls are still expected to defer to boys in school-affiliated sports!"

"I'm guessing that means your campaign to smash the patriarchy didn't go as you planned?" Mary asked. It got Remus' attention, and he looked forward to find both James and Marlene looking severely disappointed.

"Potter and I went to McGonagall," Marlene started, "and she shot us down flat! Said it was ‘out of her hands’—that the schools don’t run the tournaments, but some board based out of Aberdeen. I didn’t bother asking if *they* were all male.”

"It's complete crap," James said snidely. "I don't see why they aren't allowed to play, we have an entire women's FA league for Christ's sake!"

"That's just it though," Lily pointed out, "it's a *women's* league. No way they'd ever let them play with the men."

"I can't believe Minnie refused to help," Sirius said, astonished.

James set down his cup with a sharp thump. "I'm thinking of bringing the team out on strike."

"You can do that?" Asked Peter.

"We could try! We're the home team this year, it'd certainly say something!"

"No, all it'd do is get you disqualified from the tournament," Marlene sighed. "And then the boys would really riot. They'd turn on us in a second."

"But I thought they all signed the petition?" Lily frowned.

"Only 'cause Potter threatened to bench them if they didn't."

"I won't have bigots on my team," James huffed sharply. "If McGonagall won't help us, then we'll just have to figure something else out."

"You could always protest another way," Lottie offered. "Ooh! You could dye all of your team shirts pink!"

"What'll that do?"

"Get their attention, duh."

"Nah," Sirius said around his fork, "you wanna get their attention you best be running out onto that field starkers. That'd do it."

Lily smacked him over the head.

"Shit, Evans! That hurt!"

Ignoring them, James continued glaring down at the cafeteria table in concentration. When Remus was sure his dark brows couldn't get any closer together, he finally sat back and turned to Marlene.

“When are you guys scheduled to start practices again?”

“First day is the twenty-second.”

“Perfect! Ours is the twenty-first. You can just start practising with us.”

"Like share the pitch?"

“Why not? It’s not like we haven’t shared it before. We'll just be making it more official. You run one practice, I’ll run the next. And then come the end of term, we can just merge the two teams together.”

Marlene’s eyes widened. “You mean *together,* together? As in the same team?"

"Why not? Your girls can more than keep up, and we already play each other all the time. What's one tournament?"

"But there'll be other teams in the tournament, Potter," Mary cut in. "Full of stubborn boys, who'd probably rather not play at all than face down a bunch of girls."

"Then they’ll forfeit, not us. Can't win without trying."

"And if someone gets hurt?"

"Have none of you seen McKinnon play? Honestly, I'm more afraid for the other team than I am for ours. She’s a bit brilliant like that. Scary, but brilliant."

Everyone looked at Marlene then, who'd gone red in the face of James' praise.

"But what if the other guys on the team don't want a merger?" She murmured.

"Then they don't play," James shrugged. "I'm captain, and what I say goes. Besides, I have a feeling Hooch'll side with me."

"I think Potter's got the right idea actually," Lily supplied eagerly. “I've already read the handbook, and all it says is that no girls’ team may enter into the tournament, but there’s nothing about girls *playing* on the boys’ team. They'd bar Marlene if it was just her and the girls trying to sign up, but Potter's team is already registered—they'd have to let you play!”

"And if they don't, you could always try the starkers thing," Sirius added.

Marlene bit her lip. “Still, something tells me it isn’t going to be that easy.”

“Look on the bright side," Mary offered. "You'll be able to add 'women's suffrage' to your uni applications."

Marlene rolled her eyes, and Lottie tapped her fork against the side of her cup.

“So, next week's our first village trip of the term! What’s everyone doing then? Shall we make a day of it?”

"It's almost Daisy's birthday," James said. "I'm gonna take her out if anyone wanted to join."

“Can’t. Got plans,” Marlene said between bites. "Sorry, Lils."

Lily waved her off, unbothered, but it was Mary who looked at her sharply.

“What plans? With who?”

“No one."

"Ugh. It's not Nicole again, is it?”

“Maybe. It's none of your business, really.”

“Mouthy today, aren’t you?" Mary bristled. "Well, I’m telling you, Marls, spend any more time together and people are gonna start thinking you’re in love with her."

This seemed to shake Marlene a bit. She looked up, making pointed eye contact with Remus.

“We’re just friends. You can’t police who I hang out with, Mary.”

“Of course not! You can hang out with whoever you want... As long as you remember who was there for you in ninth year when you got your training bra caught in your braces."

At least three of them snorted, and Marlene set her fork down, looking sour.

“You know, Snatchy, I’m not sure green’s your colour. Though I'd avoid white. Wouldn't want to relive that harrowing Halloween incident from year ten. Really, who knew angels got their periods?"

The snorting became full on laughter as Marlene took up her fork and smugly stuck a piece of pie between her teeth. Across from her, Mary crossed both arms in a pout.

“Vicious bitch.”

* * *

Near the end of the second week of term, their patience was finally rewarded with news—if 'rewarded' was the right word. It came in the form of a small postcard, delivered not to Sirius, but rather a one R.J. Lupin. On the front was a photo of Bath's historic Pulteney Bridge, and the back, just a single note.

Tell my brother to stop calling.
- R.A.B.

"Could've put more than six words. Always with a flare for the dramatic, you two," Remus said, when he'd handed Sirius the postcard.

“At least we know he’s alive,” Sirius said, stuffing it into the front page of his Classics text. "Cheeky twat."

Things become easier after that. Sirius eventually got back to himself, which meant plenty of snogging for Remus and more than enough practical jokes for everyone else. Every morning for an entire week, a goat would mysteriously appear in a new teacher’s office. Sirius was still hailing Penny the goat a hero for eating her way through an entire stack of Professor Bilshin's pop quizzes, but that was just the cherry on top. No one seemed to know how the goat-fiends were getting inside the locked offices at night, and rumour had it that Filch had even taken to patrolling with a shovel after no less than three cows had shown up in his own office. Spectacular mess, that.

Those who were close to them, like the girls, fairly assumed that the cows had been the *pièce de résistance,* but it'd been so long since the Marauders had come together for a proper prank. As their grand finale, a sculpture made of paper-mache had been left on Salazar House's front steps, frozen in place by the chill and practically turned

to cement by the time morning came and the students found it. The sculpture might've carried a sweet sentiment, as personalised art often did, had it not taken the shape of a massive, eight-foot tall nob. Spectacular fun, that.

All in all, Remus was pleased. A few casual band practices and ‘Marauders’ was back, better than ever, and whether their friends knew it or not, he and Sirius were an item again. The issue with Regulus remained ongoing, and though Sirius was good at playing it off, he continued to make daily phone calls to the kitchens.

“I was never a very good big brother,” he confessed, late one night. When they were sure James and Peter were asleep Sirius snuck across to Remus' bed and the two of them crawled in together, tucking their heads in tight on the single pillow. “He’s just so different from me—that Reg. I used to think that even if we weren’t related we wouldn’t have been friends anyway, so why bother trying? That was after though... Used to be that the little bugger couldn’t find his way out of a paper bag. He'd cry if I didn't go to the bathroom with him.”

“Regulus is smart,” Remus whispered back. “He’ll be alright.”

“I asked him to run away with me once. Think he was about six or seven. Told him that we could go to London—to James’, but he just stared at me, with those big eyes. Can't help but wonder if maybe things would be different if I’d just forced him.”

“He would've just resented you."

"More than he already does, you mean."

"No, he cares. People handle hurt in different ways, I think.”

“How do you handle yours?”

“Badly, mostly.”

That at least made Sirius smile. Remus reached a hand up and stroked his thumb along his cheekbone and Sirius turned his head, pressing a kiss to the inside of his wrist.

“We’re so messed up.”

“Yup. But people love a sob story. Just imagine how much we’re gonna make on a future book deal after we've taken over the world.”

Sirius chuckled. “Plenty, I’d imagine. I’d pay out the arse for all of your secrets.”

“No need,” Remus murmured, leaning in to kiss him properly; “You have all of them already.”

Yes, nights were often melancholic, but the days were good. They had each other, and their friends, and eventually things felt normal again. Remus heard from Tomny twice in those first few weeks; first as a cheerful 'hullo' following the New Year, and second to tell him that he was going away.

“I don’t understand, going where?”

“Just on a job,” Tomny answered, his usual drawl muddled somewhat by the phone's crackling reception. “It’s up in Immingham, near that huge port. This guy I know got me a job unloading all them big ships —six month contract. Can’t make any promises that I’ll be able to call and chat, but it’s got a good pay-out so I’m hoping that I’ll be able to take it easy for a while after."

"So you're hauling freight? Sure you're not hauling anything else?"

"Smart mouth. They should take your books away, yer too clever. But just think of it though, eh? I’m gonna be like two hundred miles closer to you!”

Remus sighed. “"Still not close enough. You said six months, does that mean you'll be back by summer?”

“Yeah, same as you. Perfect, innit."

"Do you at least get a break for Easter?"

"Not anything long enough to visit."

Remus clutched the phone tightly. "That sucks."

“Don't sweat it. S'just Imming. We'll both be back before you know it, and then you can talk my ear off about everything I've missed. Promise. Now how's my cheeky lad?"

"I'm fine."

"Meant Sirius."

"Dickhead."

It was hard to hang up after that, and because he could probably sense it, Tomny let him ramble until he'd all but decimated the free block he'd meant to use for studying. It was harder still when Remus realised that he wasn't going to be able to simply pick up the phone and call his friend whenever he wanted, but that was life. Everyone had worries, whether it be a brother or a friend... So instead of worrying, he pledged to throw himself back into the things that mattered in the moment. Like his classes, books, and Sirius—which, if he were being honest, wasn't such a bad way to spend his time.

After hanging up the phone, Remus legged it back to class where he found the others tucked themselves up into their usual spots near the back of the music room's risers. Sheila said hello to him as she always did, and because he was trying to be less awkward around her, he said hello back and carried on up the risers.

"About time," Sirius asked when he sat. "Productive morning?"

"Not really. Had a bit of a lie-in."

"You know what that's code for," James called, before miming a wank.

"Fuck off, Potter," Remus said, while the rest of his friends laughed. While Sheila was getting everyone ready for warm-up, Sirius leaned in and nudged him with the head of his guitar.

"Should'a told me you wanted a lie-in. I would've joined you, turned it into a workout."

"You sod off too," Remus told him, secretly pleased.

Once they'd run through whatever composition Sheila had assigned that week, the class broke off into independent study for the rest of the hour. James and Peter got lucky and had been sent off on an errand for Sheila, while Sirius had been tasked with helping another boy sort out his piano bridge. He was leaning beside the grand piano and picking his nails like he was bored, but every now and then Sirius got down onto the bench to correct the kid's playing, unable to resist showing off himself. For the most part Remus was doing just fine on his own, but he'd reached his limit ten minutes shy of class's end, after being forced to listen to a group of girls chatter away about his boyfriend's arse for nearly the entire block.

"What do you think he'd do if I just walked up and pinched it?"

“Probably ask you to pinch the other cheek too.”

They all giggled, and Remus plucked sharply on his bass. *He’s gay!* He wanted to shout. God, where did the urge even come from? It was only talk. Plenty of girls liked Sirius—he thought he'd be used to it by now. It was a bit embarrassing really, since the only one really pinching Sirius’ arse was him.

“I just don’t understand how it’s so perfect,” one of the girls sighed, cutting through Remus’ thoughts like a hot knife through butter.

“It’s like a peach!”

More giggling.

"I saw him wearing a pair of jeans the other day, pretty sure they were women's."

"He could pull it off. He's got that androgynous look about him. You know, like Mick Jagger."

Remus rolled his eyes. If Sirius got even a whiff of that he'd never hear the end of it.

“He hasn’t dated anyone in a while, right? But I heard Heather Morris asked him out the other day. Turned her down flat."

"Yeah, she cried for hours. My heart goes out to the next girl that tries."

“Well, I’m not afraid."

"And you sure, Cassie? They say he's gonna be a rock star one day..."

"Who says?" Cassie demanded. "That's stupid, I'm not starstruck. He's just a boy right now.”

"A handsome boy..."

One of the girls hung a finger in her mouth, while the other turned on Cassie, nudging her expectantly.

“Go ahead then, Cass, prove it. Invite Sirius to the village this weekend.”

“Alright, I will. After class.”

Remus' toes curled in his boots. Suddenly nervous, he glanced at the clock, which read just five minutes to the bell. Snatching up his and Sirius' things, he did his best to casually scoot down the risers past the girls and make his way across the room. He had to wait until he'd caught Sirius' eye at the piano bench, but when he did, he urgently beckoned him over.

“Hey, Moons. What's up?”

“Let's you and me dip a few minutes early, kay?”

"You want to leave class early?"

"It's only a few minutes, Sheila'll never notice."

Sirius' confused expression quickly became that of delight, as he took his coat and slid it over either arm. They escaped with barely a moment to spare and Sirius had to practically catch his bag out of the air as Remus threw them at him.

“Not that I don't love reckless Moony, but what's gotten into you?” Sirius demanded, as they emerged out onto the pavement with the first bell chiming behind them.

“Room felt stuffy. Needed the air." He pulled Sirius by the wrist, leaning in. "Hey, dorm should be empty..."

"But you have English next. And I have Latin."

“You're right. We should skip.”

Sirius hit the breaks. “Okay, leaving early *and* skipping? Who are you and what have you done with Moony?”

“I'm just not feeling class today,” Remus insisted. “I'd rather go back to the dorm with you and—”

“Sirius!”

It was Cassie. She and her girlfriends were spilling out of the hall's front doors, practically sprinting to catch up with them. The sensible thing would've been to let the girl have her moment so that Sirius could let her down easy, but Remus had hardly ever been sensible when it came to relationships. He saw it first in slow motion; Cassie rushing forward, Sirius turning to greet her—his handsome mouth already forming a reply. Too bad he never got the chance.

Before anyone could do or say anything, Remus' arms shot out ahead of him. He pushed Sirius—*hard*—and watched as he sprawled backward off the pavement and landed on his arse in a single, icy puddle. Everyone gasped, even Remus, while Sirius looked up at him, completely astounded.

“Moony, what the *fuck?!”*

“Sorry!” Remus blabbed, clapping a hand over his mouth to stop himself from laughing. Behind them, the girls had stopped dead, staring with shocked eyes as Sirius gave a wail of frustration and scrambled back to his feet.

“You tosser, why’d you push me?” Sirius began to wipe fruitlessly at his soaked trousers only to give up and punch Remus in the shoulder instead. "Dickhead!"

“It was an accident—a reflex! C’mon, let’s go back to the dorm so you can change.” Trying not to look too chuffed, he took Sirius by the shoulders and turned him toward House Lane. The instinctive blunder may have left Sirius seriously pissed off, but it'd worked; the girls did not follow.

“You’re absolutely mental, you know that?” Sirius swore, immediately ridding himself of his wet clothes upon entry to their room. Behind him, Remus also stripped out of his own coat and boots, albeit much warmer.

“I’m sorry, it really was a reflex.”

“An embarrassing one, maybe! What sort of bloody reflex makes you push someone straight-on?”

"Would it help if I said sorry again?"

"I don't think so, no!"

"You're cute when you're angry."

"Don't—" Sirius snapped, anger slipping away for the shortest moment. "I'm—" He swallowed a smile. "I'm mad at you. Now why'd you push me?"

"It was those girls," Remus said. "They were going to ask you to the village right in front of me."

Sirius blinked at him, looking truly surprised. "Hold on, you mean you were jealous?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

"And what else would you call it?"

"Christ—alright! I was jealous! I'm not immune to it, y'know!"

"HA! Moony was jealous!" Sirius whipped off his wet shirt, letting it puddle on the bedroom floor. "Man, I missed this feeling."

Remus stepped forward, making a grab for his arm. "Alright, I admitted it, now come and make me feel better."

"Ohhh no, I'm still the wounded party here remember?" Sirius gestured to his ruined trousers. "Now I'm gonna get in the shower, and if you dare ditch me to go back to class, I'll spend the next month pouring salt in your tea."

With the undoubtedly very real threat in place, Sirius disappeared through the bathroom door, pulling down his pants and trousers as he went. The last thing Remus got was a flash of pale arse, and then he was slumping down on his bed, disappointed. Maybe he shouldn't have pushed him after all, at least then they'd be together in the—

"Moony."

A hand slipped out the bathroom door, beckoning him.

"You gonna make me freeze my balls off waiting for you?"

Remus jumped up. *Fuck me.*

> > >

He was there in an instant, letting Sirius pull him inside the tiny bathroom and peel his clothes off a layer at a time. "This was your plan all along, wasn't it, Moony? Get me filthy so we could skip class and shower… You're trying to turn me into a deviant like you, I know it."

"Why don't you check for yourself."

Sirius' hand slipped lower, and then his lips parted in scandal. "You filthy thing. This could be a safety hazard. What if I fall again? My arse is killing me."

“I’ll catch you this time... kiss it better.”

He couldn't be sure, but Remus thought that the little scoff Sirius let out was what undid them both.

They snogged while waiting for the water to warm up—it took ages in the old dorms—desperately grappling for each other as they had that first time, in that very spot. Then, when steam was finally rising, they threw the door shut, bolted the lock, and clambered into the tub together. Sirius’ skin turned to silk under the water, and Remus ran his fingers along it, then his tongue, tasting all of him and enjoying his collarbone the most—which he bit oh-so-lightly, because he knew Sirius liked it.

“Tall fucking prat,” Sirius said, wrenching Remus down to his level so they might both fit under the shower's spray. His nails scratched Remus on the neck accidentally, making him hiss and nearly take a tumble on the slick porcelain.

“That’s one way to make a guy fall limp."

“You love it, don't lie. I know you'd kill to have this whenever you wanted, but it takes some prep you know.”

"We don't have to do it all, only as much as you want. I just want you."

"We'll do enough," Sirius agreed, before catching Remus’ face in one hand. “Now, *embrasse-moi.”*

Before he could ask what the French meant, Sirius was drawing their mouths together again. Remus tasted him—a whispered goodnight, a morning cigarette, and pure, solid *Sirius.*

“Fine,” he grumbled against those pillow-soft lips, “I’ll come down to you.”

Sirius released him, biting his lip as Remus knelt down before him in the shower. Hungry, he pressed the skin of his cheek against Sirius’ hip bone and curled his mouth into it, placing gentle kisses along every chiselled curve and edge. He could feel the way Sirius' stomach fluttered, rising and falling with every anticipated breath. Once Remus might've been nervous; for so long it’d just been subtle passes in the dark—frisky touches that left them tipped over the edge but only *just.* They had to learn what each other liked, and now each motion was burned into Remus’ subconscious. He knew how to ruin Sirius

completely, and enjoyed every second of it.

“Oh, j’aime ça... More, Moony—*n'arrête pas."*

Tight fingers snaked their way through Remus’ damp curls and pulled taunt. He hissed, feeling the sweet sting lace through scalp—but Remus knew exactly what would happen next. That perfect mouth would drop open in time with his, and Sirius would sing that note he sang for no one else.

“Oh fuck, Moony!” Sirius moaned, head falling back against the shower wall. His fingers tightened again, deciding the pace. Remus wasn’t worried, it’d be up to him soon enough.

The water was a new sensation. It frayed every nerve as it rained down on the pair of them, making them raw and sensitive. Remus' fingers slipped around sharp hip bones, and his knees slid however closer Sirius guided him. His mouth was made to taste like the salt off of skin, and he swallowed all of Sirius' familiarness, humming in pleasure when he was rewarded by Sirius’ libertine whines. Most days, Remus was knocked out simply by watching Sirius turn his wrist, but this—he could’ve died happy, sucking him off.

Sirius’ thighs began to tremble as he edged closer and closer to his peak, and Remus grappled the pale skin enough to know subconsciously that bruises would be left behind. Any girl who would be lucky enough to so much as glance at Sirius’ ripe peach would see evidence of his hands, his lips—his teeth.

“This—fucking—*mouth—!”* Sirius groaned, before releasing his hold on Remus' hair. "C'mere. *Dépêche-toi,* before I lose my mind."

Not about to argue, Remus stood and crowded Sirius beneath the shower head, blocking him in with an arm on either side of his head. He had to bend at the waist so that they were level, but finally he felt Sirius take hold of him, pressing them together so they might each feel all of the other. He could hear Sirius' breath in ear, panting with the effort it took not to finish first. Remus wouldn't have cared, he'd just wait until Sirius could go again. Emboldened by the idea, he bit down on the hard shell of his ear, forcing Sirius to brace himself against the wall of the shower while his inky black tresses fell down and covered his face.

“Shit, I'm close."

"Go ahead. But kiss me first."

Sirius didn't need telling twice. He looked up and Remus cupped him around the throat, basking in the grace of their own friction. It was like touching velvet. Pure *warmth* and *noise* and *oh so lovely*. They were Remus *and* Sirius when they were playing their music, but they were something else entirely when they were together like this. Eventually Remus bat his hands away and Sirius hesitantly obeyed, gasping into Remus' mouth when he felt his hands around him again.

They both found the edge a few minutes later, Sirius first, then Remus again after more snogging and perhaps the most wonderful handjob Sirius had ever given him. By then the water had gone cold, and they'd managed to knock every shampoo bottle off the edge of the tub.

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"I suppose it's all downhill from here. Dunno how we're ever gonna top that," Sirius said later, as they lay stretched out on his bed, still naked sharing their favourite post-romp cigarette. It was the middle of the day and the sun was awake and shining, but they might as well have been the only two people in the entire world.

"We could do it in the kitchenette next—up the stakes."

"The kitchenette? Where everyone and their cousin could walk in on us? I was right—there's no way you're the real Moony."

"There's always Easter. We could stay… No one'll be around then."

"Huh, now there's an idea. Wouldn't you be missing your precious Tom though?"

"Nah, Tomny's gone up to Immingham on a job."

"He left London?"

"Only until June."

"Oh. Good. And Prongs? His family always does something big for the holidays."

"He'd get it. If we told him..."

Sirius raised a brow. "You mean about us? You're really up for it?"

"I've been thinking about it," Remus said, taping the cig out in the ashtray. "What if we told him this weekend, in the village? Lily'd be

there, so it'd be like two birds with one stone. I still don't think I could stomach telling them all at once, but Lottie knows, and she was fine with it, so..."

"Wow."

"What do you think?"

"I... Yeah, great—amazing! I think it's amazing, Moons."

"I'm just hoping it'll take some weight off our shoulders."

"Yeah. Me too."

Smiling, Sirius tucked one arm up under his head and plucked the fag from Remus' fingers. Remus let him, turning onto his stomach so he could cradle his face against his arms and stare at Sirius with further ease. He never got tired of it; he could count those midnight lashes for hours. He almost reached forward to run his fingers along the faint trace of stubble along his jaw, but then Sirius was flipping on his side, letting out a thick breath of smoke.

“Bed’s too small. You’re simply crushing me.”

“We can get a bigger bed. In London.”

“It’ll have to be ten feet long to fit all of your lankiness.”

“And seven feet wide to fit your fat head. Didn't realise you'd decided to speak French in bed now.”

“Thought I’d try it out. No good?”

“No,” Remus smiled, reaching forward to nuzzle his face in the crook of Sirius’ neck; “s’good.”

“Careful Moons, you whisper like that in my ear and I’m going to need a second round.”

"I'll give it to you. Properly."

"Naughty."

Chuckling, Remus came away to kiss him. He snuck the cigarette out of Sirius' hand as he did and felt him chuckle against his mouth. Then when Remus pulled away again, a single damp curl dipped down into Sirius’ eyes.

Beautiful, he thought.

"You're beautiful," he said.

"I love you," Sirius murmured. *“Tu es une grâce pour moi. Tu m’as sauvé* —you save me every day... Even when all I want is to pop those pretty brown eyes right out of your skull. You're my sky, Moony. I'm sorry I ever said that you weren't.”

“You’re my sky too. Other people look up and see everything—a whole universe. I only see you.”

“I told you you were a poet,” Sirius grinned. He kissed him again, and Remus inhaled in the smoky haze that had encircled them like an embrace. It felt like love, and for two kids born of *un*-love, it was the best feeling in the world.

“Sirius?”

“Mm?”

“Do me a favour and watch those toes, they’re freezing.”

* * *

Saturday 28th January 1978

"Are you coming too, Sirius?" Lily asked, when they'd met ahead of the buses that morning.

"As opposed to staying back by myself?" Sirius crossed his arms. "You just want Potter and Lupin all to yourself."

She sighed wistfully. “The fourth wheel keeps the car moving, I suppose.”

"You women."

With a small laugh, Lily turned to take James' arm ahead of them. She was all dressed up for her birthday, wearing a new coat made of a pretty red and blue tartan, and a matching ribbon into her hair. James had also made an effort, combing his hair that morning and even borrowing a bit of gel from Mary to keep it in place. Remus and Sirius were dressed as they normally did, one dark brown coat and boots

and a single leather jacket, much too thin for the weather.

It was a happy coincidence that their first village trip of the new year fell just short of Lily's eighteenth birthday. Remus was hoping that the change in scenery would make him just uncomfortable enough to let the truth slip. It was a solid plan, for the most part. After a day of doing whatever Lily wanted, they'd end by taking the happy couple on a walk around the local pond. If things went well they could retire to the Three Broomsticks for a pint, but if everything went brutally bad —to which Sirius assured him, it wouldn't—they could make their escape round the other side of town and even drown themselves in the lake should need be.

In preparation, Remus had spent the past several days practising what he might say to James and Lily in the bathroom mirror. He'd thought the speech was decent enough, except he insisted on bungling up the middle and forgetting everything else. He'd tried writing the more important bits on his hand instead, but just sweat it off from nerves. Now as he and Sirius stood shoulder-to-shoulder in line for the bus, he kept desperately trying to recount his thoughts in his head.

Look, Lily—James, I'm just gonna come out with it then... We're gay! Or not, 'we' as in 'us' , 'we' as in Sirius and me! And-And I'm not actually gay —that's just Sirius. But I am gay for Sirius—bisexual, really. Means both. Like I could like Sirius and you, Lily—not that I do! I mean do like you—totally—you're like my best friend, and James! You like James! And he's with Sirius—or I mean, he's not with Sirius—he's with you and I'm…

Shit.

So, his delivery needed some work. Good thing he had Sirius, who was smoother in all aspects and had certainly been anticipating the moment where he'd come out of the closet for much longer than he had. It felt better that they'd be doing it together. At least that way if everything went wrong they had a better chance of surviving in the woods as a pair. Maybe they could just move into the Shrieking Shack. The squirrels couldn't make that bad of neighbours, surely. Oh shit—James and Lily weren't even paying attention. Maybe they should just make a break for it now.

"You alright, Moons? You're shaking a bit."

"Huh? Oh, yep! Totally fine! Nothing to worry about…"

Sirius sighed, and then took his arm, moving them away from James and Lily and toward the back of the line where they'd have a lesser

chance of being overheard.

"You need to calm down, mate," Sirius whispered. "It's normal to be nervous, but I don't think Miss Evans is going to be very appreciative when you get sick all over her new shoes."

"I know," Remus moaned. "But I'm good, really! I want to do it, it's just a bit nuts."

"Yeah."

"I'll be alright, it's only James and Lily. And hey, if everything goes terribly today, then I suppose there are plenty of two man bands. We could be the like S—"

“Do *not* say Simon and Garfunkel.”

“Actually, I was gonna say Sonny and Cher.”

The corners of Sirius’ mouth quirked up. “Well… as long as I get to be Cher.”

The line began to move again, and Remus watched as James and Lily disappeared up the bus steps. They looked so happy, surely a couple more queers couldn't ruin their day?

"Have you thought about what you wanted to say?" Sirius asked.

"Er... not really. You?"

Sirius licked his lips nervously. "I've imagined myself telling James so many times, but now that we're actually doing it, I can't think of a thing."

"Well... Maybe we won’t even have to say anything at all! Maybe they’ll just guess it for themselves. We can just drop hints, make it obvious for them.”

“What sort of hints? Because I’m not painting myself in rainbows and dancing naked in the middle of the square.”

“It’s always zero to one-hundred with you, isn’t it?”

“ 'If life’s a stage’..."

"You're going to love your present," Remus told Lily, when they were finally shuffling off of the school bus in the middle of town. "Sirius

and I picked it out together."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh." He'd wrapped it just that morning, in fact. They'd picked it out from a catalogue; a beautiful leather briefcase, with gold fastenings. Like Remus, it'd been embossed with Lily's initials across the front.

"You're not getting it until your real birthday anyway," Sirius said. "Mary made everyone promise to wait."

"We bought it together though!" Remus interrupted, seizing his opportunity. "It's from *both* of us. We *both* put a lot of thought into it."

"That's lovely, you two. I can't wait to see what it is."

As Lily turned and began walking up the cobblestone with James, Sirius grabbed Remus' arm and hung back.

" 'It's from both of us'? Really? Man, you do sound gay."

"Am I missing something? I thought we agreed that we were gonna—"

"Yes, yes, I know. Now get on before we lose them."

"So!" Lily cried, as they emerged on the village's main strip. "It's just the four of us, what shall we do today?"

"S'up to you," Remus insisted. "Whatever you want, it's your birthday."

"I made us a reservation at Madam Puddifoot's," James said.

Sirius made a face. "The tacky tea shop?"

"Yup. It was Moony's idea, actually."

"Your idea?"

"I heard it was good for couples," Remus said pointedly.

"But it's horrible in there. Everything's so frilly and it all stinks of potpourri. Just thinking about the place makes me itchy."

"You mean you've been?" Lily teased.

"Chastity made me take her," Sirius glowered. "It felt like everyone in

there was having a bloody snogging competition."

"Which I'm sure you were *so* adverse to," James snorted.

"It doesn't matter, now you're going with us," Lily said happily. "No snogging necessary. Unless you wanted to, of course."

At her comment, Remus felt giddy and he and Sirius exchanged a look. "You mean—"

"Oh yes, I hear Madam Puddifoot is very generous when it comes to her more lonely, bitter patrons. I'm sure she'll give you a little peck if you're that desperate, Sirius. Though you have to pay extra for tongue."

"You are so nasty," Sirius said. "I'm almost proud. Our little women are going up."

Lily stuck her own tongue out and turned toward the row of shops ahead.

"Don't worry," Remus whispered. "I refuse to snog you in the same place you snogged Chastity Bell anyway."

"In that case, we didn't snog in the bookshop. Or the record shop. Or Broomsticks' loo. Or the cemetery, if you wanted to get really freaky. Plenty of places left to snog, really."

"I'll keep that in mind."

They converged at Dervish and Bangers first, mostly to satiate Sirius, and slipped inside amongst the usual crowd, which was now bolstered by all of the eager kids looking to spend their holiday money. Remus waved at the owner, Graeme, who nodded back while helping a group of local girls sort through a stack of tapes near the till. The four of them split off to sort through the rows and rows of music, and eventually Sirius drifted back to Remus' side, clicking his tongue in disappointment. "Can't find any Sex Pistols on the shelves. Gonna go ask the manager if he's got a copy somewhere else."

"Kay," Remus nodded, before watching him drift toward the far corner of the shop. The group of girls, who couldn't have been older than fourteen, were busy counting their pennies on the counter but all gave a pause when Sirius approached. They looked him up and down in his leather jacket and heavy boots, and Sirius, ever the fucking flirt, nodded at them with a smug look.

“Just can’t help himself, can he?” James chuckled, appearing at Remus’ elbow to watch.

“Uh-huh. And he’s gonna pay for it later."

“What was that?”

Before Remus could clarify, Lily squeezed herself between them. “Budge up, you two. I’m trying to get to ‘L’.”

As Remus stepped away to make room, Lily bent over the stacks of albums and began to flip through them with nimble fingers.

“Who you looking for?” James asked.

“You remember that song that was playing in that little cafe you took me to in Islington? Turns out Lottie already had the album. She recognised the lyrics and found it for me, but I wanted my own copy. Figured here would be my best bet—*a-ha!”*

Victorious, she came back with a bright yellow LP, its cover laced in psychedelic flowers juxtaposed by the black and white picture of a young couple. Across the bottom, in great purple lettering, was the band's name; *The Longbottoms.*

“Here they are!" Lily grinned, flipping it over. “And there—‘The Magic Word’, that’s the song!”

Remus plucked the cover from her hands and turned it over. “How sickeningly romantic. This is gonna be the song you dance to at your wedding, isn't it?”

“Only if you sing it for us,” James said, jabbing him in the ribs. Remus flinched away, before laughing as Sirius reappeared, clutching *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* in one hand and sporting a rather triumphant look on his face.

“Got it, baby! Turns out our most friendly mate, Sir Graeme, was hiding a copy away in his personal collection. He was willing to part with it, though you do owe him five more crates’ worth of organising next time we’re in, Moons.”

“Tsk—selling me off again? You little twat.”

Sirius tucked the album under one hand and leaned across the rows to pluck *The Longbottoms* from Remus’ hands. “Oh no, we going folk

now?”

“It’s got James and Lily’s song on it.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “Their ‘song’?”

“Oh yes, they heard it for the first time in some little noshery in Islington and ended up dancing to it on the street. It was all very romantic.”

"Eugh. I think I'm gonna vomit."

“You're just jealous,” Lily said, rosy-cheeked and snatching the LP back.

“Sirius and I have a song,” Remus blabbed out of nowhere. Sirius whirled on him in question, and both Lily and James raised their eyebrows.

"We do?"

"Sure we do! It's... uhm..."

Oh god, they were staring at him now! Now he'd gone and done it... He knew thousands of songs—why couldn't he think of any? How was it possible that every romantic melody had managed to vacate his brain at that exact moment?!

"Sirius, tell them the song!"

"Oh, it's uh... Queen!"

"Right, Queen!"

"Which Queen?" James asked.

"You know... the love... one..."

"The love one?"

"He's just having a laugh!" Sirius burst. "Moony, you tosser... ‘You’re My Best Friend’, that's the one right?”

Huh?!

James shook his head. "Very funny. Your comedic timing is truly impeccable."

Sirius forced a laugh. "Heh. I know, right?"

"I was being sarcastic actually."

"Shut up, Prongs..."

Ushered by Sirius, who refused to meet Remus' eye, James went on ahead to pay for Lily's record while Remus lagged behind, feeling like a car motor that'd up and died on the middle of the speedway.

“Are you alright, Remus?” Lily asked, reading his expression.

“Yeah, fine,” he squeaked.

"You sure...?"

Just say it!

The thought burst across his mind like a thunder strike. For so long it’d felt like such a dream, but if he wanted that pretty little dream, one where he’d fall asleep with Sirius’ warmth next to him and wake up to his lips brushing his neck, then something had to shift.

“Lily, I have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

He swallowed thickly. Could one have an allergic reaction to telling the truth?

"I... Or, you..." He sighed, defeated. "You're going to really love that album..."

Idiot.

“Oh. You've heard it before?"

"No... I just have a good feeling."

She gave him an odd look, then smiled and took his arm. When they were finished, Remus let Lily and James go first while he pulled Sirius back by the collar of his jacket, yanking him over to the shop speakers where the music was loudest. Suddenly he felt like yelling.

“ ‘You’re My Best Friend’? *Really?!"*

Guilty, Sirius hid half of his face behind *Never Mind the Bollocks.* “I-I

got nervous…”

“Nervous?!"

“Yeah, what—we were just gonna out ourselves in the middle of a shop? Where anyone could overhear?”

"We could've been done with it!"

"Alright, then why didn't you say anything?!"

Remus sagged. He had a point.

"... Fuck!"

“We’ll do it later,” Sirius reassured him; “At Puddifoot’s or something… It'll be more intimate.”

"Is intimate really what you want? 'Cause if you’d rather not, then we could always—”

“No,” Sirius said firmly, “I want this—I do. It’s just… I got nervous. But I’m over it now. Next time for sure.”

Remus wasn’t entirely convinced. He was supposed to be the nervous one, not Sirius, but then again, that was hardly fair. He supposed all that was left to do was wait until one of them literally *came out* with it. Perhaps someplace more quiet and private was exactly what they needed to pluck up the proper courage. He held out hope until they arrived at the tea shop, and it was there that Remus realised just how hooped he was. Mary had once called the teashop the 'most romantic date spot within a hundred miles', but to him, it felt more like the most *uncomfortable* date spot that'd ever existed! Everything was painted the most horrendous shade of bubblegum pink, and lace and frills hung from every surface—a true pink, perky, preposterous nightmare. And there were girls everywhere, sipping tea and eating biscuits as Lief Garret and Rod Stewart played over the radio.

This wasn't privacy, it was a set up!

“I cannot go in there,” Sirius said, slamming on the breaks outside the shop.

“Why not? Afraid of catching cooties, Black?” Lily asked. “Oh c’mon, it’s not like it’s Valentine’s Day or anything. We’ll just get a coffee and sit for a bit.”

Sirius glanced at Remus, who was trying not to look too guilty for suggesting they go in the first place, and finally acquiesced. Shuffling inside, they took a table by one of the front windows, which only horrified Sirius further when he realised they could be seen from outside by any passer-by. Thankfully those inside didn't seem all that interested; they'd squeezed between several tables occupied by handsy or otherwise snogging couples before they'd finally made it to their own seats, and any faces they recognised didn't bother saying hello.

"They have food here, right? I'm starving," James said, opening a menu.

"We're gonna go to Broomsticks later, too, so don't stuff yourself on cake," Lily warned.

"Ah, it don't matter. I'm bulking for the season right now anyway. Food's food."

Sirius ducked suddenly, out of view of the window. "I think I just saw Jacob MacGillivray from Latin."

"Shall I say hi?" Remus drawled, making Sirius glare at him with one cheek pressed to the frilly tablecloth. A moment later a round woman with a shiny black bun had squeezed in next to their table.

"What can I get you, m'dears?"

"What's this 'afternoon special'?" James asked.

"Oh well, that'll be the afternoon tea—sandwiches and little heart-shaped tea cakes. We also have a Sweethearts' Special on today. Half price for any couple." She looked to James and Lily, smiling, and Remus—feeling cheeky—said;

"Oh, well in that case, we're—"

"Gonna have four coffees," Sirius cut-in, snatching the menus back and not making eye contact with any of them.

"We could've gotten a deal on those," Remus said, after the woman had finished taking their order and slipped away.

"We can afford it."

"What happened to being over it?"

"Over what?" Lily echoed.

“I’m going to the loo,” Sirius announced suddenly, standing up from the table and leaving them there alone. Remus watched him go, and eventually Madam Puddifoot returned with their coffees. Remus took one sip—tried not to grimace at the bitter taste—and stood.

“I’m gonna use the bog, too,” he said, before weaving his way toward the tiny hallway Sirius had disappeared down. Surprisingly, he found Sirius not waiting for the single toilet, but leaning back against the rose-papered wall and smoking a cigarette.

“Pretty sure you’re not supposed to smoke in here,” Remus said. "One stray spark and we'll go up like a matchstick."

“I just lit it,” Sirius grumbled.

Remus sighed. “Alright fine, I’ll bite. What’s the matter now?”

“It’s just not working,” Sirius said, before finally grinding the tip of his cigarette out on the bottom of his boot. “Maybe we should abort the mission. Cut our losses before something bad actually happens.”

“Like what? Like Lily and James finally finding out about us?”

“Maybe—yeah!”

“I thought you wanted this?”

“I thought I did too!”

“Well, do you want me to stop trying?”

“Yes—!” Then; *“No!”* Sirius lowered his voice before he could start shouting; “It’s just—*ugh,* get me out of this place first. I feel like I'm being felt up by a fucking doily.”

That, Remus could agree with.

They crossed back to their table together only to find James and Lily busy snogging like all the rest of the couples. They broke apart when they noticed their return, and James bashfully wiped his mouth. “Sorry, lads.”

“I guess the atmosphere really sets the mood,” Sirius grumbled.

They managed a bit more strenuous small talk while James scarfed down a few finger sandwiches and finally paid their bill and made their way back out onto the street corner. The air had cooled some

more in the early afternoon, so they all huddled close as they made their way down the snowy pavement. Eventually Remus reached out and took Sirius' chilled hand. He looked down at their fingers first, unsure, but when their eyes met again, Sirius nodded firmly. Remus smiled, and together they nervously kept on, waiting until one of their friends noticed. It took a bit of pointed gesture—swinging their hands back and forth rather animatedly for several streets—but finally James noticed.

"You two holding hands?"

"Yes!" Sirius practically gasped; "Fuck—Prongs!"

"What'd I do?!"

"Nothing! There's just something we gotta tell ya!"

"Oh... Well, in that case, I want in on some 'a this first." Looking cheeky, James took Sirius' other hand. Lily giggled at them, and then *she* grabbed Remus' free hand, and suddenly they'd gone from a twosome to a foursome, and both Remus and Sirius were left partly stunned.

"What was that you wanted to tell us?" James asked.

"Nothing," Sirius moaned. "Your boot lace is untied."

James looked down; "Huh." and pulled them all to a spectacular halt when he bent down to re-tie it—refusing to release Sirius' hand in the process.

"Maybe we should just say it," Remus muttered quietly later on, while they were clustered together between the rows of the bookshop.

"No!" Sirius hissed. "Now it's a matter of pride."

"It's always a matter of pride with you."

"Don't worry, they'll catch on eventually if we just keep dropping hints."

"I don't know how many more hints we can drop! At this point we might have to actually paint ourselves with rainbows and dance naked in the square."

"You're not funny," Sirius scowled.

“Fine, watch this then. Lily’ll get it.” Stepping away from Sirius, Remus held up a faded copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—the only moderately queer book he’d been able to find in the entire shop—and began weaving through the aisles in search of their friends. They found Lily in the philosophy section, nose already buried in a tomb the size of her head.

“Lils, I think I got a book recommendation for you—”

“Here you are, Miss,” the shop attendant started, appearing on Lily’s other side with a stack of books. Before either of them could address Remus’ recommendation, Sirius snatched *Dorian Gray* and threw it behind himself, clearing the next shelf completely.

“Thank you,” Lily told the shopkeep, before turning back to them. “What was that, Remus?”

“Oh… nothing…”

Now Remus was starting to get a headache.

“You’re making this so much harder than it has to be!” He griped, after they’d left the bookshop and stopped to replenish their cigarette supply at the local corner shop.

“I know!” Sirius moaned, dropping down on the bench outside while they waited for James to pay. It was his turn to foot the tobacco bill anyway. "It was a reflex! You'd know all about this..."

Remus sighed, collapsing down on a nearby bench. “Maybe we should just forget the whole thing.”

“I don’t want to."

“I’m starting to feel like the bad guy here.”

"And how's it feel?" Sirius snapped. He softened a second later, and hung his head. "Sorry, didn't mean that."

"I know."

"Never really thought that we'd get here, to be honest. Thought you'd back out before we got close... sort of like, well..."

He said the last bit very quietly, and Remus felt his entire chest sink.

"I'm not Miles, Sirius."

"I know!" He whimpered, slumping back on the bench. "You're nothing alike—not really, and I never I think of him unless I'm depressed. Miles and I, we were fourteen, and he was a great friend, but your Moony! That's what James said to me, you know. Way back in our first year together? I hated you... thought you were taking his place or something, but there you were with that sharp mouth and all those freckles—you were too hard not to like! And James, he... He said —'Sirius, if you want him to be our friend, you can't compare them anymore'. See, Potter wanted to be your friend first, not me. He was the one who helped open my eyes, and I'm grateful for it everyday."

"Why can't we say that to him? Either of us..."

"Fear, I suppose."

"Change," Remus nodded. "I never thought we'd get here either. Figured that you and I—that we—well.. That we could actually love each other. Thought it'd just fall about first, and we'd have to go back to being friends."

"We'll always be friends, Moons," Sirius said. "That's never gonna change. Loving you's just a bonus."

Oh god, he thought, *I love you so much.*

“Sirius, do you really think James Potter—your bestest friend in the world and the nicest guy we know—and *Lily Evans*—my bestest friend and champion for underdogs everywhere! Do you think that they could take that from us?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“See! I don’t think so either! Not anymore... But I need us to communicate—that’s what’s most important here, and I’m not gonna blame you if you decide that you’re not ready. I don’t care what happened before. I just want you. In whatever capacity. And that’s the truth.”

“But what happens if we don’t tell them? What about when school ends? What about the band and London?”

“Fuck London. We’ll figure it out as we go.”

Sirius looked up then, all stormy-grey eyes. “I really want to kiss you right now.”

“Well…” Remus hummed; “What’s stopping you?”

Sirius sucked on his bottom lip, glancing around at the street, before jumping up from the bench. He caught Remus’ arm and dragged him around the side of the corner shop, into the tiny alleyway they’d cut through earlier. More than a little eager, Remus began to chase Sirius' lips with his own, but before he could claim them, he found himself pressed up against the side of the brick.

"I said I'm kissing you, didn't I?"

Oh. Remus didn’t mind; Sirius’ kiss warmed him—scorching his lips in their desperate fever and all the teenage lust they could muster. Not that he had much time to fantasize before they were interrupted.

"Wow. Don't you two look busy."

"JAMES!" Sirius yelped, at the same time Remus went; "LILY!"

"Thank your lucky stars it's not," Nicole snorted. Marlene stood beside her, both girls hiding a sparse giggle behind their gloved fingers.

“Sorry to interrupt your fun, but you’re not exactly swimming in privacy."

"Tell me about it," Sirius gasped mournfully, doubling-over as Marlene and Nicole’s giggling turned to full-blown cackles. “Bloody fuck—it’s only you two. Damn—what’s a couple ‘a lads gotta do for a few minutes alone?”

“Not snog each other in the middle of town, for one.”

“I was actually enjoying the show quite a bit,” Nicole said, stepping forward and smacking Sirius on the back none-too-gently. “What’s got you two so furiously hot and randy in the middle of the day?”

“Best not ask,” Remus moaned.

Marlene smiled and came forward, playfully jabbing Remus in the side with her elbow. “Your guardian angels must be working overtime. You’re lucky it was us who caught you. I thought you were going around with James and Lily today?”

“We are. They’re around the corner getting the fags.”

“Ooh, mind if I bum a few later?” Nicole asked. “My roommate normally gets them from her older sister, but she’s been stingy lately.”

"Yeah, don't mind."

"Where's Macdonald, McKinnon?" Sirius asked. "Thought she'd sworn not to let you out of her sight today?"

"Lost her by the buses," Marlene said, rubbing her arm sorely. Next to her Nicole had turned stoney and Remus got the feeling that the topic had already been bridged that day, under less than ideal circumstances.

“Mary’s on a date of her own," Nicole said. "Haven’t seen her all day.”

“You mean she didn’t try and crash yours like she promised she would?” Sirius asked. It was clearly a joke, but Sirius had never been particularly astute at reading a room.

“Oh, she tried."

Marlene nudged her. "Nicole..."

"What? It's not my fault she doesn't know when to quit. Really, it’s like having half the school at her beck and call isn’t enough. She needs Marlene to wait on her hand and foot too.”

“She doesn’t,” Marlene insisted quietly.

“Wait,” Remus started, “Mary knows about you two?”

“No,” Nicole replied sharply. “She *doesn’t.”*

Marlene sighed tiredly. “I told you she’s just jealous. She isn’t used to sharing me.”

“Who the fuck needs to ‘share’ their best friend? She’s being petty, and she sulks whenever she doesn’t get her way. It’s irritating.”

“You can’t just call my friends irritating!”

“Fine, let’s get an outside opinion.” Nicole turned on Sirius. “Black, if Remus’ best friend kept coming around to crash your time together and then sulked when you tried to put up boundaries, wouldn’t you be pissed off?”

Sirius threw his arms out. "Uh—fuck yeah. Man, you have no idea how close to home this hits."

Nicole rounded on Marlene. "See?"

"Sirius!"

“Okay honestly, if I’d put up boundaries we wouldn’t be on a double-date with Evans and Potter in the first place,” Sirius finished, utterly blasé.

“Mary doesn’t know we’re together,” Marlene reasoned. “She just thinks I’m ditching her to hang out with someone else.”

“Well, Mary should learn how to *share,”* Nicole said finally, before huffing and stepping past them all. “I’m gonna go find a lav. See you later, Remus—Black.”

They watched her go, and Marlene rocked back and forth awkwardly in her winter boots. “Sorry guys,” she sighed. “It’s turned into a bit of an ongoing thing.”

“I didn’t realise Mary cared so much,” Remus said. "When'd this all start?"

“When Nicole came to mine for Christmas?" She winced. "I think Mary took it to heart. I’ve never had her over, so… But then she said some stuff in front of Nicole and they just blew up on each other. I love Mary, I do—but everything concerning money just goes right over her head. She doesn’t think classes even exist anymore. Nicole gets it a bit more, I think. She’s only here because her uncle offered to pay her tuition. Her dad runs a bakery.” Marlene put her hands up suddenly, shaking her head. “But listen to me go off. I should probably go after her. You guys have fun with Lily and Potter.”

“We’re going to the Three Broomsticks later if you want to join,” Sirius called, as Marlene disappeared around the corner of the alley, after her girlfriend. “Geez, women. Can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em.”

“I think the same can be said for either of us,” Remus smirked.

They met back up with James and Lily on the street corner, both of them concerned over where they’d disappeared to. After brushing their worries off, Remus held his hand out for his package of cigarettes and Lily handed him a rather thick chocolate bar instead.

“No smoking on my birthday."

“It’s not your birthday yet."

Lily shrugged simply and began strolling ahead, linking arms with Sirius. As she did, James appeared at Remus' elbow and gently slipped a pack of smokes into his coat pocket. "Remember, you and I? We never talked," he grinned dopily.

Arm-in-arm, the four of them made their way across town toward the little pub, the sun finally slipping from the sky and leaving only the occasional lamppost to light their way. It was far too late for a walk around the pond now, which disappointed him. But unbeknownst to them, their luck hadn't run out entirely.

"If you could be any vegetable, what vegetable would you be?" Lily asked James. Remus wasn't sure how it'd started (usually Mary was the one that suggested these things) but somewhere along the walk over they'd picked up a game of questions.

"Definitely a squash," James answered.

"That was a quick answer. Why a squash?"

"Why not? They're so versatile. Would you still love me as a squash?"

"Perhaps. Though if you start growing mould then all bets are off."

"Padfoot, did you hear that? Her love's conditional!"

"All love's conditional," Sirius replied snidely. "You're lucky it takes you becoming a fucking pumpkin for her to have doubts."

Lily beamed at him, and James just snorted. "Alright then, Padfoot, your turn. If you were a girl for a day, what's the first thing you'd do?"

"I'd do Moony," Sirius said automatically.

James gaped. "Moony?"

"Yeah. You know, just to see how it feels."

"You mean you wouldn't do *me?"*

Now it was Sirius' turn to gape. "You?! That's fucking nasty, you're my best mate!"

"So's Moony!"

They both looked at each other then—Sirius and Remus—and knew

without saying anything aloud at all that their moment had finally come. They slowed their walk beneath a single buzzing street light and James and Lily both paused, looking at them expectantly. The Three Broomsticks was just a short way beyond them now, and they could almost make out its nightly clamour of noise and patrons, but there would be no intimate freedom to confess in there. If they wanted their friends to finally know about them, it had to be now.

“Is everything alright?” Asked Lily.

“Yeah, s’fine, Evans,” Sirius said, sounding uncharacteristically grim.

“Then why do you both look like you just swallowed a tack?”

Sirius glanced at him, and Remus nodded. *No more fear. Just take the plunge.*

“Prongs, ask Moony the same question you asked me.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I mean the same question.”

“Like if he were a girl?”

“I’d do Sirius!" Remus blabbed.

“You'd what? Okay, I don’t follow." James looked at Lily, then scratched the side of his head. "You guys have been acting weird all day, now what's going on? You planning a surprise party?" He gasped. "Wait! You've planned a surprise party for Daisy, haven't you!"

Lily smacked him. "Potter, shut up and let them say what they're trying to say."

As James rubbed his arm, Remus took a deep breath. “James, Lily, there's no surprise party, but we do have something to tell you. It's..."

"Go ahead Remus."

"It's about us. You see, the two of us… That is, Sirius and I… We—ergh…”

“Yes?”

“We… Sirius… Erm, well—*Siriuswaswithmeallsummer!”*

Sirius slapped a hand over his eyes. “Oh, Jesus."

“What d’you mean?” James asked automatically, then his eyes bulged in realisation. “Hold on—*all* summer?”

“Not the whole thing, just most of August.”

“But you told us that it was only a few days. That he’d just gotten back from Belgium!”

“Yeah, we know, but—”

James whirled on Sirius. “You liar! What were you doing at Moony’s all that time?”

“Aren’t you listening? I was doing M—”

“Sirius! Don’t you have any tact?” Remus hissed.

“What? I thought you wanted to be out with it?”

Lily scrunched her face up, waving her hands about as if to clear the air. “Stop, stop, just stop—now what does the summer have to do with what you’re trying to tell us?”

“Yes!” Sirius exclaimed. “What does it?”

“I just thought we should come clean about all of it,” Remus reasoned. “You don’t wash one dirty dish, right, you wash ‘em all.”

“All? *ALL?* What we gonna recount the bloody Sex Pistols concert for them next?”

“You went to see the Sex Pistols?” James half-shouted. “WITHOUT US?!”

“That really has nothing to do with this,” Remus cried. “We'd barely done anything before that. Just—look, Prongs—we only mean that there's a lot going on here that you don't know about.”

“CLEARLY! What, you gonna tell us you shook hands with the Queen next?”

“Sure, a type of queen,” Sirius said under his breath. “And only if by ‘shaking hands’ you mean—”

Remus cleared his throat pointedly. “While Sirius was at my house,

some stuff happened. Or really, it started before that—here—at school. Nothing crazy though! ... Just that time in the toilet."

"I'm sorry—the *toilet?"*

"It was one time," Sirius said. "That year, anyway."

Lily's hands flew to her mouth.

"I knew that Sirius was like *that* for a while," Remus reasoned, "but I never thought that *I* could be... I mean I was with Marlene for so long—but then there was the stuff at the piano, and we just… I dunno, it made sense when it happened."

"What piano?" James demanded. "What *stuff?!"*

"Moony—"

Remus flew past him, he couldn't stop. He was a rollercoaster going down.

"I didn't know what was going on, it was so mixed up! Like I'm still not totally like that, but I'm definitely *like that*—and being with Sirius is so—but then I TOTALLY fucked things up after that shit with Tomny. Like *TOTALLY!"*

"Moony!"

"And then there was all that crap with Jillian—ugh! And then you, James—and then because that wasn't enough it was Regulus, then bloody Christmas—and we both fucked up *so* badly and I just fucking ran off, who *KNOWS* what I was thinking. And then Sirius got angry and Tomny was there, *and I just—"*

"Remus!" This time it was Lily, holding her arms up as though he were some frantic animal she was trying to calm. "Just take a breath! Now what are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say is that you and James are on a date today, but so ARE SIRIUS AND ME!"

James' mouth slackened. "You mean like... as friends?"

Sirius threw his arms out; *"OH FOR CHRIST'S SAKE—!"*

Then he grabbed Remus by the collar, pulled him down to his level, and kissed him full on the mouth. It was a jostling manoeuvre—their

teeth knocked sharply enough to make Remus hiss—but he was kissing Sirius, and somehow it made everything feel alright in the world.

When they pulled apart, Sirius released his hold on the front of Remus' coat and spun around to face their friends. "There! HAPPY?!"

James just stared at them, wide-eyed as a goldfish. *"Huh?* Wha—? You just—"

"Oh my," Lily said softly, covering her mouth again. If Remus weren't mistaken, she almost looked impressed.

"It's not the first time either," Sirius said staunchly. "I think what our normally-so-astute Moony was *trying* to say is that… Well, we're together. Have been for a while now and we—we wanted to tell you about it because you're our… Shit, you're our best friends."

James' jaw opened even wider, but Lily just dropped her hand.

"Oh blimey, *I already knew that!"*

The first moments of silence were palpable, then—all three of them at once; *"YOU DID?!"*

"Of course!" She turned on James. "How could you have *not* known, you live with them!"

James sputtered, looking between his friends and girlfriend as though he might be saved from his own ignorance. "What? You're blaming me? What about them?! They didn't exactly plaster it on the wall with a neon sign."

"Yeah, you're welcome for that," Sirius huffed.

"Does anyone else know?" Lily urged.

Sirius opened his mouth to answer, but Remus got there first. "No," he said, eyeing his boyfriend sharply. They couldn't tell them Marlene knew—not without them asking why, and Marlene's sexuality was her business. It took a second, but finally Sirius nodded, understanding.

"Just Lottie."

"You told Lottie?"

"No, she sort of sorted it out on her own."

Lily stamped her foot. "Well, so did I! Some of us are just more discreet."

"How long have you known?" Remus moaned.

"Since Halloween."

"Halloween?" James hollered. "HALLOWEEN?! You mean to say that the two of you have been bunking off together since *HALLOWEEN?!"*

"No, we said summer," Sirius replied, looking as chuffed as Lily. "Keep up, Potter."

James went pale, and Remus imagined little bits of him chipping off like crumbling stone as he realised that at least half of his closest friends had been lying to him.

"Sorry, Prongs. Things just got sort of… muddled."

"You're bloody telling me!" James pressed a hand over his heart and took a deep breath. "So the two of you are—what, boyfriends??"

"Yeah."

"Since *summer?"*

Sirius bristled a bit. "If you've got such a problem with me loving Moony then you—"

"Love?!"

"Er..."

"Are you really in love with each other?" Lily asked hopefully.

They exchanged a look, both blushing in the darkness, and shared a nod.

By now James looked positively haggard. "Then all that stuff at Christmas…" He warbled. "That was... what a couple's fight?"

"Yeah," Sirius winced; "Not our best moment, I will admit. Sorry the rest of you had to put up with us. But we put up with your and Evan's nonsense for twice as long. Moony went to a lot of trouble playing matchmaker, you know."

"That was some of my best work," Remus added, closing the gap

between him and Sirius and reaching around to hold him by the waist. They shared a happy look, before Remus glanced back at James, who was still standing stunned, and remembered that they might not entirely be out of the woods just yet.

“You okay there, Prongs…?” Sirius said, voice hitching.

James didn’t say anything at first, just stared at the damp cobblestone street in silence until Lily ultimately looked up at him and smacked him on the arm for a second time.

“OW!?”

“You’re worrying your friends!”

“Oh.” Rubbing his arm, James straightened up and cleared his throat. He looked each of them dead on, firmly. “You’re for real about this? The two of you—together?”

“Yes, we are,” Sirius said.

“And you’re happy?”

This time it was Remus’ turn to answer; “So happy.”

James crossed his arms. "I'm a bit mad, to be honest."

"Figured you might be," Sirius mumbled.

"You didn't tell me, why?"

"It wasn't that easy."

"James," Lily took his arm. "They're telling you now."

He looked at her, then back at the two of them, and finally all of the strain seemed to smelt from his muscles. "Did you two really go see the Sex Pistols without us?"

"Sorry," Sirius sniggered. "But it was really fucking cool."

"UGH!" James swept forward, hugging them both. "Fucking twats, both of you. Never again, you hear me?"

Remus heard Sirius hum happily—giddily—and then all three of them were hugging.

This is it, the little voice said, finally content. *This is what family feels like.*

Well, almost.

Cradled tightly in James and Sirius' embrace, Remus held out another arm to Lily, who was standing off to the side, quietly wiping beneath her eyes. She caught the gesture and nearly whimpered before surging forward and squeezing herself into his side.

"I'm so happy!" She cried, voice muffled where she pressed her face into James' side.

"I guess now's not the time to tell you it was all a joke then?" Sirius teased.

Remus felt a hard pinch on his arm and yelped, throwing himself backward and breaking up the hug.

"Oops! Sorry, Remus, I was trying to get Sirius."

They all finished their walk to the Three Broomsticks hand in hand, but this time it meant something different to all of them. And yet it didn't *feel* any different. There was no change, just a feeling of happiness—a feeling that, Remus was coming to realise, came with a lot less guilt than he'd ever imagined possible.

"So how did snuff us out anyway, Evans?" Sirius asked, as the pub's yellow lights fell into view. "You said Halloween?"

"Yes. I figured that unless John Lennon had made a special appearance at our school party just to kiss Remus on the mouth, I had pretty good odds."

"Huh?"

"Oh, Black, really. Not every ghost wears satin lime-green trousers and high top trainers."

"Only you would be looking at his shoes when he's kissing Moony in front of half the school," said James.

"Plenty of people want to kiss Remus. Had to narrow it down somehow."

Remus' cheeks turned warm, but Sirius only looked more smug. Beside him, James raised his hands up behind his head, looking well-pleased

himself.

“Well Black, I at least hope you’re a better kisser now than that time you and I had a go. For Moony's sake.”

For a moment Remus thought he might’ve heard him wrong. Lily too, appeared to be questioning her hearing as they all stopped dead in their tracks. Sirius looked horrified.

“I’m sorry,” Lily gaped. “But the two of you have…?”

“We did not *have a go!”* Sirius howled. “It was one time, and it was an accident!”

“Bet you liked it though, didn't you, Padfoot."

“I did not!"

Remus looked down at Sirius in utter disbelief. "You kissed James?"

"It was an accident!" He insisted.

"When?"

"Your birthday, Moons, eleventh year." James smirked. "Suppose he was too frigid to try it on you back then."

"Shut up!"

"Did you like it?" Lily asked him.

"It was alright. Could’ve used a bit more enthusiasm.”

Sirius punched James in the arm, hard enough to make everyone flinch. “I said shut up! It was barely a peck, you nob! It was dark and we were both drunk as hell. Plus I nearly chipped a tooth on that fat face of yours!”

“Oi, that was a fond memory for me, thank you very much,” James pouted. “I really thought our friendship reached new heights in that toilet.”

“The TOILET?” Remus laughed, as Sirius abandoned all reasoning and promptly tackled James into the snow.

"See, this is how it happened last time, Padfoot! Careful, Moons. Think your—*eugh!*—man's trying to have another go!”

“He’s lying! I tripped!”

“Yeah, right into my mouth! HA!”

“Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!”

Sirius grabbed Remus' hand, and attempted to drag him on ahead to the pub. This didn't seem to bother Lily, or James, who simply cupped his hands around his mouth to holler after them.

“So did you two, like—do stuff in the dorm? ‘Cause it's totally fine if you did! But how MUCH stuff exactly…?"

Chapter End Notes

> Maybe this is late, idk. Originally it was two chapters but I felt they worked together as one so it took fucking forever to edit. It might be wonky, there's probably mistakes, but I feel the wonkiness fits the theme. Anyone who's ever come out should know the feeling.
>
> Happy Stranger Things day! Oh, and also becca?? no bathroom comments, pff x

Chapter 87: The Anti-Valentine's Day

Chapter Summary

It's Valentine's at Hawkings; love is in the air, and the world is on fire.

Chapter Notes

I posted the unedited version of this chapter on accident the first time around, so if you read it without seeing this note it was a mistake!

Author's Note!!!: Due to a conflicting work schedule, I've decided to make upload day Sundays of every week. This will hopefully make it so my uploads aren't as late in the day anymore.

Next upload: July 17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You're a rich girl, and you've gone too far,
'Cause you know it don't matter anyway;
You can rely on the old man's money,
You can rely on the old man's money;

It's a bitch girl but it's gone too far,
'Cause you know it don't matter anyway;
Say money, but it won't get you too far,
Get you too far...

- "Rich Girl" Hall & Oates, 1977

Not long after the trip into Craigtyre, Remus told Marlene everything. About Lily and James, how they'd taken the news and the wonderful way they'd accepted it without question. A part of him had been almost afraid to tell her; he'd wrapped up his story with the assurance that there was no need for her to do the same, and that neither he nor Sirius had told them anything about her and Nicole.

Afterwards Marlene was quiet for a long time. Remus sat quietly too, waiting for her to process it all, and eventually he felt the gentle nudge of Marlene's pinky finger against his own.

“Tell me again?” She asked, her voice barely a whisper. “Tell me again what they said?”

He did.

* * *

Friday 10th February 1978

Sometimes it was easy for Remus to believe they could be a real band someday.

“ ‘She’s soft as butter, call me a nutter’?” Sirius glanced up from the notebook with an incredulous look. “Really, mate?”

James nodded enthusiastically. “It’s a metaphor.”

And sometimes... less easy.

It was near the end of their music period, final class of the day, and amidst the clamour of twenty other students all practising, the four Marauders had sequestered themselves in their usual spot near the back of the room, all surrounding Peter’s drum kit. Sirius had taken James’ notebook and was flipping through it, looking for potential material, though so far little had been found. Sufficiently amused, Peter reached over and took the notebook, eyes scanning the page as he laughed.

“You call her ‘sweet as sugar’ in the next verse. What, are you baking a cake?”

“I said it’s a metaphor!” James snapped.

“For what?”

“Her voice, duh!”

“And the butter?” Sirius asked. “What’s that supposed to signify?”

“Her… body! You know, like butter-soft skin! Lily’s got great skin.”

“Yeah, so great she’d likely *skin* you alive the moment you read it to her.”

James snatched his notebook back from Peter and reached over to smack Sirius over the head with it. “I’m bloody trying my best here. Valentine’s is next week and Moony's been no help at all.”

“I refuse to be the Pete Townshend of Marauders,” Remus said staunchly, sitting a few seats away and flicking lazily at his bass.

“Do either of you know what he’s saying?” James snarked. “I never have any idea what he’s saying.”

“He means he’s not gonna write all the songs, which he *doesn’t.* Check this.” Sirius tossed a paper ball at Remus’ head, which he caught out of the air and unfolded, shooting Sirius a coltish smile before glancing down at the page.

Pretty darling, spiteful darling,
You’re cutting my cords, pulling my strings;
Pretty honey, spiteful honey,
You’re twisting my words, stealing my rings;

Why won’t you love me?
Why can’t you be true?
Spiteful darling, I swore I’d come through.

“Any good?” Sirius asked.

“Maybe. Put a few chords to it and we’ll see.”

“Smug prat.” Smirking, Sirius turned away with a pencil already in hand. Remus couldn’t help but stare after him, temporarily enthralled by the faint bruise he could see forming just behind his ear, but then Peter was twirling his drumsticks again and the sharp crash of the cymbal pulled him back to earth.

“Okay guys, rubbish songs away. Do me a favour and just give this a listen.” Without any further prompting, Peter swiftly launched into a rather glorious drum fill, one that left them all bobbing their heads along with the rhythm. It was good—swift and sharp and able to catch anyone by the ear with little effort. By the time he’d finished, half the class had stopped to listen and there were several whoops from the other percussionists.

“Blimey, sounds great, Pete!” James cried. “Did you really write that all on your own?”

Peter spun his drumsticks, looking almost miffed. “Obviously. I *can* play my own instrument, you know. Have you even finished that song translation for class yet? It’s already overdue.”

“No, but that's hardly my fault."

"Who's fault is it then?"

James scowled and crossed his arms over his guitar. "I can hear the bloody notes just fine, alright? It’s the 'writing them down' part that can suck a nob.”

“Well, I’ll do it for you if you give me that song,” Peter offered. “I need something to give Moira for Valentine’s that isn’t another painting and I still can’t write lyrics for shit.”

James looked down at his metaphorical cake song and nodded. “Fucking deal, mate.”

“Yeah, remind me never to date either of you,” Sirius said, just as Sheila took her spot up at the front of the classroom, wrapping her conductor’s baton against the podium to get everyone’s attention.

“Alright, let’s get going,” she trilled. “That was more than enough practice time I think, and I’d like to get through one good rendition of ‘Sweet Caroline’ before we go!”

There was a chorus of groans.

“Oh, c’mon now! It’s a classic!”

“I hate that song," Sirius grumbled under his breath. "Neil Diamond can suck *my* nob."

More rapping from the baton.

“Alright, song books open! ‘Sweet Caroline’ from the top! Starting with clarinets. And a one, and a two—” Suddenly a knock came on the classroom door and Sheila dropped her arms. “Ah, alright… Everyone practise your C major scale while I get this!”

As their teacher went to the door and the class erupted back into its dull racket, Remus began fretting absent-mindedly across his E string while Sirius scooted his chair closer. “Hey Moony, Sheila’s fit enough for her age, right? Think she's got any Valentine’s plans? ”

“How would I know?”

“You’ve got eyes.”

“I mean how would I know if she has plans, idiot.”

“ ‘Cause. She likes you best.”

No way, Remus thought to himself. In fact he was almost positive she couldn't have, at least not after the way they’d left things since January. Often he went back and forth over the things he'd said to her and whether she deserved them or not; some days they felt too harsh. She'd obviously wanted to tell him something important, but if it was anything like 'Tad was a quick wit too' then Remus didn't care to hear it.

"She doesn't like me best."

“Sure she does,” Sirius sang, unaware of Remus’ internal turmoil. “She was your mum's best friend, she knew your dad, and now she's your teacher! That's more than just a coincidence, it's like you’ve got this crazy cosmic connection or something. I bet if you asked her out for Valentine's she’d say yes.”

“She’s our teacher. And she’s *married.”*

“Oh, well she’d just be being polite, of course.”

Remus shot his boyfriend a look. “So I should leave you alone on Valentine’s then?”

“Pfft, you think *I’d* get stuck alone on the most romantic holiday of the year? As if.”

“Now who’s being the smug prat? You just want me to get jealous so that I'll take you out myself."

"Maybe." Sirius wiggled his shoulders with a contented hum. “Does this mean we’re doing something for Valentine’s?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a corporate holiday designed for capitalist gain. And I hate it.”

“You hate everything.”

“Correct.”

“Even me.”

“Depends on the day, really.”

“Oi.” Offended, Sirius reached over and began messing with the Fender’s keys, which Remus had just finished tuning. Horrified, he punched Sirius in the arm for it, who held his shoulder with a pained smile. “Hey, you hear from Tomny lately?”

The question caught Remus off guard. He’d been trying hard not to think too hard about Tomny; there’d been no news since he’d said he was going up to Immingham for work and fretting over it helped no one.

“No,” he answered, “but it’s a long job. He said he'd be busy.”

“Sad you'll be missing him for Easter? 'Course, it's not like I'd let you run off without me again."

“For the thousandth time, you don’t need to be jealous of Tomny.”

“Are you kidding me? He’s like if the local drug-dealer and Robert Redford had a baby. And he’s always staring at you with those eyes.”

“What eyes?”

“ ‘Fuck me’ eyes.”

“Okay, why don’t you *fuck off?”* Remus spluttered, suddenly desperate to change the subject. “What about you? Have you heard from Regulus at all?”

“Not really,” Sirius dismissed. “The guy I talk to in the kitchen—Ginger—he said there’s been a lot of people coming and going, probably private tutors. If I had to guess it’s their way of keeping him away from others—away from *me*. They’re probably gonna force him to finish school at home.”

“Shit.”

Sirius nodded. “I’ll keep calling though. At least until I get the cheeky turd to send a postcard with my name on it.”

Remus smiled. It was good to hear Sirius dedicated to helping Regulus, even if it was mostly just born of guilt. He opened his mouth

to say something, but before he could, Sheila was back at the front of the room, a pair of girls standing next to her. Remus knew them both; they were prefects, sixth form girls named Marie and Eugenia.

“It seems we have an announcement,” Sheila called. “Go ahead, Marie.”

Marie faced the class, her blonde ponytail bobbing behind her. “As you all know," she started, "it’s Valentine’s Day next week, and as co-heads of the dance club we’re happy to report that Hawkings is hosting a school dance!”

"And we expect everyone to be there!" Eugenia added enthusiastically.

A surprised murmur immediately broke out around the room. As head of the college, Professor McGonagall was notorious for her dislike of everything frivolous and disco-related. She maintained the open opinion that such events were only a thinly-veiled excuse for poor behaviour, and therefore hadn’t allowed for one to be held in years.

“It’s a Sadie Hawkins dance,” Marie continued. "Apparently they're very popular in America, and we just thought, Hawkings—Hawkins. It's cute."

"It's swell!" Eugenia added again.

Between the two of them, the girls unfurled a large poster for everyone to see. *Sadie has come to Hawkings!* It read; *Ladies choice! Gather your beau and meet us in the Great Hall on Tuesday February 14th. Doors at 6PM.*

“Who’s ‘Sadie Hawkins’?” One of the trombones asked.

“It just means girls ask guys,” Marie explained. “But it’s a chance to let our hair down. School spirit and all that! There’ll be music—food too. The dress code is black tie. That means suits and ties for the boys, and formal gowns for girls."

"And remember you need a date to get in!" Eugenia—again. "Can't get in without one."

“But you just said girls have to ask the guys!” Another—a trumpet, whined.

“Well yeah, duh. A girl’s gotta ask you first.”

There was some giggling—mostly from the girls in the strings section—and Remus looked around to see several of his male classmates looking severely discouraged. Then Sirius raised his hand, a rarity for him. Marie jumped on it immediately, shushing the rest of the class rather violently as he pointed her painted finger at him.

"Yes, Sirius?"

“What sort of music are you playing?”

“Dancing music, obviously," she giggled. "Dorset House has volunteered to come up with the playlist. But you can let us know if you have any suggestions!”

“Oh yeah, I have a few suggestions. How about some Black Sabbath?”

Marie's face fell. “Uhm, it’s a *Valentine’s* dance. The music should probably be more... romantic.”

“Ozzy is very romantic,” James bolstered, sniggering along with his best friend.

“Yeah," Sirius agreed, "you can totally bump and grind to ‘Sabbath Bloody Sabbath’.”

To illustrate their point, both James and Sirius began to wiggle in their seats, singing together; *“ ‘Sabbath bloody Sabbath—nothing more to do! Living just for dying—DYING JUST FOR YOU!’ ”*

None of the girls looked all that impressed, but the rest of the boys showed their support by cheering loud enough that Sheila had to rap her baton on the conductor's podium again.

"Alright, that's enough! Thank you, Mr. Black."

Grinning, Sirius pushed his hair up out of his eyes. “See, Marie? 'S very romantic!”

Marie's smile could've curdled milk, but Remus was pleased. Perhaps this meant that one less girl would be looking to ask his boyfriend to waltz with them.

Across the room, another girl raised her hand and waited patiently to be picked.

“Will this be a chaperoned dance?” She asked, once Marie had beckoned her on.

“Mhm! Yes.”

Another chorus of groans, and Sheila had to bang one of the class gongs just to get them to shut up this time.

“I’m *sure* that Professor McGonagall wouldn’t have approved the dance if it weren’t being monitored, so whatever nonsense you were already planning inside those little brains of yours—you can forget it."

Remus couldn't be sure, but he suspected she was talking straight to the marauders with that last bit.

“Several of the teachers have already agreed to chaperone,” Marie said. “And us prefects will be there too.”

“Guess you do have Valentine’s plans after all, Moons,” Sirius said snidely, while Remus dropped his head back with a moan.

“Well, there then. Sounds like fun. Is that all? Thank you, girls.” Sheila clapped her hands together just as the bell went and everyone cheered—no ‘Sweet Caroline’.

“Alright, you got off easy today! But I want all overdue work in my office box by Sunday night! Have a wonderful weekend!”

James leapt up from his seat with equal vigour. “Looks like you’ve got homework due, Pete. Remember our deal!” He cackled, as Peter threw a drumstick at him.

While the rest of the class went about its usual scuffling, stacking chairs and returning instruments, Remus bent over to fit the Fender back into his case. As he did, someone delivered a stinging smack to his behind, making him practically drop the thing as he shot upright.

“C’mon Moons, get a leg on, I’m starving and it’s lamb for dinner,” Sirius complained, waiting for him with his guitar case in one hand and a bored look on his face. He caught Remus’ expression and raised a brow. “What’s that look for?”

“What do you think? How 'bout you don’t smack me on the arse for starters!”

“Aw, don’t get your pants in a twist, guys do it to each other all the time on the field.”

Remus practically sputtered; “In case you haven’t noticed, Sirius,

we're in a *music* classroom."

"Alright, I won't do it again, ya tart. No one was watching anyway."

"Almost no one," James cut-in, appearing at their side with his guitar. Sirius smirked at him.

"Peeping Tom."

They slugged their way back to the dining hall together, convening at their usual table with dinner in hand. Already a huge banner had been hung on the far wall advertising the dance, and a couple of Dorset girls had set up a table in the corner underneath to hand out flyers and collect song requests for their playlist. It was obvious they'd worked hard on them; several of the heart-strewn flyers had made it onto their table, each featuring a cheesy love poem.

"They really had to reach deep for these," Sirius said, reading one over. "Maybe you should've helped them out, Moons. Bet you would've been ace at it."

"Sod off. You read one since you're so desperate."

Sirius acquiesced, because of course he did, and promptly cleared his throat. " 'Knock, knock'."

James answered, over a mouthful of food. " 'oo's there?"

"Peas."

" 'ees, 'oo?"

" 'Will you *peas* be my valentine'?"

James swallowed, then grimaced. "Blimey, not even Professor Binns would fall for that one."

"Darn." Sirius began folding the flier up into a paper aeroplane, which when thrown, soared all the way across the room to land in one of the bowls of potato salad along the lunch line.

"I don't think it will be all bad actually," Lottie said, bringing the conversation back around to the dance. "I heard they're gonna serve alcohol."

"It's mulled cider," Marlene dismissed. "They serve it at the Three Broomsticks. You'd be lucky to drink a dozen cups and feel even

slightly tipsy."

“I’ll bet we could spike it,” Sirius suggested. "Then it'd be a real party. Not just some namby 'Sadie Porkins' ball or whatever."

"It's Sadie *Hawkins,"* Lily corrected. "Like a Spinsters' Ball, though I think this name is kinder. I read about them once in one of my grandma's old 'Picture Post' magazines. Some American colleges even have a whole day dedicated to it."

“I still don’t understand though,” Peter sighed. "We aren't allowed to ask you girls at all? Why?"

“Because. It reverses gender roles and gives women a chance to make the first move without being ‘socially taboo’."

“But what’s so taboo about a girl asking a guy to a dance?” Asked James.

Lily glanced at Marlene, and together they rolled their eyes. Remus could see it now—*men.*

While James looked at Peter, eyebrows knit together in concern, Sirius leaned over and elbowed him suggestively. “What's 'a matter, lads? Afraid your own girlfriends won’t ask you to the dance?”

“Shove off,” James grumbled, before swinging his head toward Lily, who smiled and poked him in the nose with the end of her fork.

“Well, I also think it’s a perfectly stupid idea,” Mary announced.

“I agree!” Marlene cried. "You know it started as a joke against women, right? The girls would chase the men and if she caught him and dragged him across the finish line he'd have to legally marry her."

“Not that," Mary scoffed. "I just think it's stupid to fix something that isn't broken. I mean, what’s so wrong about wanting a bloke to get down on one knee and beg for a scrap of your attention for one day?”

Marlene immediately pressed her fingers to her forehead. *“Lord have mercy.”*

“A bit disgruntled because this means less suitors will be strolling up to your door, Macdonald?” Sirius smirked.

“They don’t stroll, they *run,* Sirius Black.” Mary reached up and twirled a dark curl around one finger. “And I'm in a right state. I don’t

even know who I'd ask! ... Normally I take stock after the fact, and even then, last year I was horribly double-booked."

"You could ask one of us," Sirius suggested.

"Hm... Alright. Remus, are you free on the fourteenth?"

Remus sucked his tea back sharply, leaving him coughing so violently that Lily had to smack him on the back until he was done. *"Me?"*

"Why not you? You're the only single bloke here I haven't already snogged."

"Er—Sorry, Mary... can't."

Mary clicked her tongue sourly but paused when she noticed Marlene had begun to quietly laugh.

"What are you sniggering about?"

"Nothing. Not you—I'm just thinking about how funny it's gonna be when his *other* invitations start rolling in."

She gestured to Remus with her spoon, and everyone turned on him. James and Lily both understood the joke immediately and had to hide their smiles, but Remus had yet to think so far ahead. Already he had a prefectural obligation to show up, but if a girl appeared under the influence of Sadie Hawkins herself and asked him to go, then he'd have to make up another excuse. Bugger. The horror must've shown on his face, as the next moment all of his friends were laughing, save Peter.

"I don't get it, why's it such a big deal if someone asks Moony?" Peter questioned.

"It's a *dance,* Wormtail," Sirius said. "That means everyone would have to bear witness to a dancing Moony. Can't think of anything more terrifying, to be honest."

Remus hadn't even the capacity to be offended. It was true.

"What about you then, Black? Surely you're eager to show off," Mary sneered. "Or can you not dance either?"

"Of course I can dance! I was doing the waltz before I could walk. Doesn't mean I'm gonna go, though. Having McGonagall breathe down the back of my neck while I sip on Aperol Spritz isn't my idea of

a good time. Nah, I think I'll leave the awkward swaying and frigid hand-holding to the rest of you."

"I'm with Sirius," Marlene said.

Now it was Mary's turn to groan. "C'mon, Marls, don't let Black's poor attitude get to you. I know you've always been pretty 'anti-Valentine', but really, you could ask out whoever you wanted! Though if I were you, I'd start with the tallest blokes and work my way down from there. They'd be stupid to say no."

"Well thanks for that," Marlene snapped suddenly. "Glad to know I'm not entirely hopeless, but I'm still not gonna go."

"Alright, calm down. It was only a joke," Mary said staunchly; "I know, how about I help you pick one out? I heard Harvey Craft's on the lookout. He's tall, been to the library once or twice. I'm sure he'd make a fine date. Or there's always Warner Caldwell. He's a bit naff, but that just means he won't be intimidated when you start leading during the slow dances."

Marlene slammed her cup down on the table.

"You are *so* dense sometimes! I said I'm not going and I bloody meant it, *now leave me alone!"*

The table fell deadly quiet and Remus swallowed a sour taste in his mouth. He knew exactly what was going on, but whether by Marlene's will or her own, Mary was entirely ignorant. Before she could get another word out, Marlene picked up her school bag and lunch tray and stalked off. Mary's mouth fell open, and after she'd watched as Marlene threw down her empty tray and fled through the back doors, she whirled on the rest of them.

"Oh my god. Can you guys believe her?"

Yes, actually, Remus thought.

They finished their meal in relative silence, with no one saying anything as Mary interjected with various expletives describing Marlene's so-called 'erratic behaviour'. There was no time to talk privately, but Remus felt Sirius nudge him with his knee beneath the table, and he slipped a hand into his lap so they could lock their fingers together in sad, knowing solidarity. The group's mood did not improve as they all cleared their trays and headed back to the dorms for the night. After walking the girls back to Rowena, they turned for

Godric and found Marlene waiting for them, tucked up against the stone steps despite the cold.

“Remus.” Was all she said.

Sirius squeezed his hand once more before following James and Peter inside, and Remus watched him go, almost wishing he’d stay. He’d never really considered himself the same sort of wordsmith Sirius was, but Marlene had asked for him, and so he’d endure.

“Shall we go inside?” He suggested. “The common room's warmer than out here”

Marlene wrapped her arms around herself, looking like she might cry, and shook her head.

“Let’s go to our spot then,” Remus said, and he offered his hand.

Little had changed around the window seat from the year before. He’d had to pop the lock on the Flamel Block’s front door since it was after dinner, but it paid off. Paint was still peeling off the sides of the window frames and the gardens they overlooked were still cushioned in frost. Their legs had gotten a bit longer, but not so much that they couldn't both fit. Remus was pleased they'd come; Marlene was already calming down. She'd shrugged off her coat and laid it across her lap like a blanket, using his shoulder as a pillow.

“You should know that Nicole and I broke up."

Remus sighed, touching his cheek to the top of her head. "I'm sorry, Marls."

“Yeah... It feels different from when you and I broke up, though I guess that should be obvious. It’s just… How did you handle it, Remus —when you and Sirius broke up over Christmas?”

“Badly, obviously.”

She smiled a bit, before sniffling. They’d left the lights off under the guise of not wanting Filch to come sniffing around, but also in case she just needed a cry.

“It just sucks, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And Mary—god. She just doesn’t get it.”

“You mean you’ve told her?”

“No." Marlene wiped beneath her eyes. "I just thought she would’ve figured it out by now.”

He knew she was hurting. He’d hurt like that too. Even more so when he was at his most irrational, before he and Sirius had figured out how to properly communicate. Hell... maybe they still didn't know how. But what Marlene needed was clarity, not doom and gloom.

“Mary’s not a mind-reader, Cherry. She’s like Sirius."

"Oh, you would know all about that, wouldn't you. Go on then."

He forgave the quip. "She's brash, and never thinks before speaking. An insufferable arse, most days. But they're wonderful too. They've got this gravity you can’t avoid no matter how hard you try. It's like you just get sucked in and when you’re in it, you’re still somehow thankful. Thankful that out of everybody they’ve chosen you... I just know how it feels to love that feeling, is all. I get greedy too.”

“Yeah, sure. You're greedy… But at least Sirius loves you back.”

It was like the click of his lock pick. A door falling open.

“Marlene, do you—”

“I *used* to,” she said very quickly. “I’m not stupid enough to think it could happen now. Mary's too complicated for me, *and* too simple. I gave up on her ages ago, before I really even knew about myself. And I love Nicole, or… But we broke up... I won’t give up my friends, no matter how insufferable.”

“Nicole asked you to give up Mary?”

“No, but we were always fighting about it. She said that the only way we could fix it was by coming out, and I—I couldn't... Not yet, anyway. Not to her... so she broke it off. It's not like I blame her, and I know I lied to you about it. Sorry..."

"Don't be sorry. I get it."

She wiped her face. "Thanks... Quite the timing though, right before this shit holiday…”

“Well, if you're that desperate for a date to the horribly sexist dance, I could be persuaded. No promises that I won't trod all over your toes

though. I'm a bit of a beast on the dance floor."

Marlene chuckled sadly.

"Oh Remus, if only you had a vagina."

The next morning things between the girls were still stilted. Mary sat on one end of the breakfast table and Marlene on the other, leaving the rest of them with no choice but to ignore the sour mood. News of the dance had spread like wildfire, and with Valentine's just around the corner, it seemed as though everyone was on the hunt. Remus found himself back to dodging Audriana and her girlfriends at every turn, and he wasn't the only one. In the time it took for them to sit down at the breakfast table and finish their meal, several girls had come up to Sirius to ask for a moment of his time. He followed each of them away, and each time returned with a small smirk on his face meant only for Remus.

"How many is that now?" Peter asked, as a twelfth year girl returned to her table looking particularly solemn.

"Nine, since this morning."

James nudged Remus. "And you?"

"Eleven."

"Well, Padfoot. Looks like you've officially lost out on the title of Godric's hottest piece of ass."

As James and Peter sniggered, Sirius ripped off a piece of toast with his teeth.

"We'll see."

Between lessons, Remus was accosted twice more. Once when he stepped out on an errand for Professor Binns, and again on his way to the toilet. He felt worse about the second girl, who he'd called Cheryl by mistake when he was declining the offer (her name was Barbra). After that Marie of all people turned up, and Remus knew he was well and truly in for it.

"Sorry you got signed up for it and all, since you're a prefect, but since we're both going I thought it might be nice to go together?"

He said no, but at least he got her name right this time.

After Marie, Remus thought it might be safer to spend his final block of the day hiding out in the library. At least if Audriana and her horde turned up there he'd be able to hide out beneath Ms. Pince's desk. He'd take detention in a heartbeat if it meant not having to explain just what a horrible date he'd make to yet another hopeful dance partner. He'd made it through almost the entire block before the next interruption came, but luckily this time it wasn't anyone he felt the need to say no to.

"Hey, Sam. Feel like taking a load off?"

The tenth year scuttled forward, eagerly taking the seat across from Remus. "I thought you'd be here, Remus," he said. "N-Not that I'm following you, I just remembered you might have a spare... now... Er —I came to study too, in fact! Whatchu working on?"

Remus gestured to his books. "Got a History essay due. You?"

Sam eagerly turned his book over. *The Iliad.*

"It's my second time reading it! I just think the whole war with the Trojans is so cool, don't you?"

"Yeah, it's cool."

"It was a bit hard to get through the first time to be honest, but I think I have a better grasp now. I just love Achilles' bits. He must've really cared for Patroclus, I wish I had a friend who'd fight a god for me."

Remus leaned his chin on his hand, smiling just a little. "That right..."

"Hey, have you heard about the dance that's being planned? Ah, what am I saying... 'course you heard, you're a prefect! Are... uhm, you going?"

"Apparently I have to," Remus said. "All of the prefects are supposed to be chaperoning, but honestly I'm gonna see if I can't get out of it. Pain in the arse, really. I'm not much of a dancer."

Sam shut his mouth very quickly and nodded. "Right. Total pain. I mean who'd want to dance with a girl anyway?" He laughed, and then seemed to realise what he'd said. "Or go! I meant, *go* to a dance... heh..."

"Bet you'd be better than me. I'm likely to fall off my own shoes."

"I'd probably twist an ankle," Sam said.

"Why stop there? Give new meaning to break a leg! Trip over a stereo cable, knock over a couple drink tables while you're at it."

Sam laughed, and then bit his lip nervously. "Hey, Remus, you wouldn't happen to have a cigarette, would you?"

"What do you want with a cigarette?"

"Oh. Just thought I'd try it."

Remus felt for his pocket, and found his pack right where it was supposed to be. It would be easy to give him one, plenty of kids who weren't old enough to go down to the village themselves came around to ask, and it wasn't like Sam wouldn't be good for it, but somehow he didn't strike Remus as the type.

"Uh... Sorry, pal. Don't have any on me."

Sam nodded, understanding, and glanced back down at his book. He began flipping through, and Remus suddenly felt guilty.

"You know, in my opinion the 'Iliad' leaves off right at the best part. Have you read the 'Odyssey'?"

Sam looked up. "No."

"Oh, geez! You gotta read the 'Odyssey'. Odysseus is like the *coolest,* and it's basic Classics stuff. Got any favourite parts in there though?"

It was enough. Eagerly, Sam opened his book and began scanning every page until he found something suitable enough to ramble on about. Remus didn't mind; he let the kid chatter on, challenging his favourite excerpts from the epic whenever it suited. They were in a secluded enough spot amongst the stacks so that they wouldn't be bothering anyone, but that did not mean that others might not bother them.

While Sam was recounting the fight between Achilles and the sea god Neptune, a girl came around the corner behind him, stopping dead only when she saw that they were together. Remus, in all his humility, assumed she was there for him and cringed when he realised how young she looked, but then as the girl peeked back around the bookshelf to stare, he finally caught on.

"Sammy, I think you have an admirer."

Sam's face turned beet red, and he looked up with an open mouth. "Oh no! You don't have to—"

Remus pointed; "Don't look now..."

Even more confused, Sam turned around in his library chair, and Remus saw his tiny shoulders deflate.

"Oh. Hi, Fiona..."

"Hi, Sam." The girl waved shyly, then in a small voice; "Do you think I could talk to you for a moment?"

He went, though Remus could tell he was reluctant. Silently, he cheered him on. *Happens to the best of us, pal.*

The bell rang suddenly, and Remus checked his watch—cursing.

"Sorry I'm late!" He exclaimed, bursting into their dorm room in the same breath.

"Meh, I'm late too," Sirius answered, busy flitting around their bedroom. He was shirtless and towelling off his damp hair as he stuffed bits of sheet music and note paper into his guitar case. James and Peter were nowhere in sight, having already gone ahead to the music room where they'd planned a band practice, and so Remus sat down on James' bed to wait.

"It's because you're so approachable," Sirius said, as he jumped to tug on his jeans. Remus had only been half listening, and looked up from his song book when he spoke.

"Huh?"

"The girls!" Sirius went on. "They think you'll just bend over backward for them, and that's why they're interested. Mary says guys don't get points for being nice, but I think that's rubbish. They give you points just for saying hello."

"Oh, you're still hung up on this then?"

"It's a matter of pride! Potter'll never let me hear the end of it if *you* win."

“Yeah, yeah—can we get going already? Filch is gonna show up and

kick us out of the music room before we even get done our warm-up."

"All I'm saying is, you're not the only one that's been dodging proposals left and right."

"Oh really?" Remus drawled, trying hard not to notice his boyfriend's blatant nakedness. It didn't work, especially when Sirius smirked and pushed back his still-damp hair with a single hand, leaving his jeans unzippered down the front.

"Mm-hm."

"Who is it this time then, stud?"

Sirius lifted his chin. "Allison and Avery. Allison after breakfast, Avery after lunch. Then again at the same time."

"Allison *and* Avery?" Remus echoed. "Aren't they sisters?"

"Twins actually. But you don't have to worry. I said no both times, of course."

"Oh, of *course."*

Sirius tossed his towel over one shoulder, looking even more smug. "Imagine it, Moony—*twin sisters*. I was *this* close to the fantasy that so many guys dream of!"

"Gay guys?"

"You know me, I'll try anything once. Twice, if it's twins."

"You're so gross."

Remus didn't miss the obvious glint in Sirius' eye. He had his shirt in his hands, but he wasn't putting it on, which meant he knew exactly what he was doing. Remus couldn't help it; his eyes found the burn scars on his shoulder, then dipped toward that faint trail of dark hair that led south from his belly button. Just like that he felt his resolve snap like the plucked strings of a guitar. Just *snap, snap, snap!*

He looked at the clock—they were late. Or rather, they were *already* late. Can't be later than late. Time was relative anyway.

"You alright there, Moony?" Sirius drawled, sliding one hand along his own collarbone. "Look a bit... lost."

Damn you.

In a single motion, Remus had pressed up from the bed and closed the only space between them. When they met, they met fiercely, leaving only a dull thud as Sirius' back met the corner post of his bed and his mouth found Remus. It felt electric, like the first time but better. Now Remus knew every bit of him—all the places he could touch that would take him apart, and all of the kisses he could give to put him back together again. Sirius' hands were like velvet, sliding up into the soft hair at the back of Remus' neck as his mouth opened automatically, curving in to fit like a key in a lock. The towel slipped from his pale shoulder as Remus grazed his fingers along every tender curve and ridge. He only stopped when they met his throat, fingers cupping just beneath his jaw in the way he knew Sirius liked. It earned him a throaty whisper, like a purr;

"Je te veux. Embrasse-moi fort."

"You know I don't speak French," Remus murmured back, already grazing his teeth along the shell of Sirius' ear.

"Oh, I think you do."

Sirius knotted his fingers in his hair then, and yanked Remus' head back with one sharp tug—hard enough to leave him hissing from between his teeth.

"Let's sound it out together," he grinned. *"Embrasse-moi…* Come now, let me hear you say it."

Because this Sirius was doing something to him, and he wanted to prolong it for another few vicious moments, Remus shook his head in stubborn refusal.

"Cheeky!" Sirius laughed, yanking his head back again and making Remus grunt. "Let me hear you say it, Moony. *Embrasse-moi!"*

"Ngh... 'brasse... moi…"

"Mm-hm... *Fort."*

"Fort."

"There's a good boy. Knew you could do it. Now all together—*'Je te veux. Embrasse-moi fort'."*

“Alright, I’ll kiss you, Padfoot,” Remus answered snidely. "No need to beg.”

Sirius’ mouth dropped open, but closed again when Remus’ hold tightened around his throat. “You knew?” He nearly-rasped.

“May have looked some of it up in the library. Not my fault you're so chatty in bed."

Sirius’ eyes flashed, even more devilish than before. “Clever, you."

Eager, Remus leaned forward and Sirius finally released the tight hold he had on his hair. They kissed, deeply, clinging to one another with greedy hands. One step at a time, Remus walked him backward until Sirius’ calves were brushing the edge of his bed. He was just about to tip him over onto it when suddenly the familiar clicking of a lock sounded and the door to their bedroom fell open. Remus only had half a second to jump backwards before Peter was strolling inside, looking more than a little irked.

“Thought I’d find you two here!” He lashed at them. “You’re late. What were you doing?”

Both of them fumbled with a few ‘ers’ and ‘uhms’, before Sirius finally collected himself enough to answer. “Had an eyelash in my eye,” he murmured, quickly scooping his towel up from the floor. “Moony was helping me get it.”

Peter eyed them suspiciously, before shaking his head and making his way into the room. “Whatever. Came back ‘cause I forgot one of my sticks. Did you shower already?”

Sirius nodded, looking more than a little embarrassed. It didn’t help that he had to hold the towel over his crotch to hide the tent in his trousers. If Peter had showed up even ten seconds later he certainly would've gotten the eyeful of his life.

“Hurry up then,” Peter continued, already busy searching around his corner of the room for the stray drumstick. “We’re not gonna wait all night for you to beautify yourself, Black. James already went over to the dining hall just to look for you two gits.”

“Sorry Pete,” Remus cut-in, “got caught-up chatting.”

“Must’a been real important to miss practice for—AH-HA! Found you, ya little bastard.” Victorious, Peter pulled back from beneath his bed

with a drumstick in hand, stopping long enough to rattle a short beat off the floor. “So, did the two of you decide who you're taking to the dance?"

“Not gonna go,” Remus answered.

“Neither of you?"

"Wouldn't be fair," Sirius mused. "Say yes to one girl and leave a million more hearts shattered."

Peter rolled his eyes. “Typical. You two should just take each other."

Sirius' face lit up, while Remus grimaced.

“What a fine idea, Wormy!" He stood and took Remus by the hands, spinning them around awkwardly while Peter watched from the corner. "Whaddya say, Moons? You, me, some disco-dancing and enough booze to drown a swimming team!”

“C’mon Black,” Peter interjected, “even you have your limits. Stop teasing Moony and put a bloody shirt on so we can get going.”

Sirius whirled around. “And if I’m not teasing him? It’s just a dance. Do you have a problem with two blokes going stag, Wormtail?”

Peter squinted at them, and Remus could practically see the gears turning in his head. This was wrong—it wasn’t going at all like how it’d been with Marlene or Lily or James. He could see that waterfall in the distance, getting closer with every passing second. They couldn’t do it like this, Sirius would just have to forgive him.

“He’s joking, Pete,” Remus said, stepping between the two of them. “Steam got to his head. I’ll make sure he gets dressed, so how ‘bout we meet you in the music room? You can tell James we’re on our way.”

The look of scrutiny didn't fade, but Remus could tell Peter wasn't about to stop and wonder. Finally he wiped his face, nose still running from the evening cold, and turned for the door. "You're so weird," he muttered, slipping out.

Remus stared at the shut door, already dreading what was coming next. He could *feel* it.

"Weird..." Sirius murmured. "He called me weird."

"He didn't mean it like that," Remus sighed, turning around. "But you

have to admit, you were acting off. What was he supposed to think?"

Sirius' lips pressed into a thin line. "Whatever, let's just go before Potter comes looking and finds us with our pants 'round our ankles."

Remus wanted to make a joke, but thought better of it when he saw the way Sirius snatched his shirt up from the floor. By the time he was dressed and the two of them were actually making their way across campus, the sun had long gone from the sky and only a few people were left dotting the pavement.

“But he has to suspect something now! What do you think?” Sirius asked as they stepped off the trolley outside the Bellchant building. He'd been mostly quiet on the way over, but Remus could tell the run-in with Peter was still eating at him.

"Do I think Pete calling us weird automatically means that he knows we're dating? No."

"Maybe not dating, but he has to know *something.* Not even Wormy’s that thick.”

“Peter’s not thick,” Remus reasoned. “He’s just a bit… naive.”

“You think that sounds nicer but it doesn’t.”

Remus smiled meekly, a bit his lip. “So… just to be clear, you don’t want to go to the dance?”

Sirius looked up at him. “Of course not. Do *you?”*

"No, obviously not. But I just thought it might be fun for you. At least if you went with a girl you'd get to show off for a night.”

Sirius huffed in disbelief. "Wow. You have no faith in me at all, do you?"

"No, that's not what I—"

"Listen up, Moony!" Sirius snapped. "I don’t date more than one person at a time, and I *don’t* cheat.”

“I wasn’t talking about actually dating someone else, you nob. I just meant find someone to go to the dance with—ask Mary if you bloody want to. And I don't think I have to worry much about you cheating either, what with the way you can't keep your hands to yourself for more than five minutes.”

“Hold on.” Sirius cut across the pavement, getting in front of Remus and drawing him to a sudden halt. “You think I can’t keep my hands to myself?”

“Is that a trick question?"

"Just answer it!"

"Why? It's not like it's a competition."

Sirius laughed. "You smug bastard. You think I like you more than you like me?”

Yes—wait, no. Not possible. But you don’t need to know that.

“Like I said, it’s not a competition.”

“You do!” Sirius straightened up, nearly fumbling his guitar case. “Great git—calling me a slag. You think I can't go more than five minutes without throwing myself at you, don't you?!”

Remus went to pass, nudging Sirius in the shoulder as he did. "You said it, not me."

“There! Proof!” Sirius cried, pushing his hand away. “You can’t stop touching me either. You’re just as desperate for my sweet, sweet caress as I am for yours.”

“If that’s what fills your bucket, then fine. I *like* touching my boyfriend. Someone alert the media.”

They'd reached the front door of the building now, yellow lights buzzing overhead. Remus was just reaching for the door handle when Sirius' arm shot out, slamming it shut again and preventing him from going inside.

"Bet I could go longer without touching you."

"Huh?!"

Sirius grinned at him, all teeth.

"I bet that you can't go as long as I can without touching each other. No kissing, no hand-holding—not so much as a friendly pat."

"You're being stupid, get out of the way."

"I'll move when you admit you're just as needy as I am."

"Oh *I'm* needy?" Remus rolled his eyes. "Move, Padfoot."

"You're just afraid I'm right," Sirius goaded. "You probably wouldn't even make it to the end of the weekend. In fact, I'll bet you cave at the first inconvenience! Just a total breakdown, loaded with whining. Probably sound something like, 'Oh Sirius, please hold me, I'm feeling so weak'!"

"You're an idiot. And I don't sound like that."

"You do, and I'm also right."

"No. I'm right."

"Prove it! Take the bet."

It was so stupid, but Sirius had always ignited that competitive part of him, and this was a matter of the heart. Remus couldn't help but rise to the bait.

"Does that mean, like, 'sexual touching' or like any old brush on the shoulder?"

"Why bother clarifying?" Sirius taunted. "Afraid you'll lose?"

"No," Remus answered haughtily. "In fact I think I'll win—I *know* I'll win. You are a bit of a slag, Padfoot."

"Better than being all fur coat and no knickers, *Moony*. Now take the bloody bet."

"Fine, but what's the winner get when this is all over?"

"An *entire day* of arse-kissing."

"Literal arse-kissing?"

Sirius shrugged. "If I feel like it. Think I'll save the details of my win as a surprise."

"Oh, so that's how it's gonna be, huh?" Remus pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek, before nodding with a simple smile. "Alright then. Shall we shake on it?"

He held out his hand and Sirius instinctively reached forward to take

it before snatching his arm back upon realisation.

“Oooh, nice try. You’re good, but not that good.”

“Guess we’ll find out.” Remus smiled, before a thought occurred to him; “We’re not fighting, right?”

“Oh no, not at all. S’just a friendly bet.”

“Right." He opened the front door. "After you, Padfoot.”

“Why thank you. Such a gentleman.” Sirius passed through and as he did, knocked Remus in the butt with the end of his guitar case.

“Oi—”

“Oops. Still doesn’t count though.”

Remus stared after Sirius’ back. He almost considered throwing the entire thing right then and there, but then Sirius turned and smirked back at him.

"Keep up, Moony."

Pretty prick.

You are so going down...

* * *

Sunday 12th February 1978

A day had passed, and Remus Lupin was *sure* he was going to win this bet. Neither he nor Sirius seemed interested in doing the sensible thing, which would be to ignore the other entirely, and instead both had adopted a sort of 'tease and weave' strategy. Remus figured that if he could trick Sirius into coming close enough that he'd fall to temptation, or in the very least, all the blood would surge to his nether regions and he'd experience temporary memory loss and lose on his own. He was having fun at least, though he did miss the silent game of footsies they always played over breakfast. They weren't even sitting together today, as that would be much too big a risk.

"Hm. Pass the salt, Moony?”

Remus did so, reaching an arm over Peter, who had to duck to avoid taking a salt shaker to the forehead. When Sirius reached for it, he opened his palm flat and let Remus drop it in, before they both snatched their hands back as if shocked.

"Mind handing me the pepper, Padfoot?"

"Certainly, Moony."

Again, no fingers did touch. And when Sirius asked for a spare napkin and Remus asked for the sugar pot, they snatched said items away just quickly, leaving Peter to crouch down over his breakfast with an annoyed look on his face.

"Moony, pass me the—"

“Enough!" James snapped. "You two have been acting odd since yesterday, now what the hell is going on?”

Both Remus and Sirius looked up, feigning confusion.

“What do you mean, Prongs?"

"You've both been dancing around each other like you have cooties," he huffed, eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Oh. You mean like... this?" Sirius waved a hand over Remus' shoulder, making him flinch away. “It’s just a little bet me and Moony got going on,” he sniggered. “Don’t worry yourself over it, Prongs.”

“What sort of bet?” Peter demanded.

“We’re not telling people,” Remus said. “Can’t afford outside intervention. This is strictly between Sirius and I. Pass the milk, Padfoot?”

Sirius did so, and they continued their careful exchange while their friends watched.

“Well, it’s fucking weird."

"Good," Sirius said. "I happen to *like* weird."

If Peter got the insinuation, he made no mention of it. He simply got up with his breakfast tray and took up the seat on James' other side, leaving a large gap between Remus and Sirius. Luckily for them, it was filled a moment later, when Marlene and Lily arrived, both

looking downtrodden.

"Don't be upset, Lils," Marlene was saying. "It's only natural, we didn't get to go to interviews after all."

"What's the matter?" James asked, instantly queuing in on his girlfriend's distress.

"I heard back from Oxford today," Lily sighed.

"And?"

"And I've received a conditional offer."

"That's GREAT!" James boomed. "I knew you could do it!"

"Yes, well a conditional's not a certain, is it?" Lily frowned. "Until we complete our A-Levels, nothing's for certain."

"As if you have anything to worry about," Peter said, biting into a sausage. "You've been top of our year since you came to Hawkings. I'll bet you get full marks on every test."

Sirius covered his mouth over a yawn. "Yeah, don't fret, Evans. Even if you don't get in, Oxford's only got stuffy prats to begin with. Ask Sim."

Unsurprisingly, Lily did not look all that reassured. She shrugged her shoulders when James leaned in to comfort her some more, but by then Mary and Lottie had already arrived at the table with large smiles on their faces and enthusiasm oozing from every pore.

“Morning, my lovely friends!” Mary chirped. "Have we got news for you. As of today, Valentine's Day has officially been usurped!"

"Usurped?" Sirius echoed. "What, are we going to perform sacrifices to Satan instead?"

"Even better! We are going to throw—drum roll, Lot!"

Lottie began smacking Peter on the top of the head.

"OW—”

"A PARTY!"

The rest of them shared a glance.

"A party?"

"That's right! And no one is to bring a date at all! It's the perfect way to protest the sexist Sadie Hawkins' bash, don't you think?"

Mumbling something about tea, Marlene untucked herself from the table and strode off. No one stopped her; Lily had told them yesterday that the two still weren't talking, and Mary had spent much of her time with Lottie while Marlene refused to come within ten feet outside their bedroom. Mary watched her go, sighing a little, but when James asked for further clarification of her 'protest party', she returned with all her vigour.

"I'm so glad you asked, Potter. Lottie and I have had the most *wonderful* idea. We spent all day yesterday taking stock, and as it turns out, a large percentage of Hawkings' upper secondary campus has no interest in celebrating Valentine's Day *or* attending a dance."

"We took a poll," Lottie confirmed, holding up a sheet and clipboard.

"So it's a... Anti-Valentine's party...?"

"Exactly!" Mary said. "There is to be no dancing, no snogging—no fraternizing of any kind!"

"But those are some of my favourite things," Sirius whined.

"Yeah," James chuckled, "not to rain on your parade or anything, Mary, but this might be the only party Professor McGonagall would actually approve of."

"But it's *our* party so of course there'll be a twist!"

"Which is?" Asked Remus.

Mary stopped to wiggle in her seat a bit. "Just listen, I've already got it all figured out! I talked to this tenth year kid that got stuck cleaning out Filch's office for detention last week, and you'll *never* guess what he found! An *entire* collection of plastic water guns just waiting to be pinched! Now imagine we told everyone to wear white, and then filled them with red food colouring, or cranberry juice, or—or whatever! And we soak any person who's caught doing anything other than good, honest partying. Just—*bang!"* She shot her finger into the centre of Remus' chest; "Soak city."

"This doesn't sound like a party," Peter said, "it sounds like a half-

baked ploy so that you can get Marlene to stop hating you."

Mary crossed her arms. “It’s an alternative to an otherwise uneventful evening. At least this way all of you frigid Frida’s will have something to do.”

“Well, I’m in!” James announced.

“Me too,” Remus said. If he was already not getting any then he could at least have some fun doing it.

“Will there be drinking?” Lily asked. “Valentine’s *is* on a Tuesday.”

“If you thought there wasn’t going to be drinking at that barmy dance then you’re not as smart as I thought, Evans,” Sirius told her.

“It’s gonna be hard convincing Moira,” Peter winced, “but yeah, I’m in too.”

“Great!” Mary cried. “I’ll spread the word—you guys have to get the water guns.”

“Easy,” Sirius declared, while Lily gaped.

“It’s Filch’s office! He’ll actually kill you if he finds you in there.”

“Meh. If you’ve done it once, you’ve done it a thousand times.”

She whirled on James, who only shrugged. “It’s a long story.”

“Well, pour yourself another cup of tea, because you’re not going anywhere until I know the full story, *James Potter.”*

As James wiggled uncomfortably in his seat, Remus felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Remus," Mary whispered, leaning in close, “will you do me a favour? I need you to ask Marls to come to the party."

"Why don't you ask her?”

"Because she won't come if *I* ask her."

"She might."

Mary clapped her hands together. "Pleeeease, Remus?"

"... Alright."

He waited until the following day's classes let out. Mary made sure to make herself scarce so he and Marlene could have the room, but they'd still ended up in his; lounging top and tail on his bed with a shared packet of crisps between them. The turntable was out, but it was Marlene's album—playing her newest obsession, Blondie.

'She loves you right now, so don't close your eyes,
She'll be talking and laughing with six other guys;
Flirtatious and cute, she'll take you the route,
Telling little girl lies...'

"It could be fun," Remus offered. "You know, the party."

"Hmph."

"Sounds like she's going to make it into a big show... She's already told half the year. I think she means to make up with you."

“It sounds stupid,” Marlene scoffed. "I don't know why everyone's so riled up. It's only a party."

“Only a party, yes, but still more fun than a school-organised dance, right?”

She grunted again, indifferently. “Did you get out of supervising the dance then, Mr. Prefect?”

“Yeah. Told one of the girls organising it that it’s the anniversary of my mum’s death and I probably wouldn’t feel like celebrating.”

“Remus! You can’t do that!”

“Sure I can. I call it ‘dead mum privilege’.”

“You’re terrible.”

“Yup. You’re still gonna come to the party though, right? It’ll be in our common room, so you don’t have to hang around Mary if you don’t want to.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I take that to mean that you're still angry with her."

“She's just so pig-headed! Why's it so bad to want to keep her in Coventry a bit longer?”

"It's not. I get it."

Marlene sighed deeply, and pulled herself up into a sitting position. "Enough about Mary, what’s this I hear about a bet between you and Black?”

“Oh, that." Remus chuckled. "Sirius bet that he could go longer without touching me.”

“Why?"

"I dunno. It’s dumb. He’s still gonna lose though.”

“You sure? You seem a bit nervous, Rem.”

"Evil!" He whipped a pillow at her. “I’m not nervous, now stop playing mind games. I'm starting to think Sirius paid you off.”

“If you’re sure,” she teased, holding her hands up in surrender.

“I am.”

Not.

It’d only been a couple of days and yet it felt like forever. How many times had he already caught himself reaching out for Sirius just out of pure instinct? There was that moment yesterday morning, when he’d held the door and let Sirius go first, nearly coming up behind him and putting a hand on his shoulder. Then today in class, when he’d slipped on the wet doormat on his way in and nearly reached for Sirius to steady himself. And that piece of Sirius’ hair that had flopped the wrong way at the part, or the spot of tea he got on his collar at lunch, or the paper-cut he'd gotten while playing cards in the common room.

Who gets a paper-cut while playing cards?!

The excuses to touch Sirius were limitless, but by far the worst was the need to hold his *hand.* The urge was more than limitless, it was endless—enough to be almost startling. Remus wasn’t a clingy person, or even a particularly touchy person, but he *loved* touching Sirius. Now that he couldn’t, he was beyond frustrated, which he supposed was the point of the bet.

The door to their bedroom flew open and James flounced in, beaming

as he hauled a fully-packed bin bag behind him. Next came Sirius with a similar smile and bag, and both dropped them in the middle of the room with the sound of several hollow clatters.

“Mission: Bravo was a success!” Sirius announced. “We have secured the goods.” He ripped open the top of the bin bag and pulled out a large plastic water pistol, which he aimed at the two of them. “Hands up, ya filthy animals!”

Remus shot upright in bed. “You went and got them?” *Without me?* “You actually got into Filch’s office?” *Without me?!*

“Yeah!” James grinned. “Wormy egged his windows, totally riled him up! Filchy ran right out without even locking the doors and we were able to walk right in. It was so ace!”

“And where’s Wormtail now?”

“Probably still running from Filch,” Sirius snorted. “Now I said hands up! Don’t make me shoot you!”

“Are those for tomorrow then?” Marlene asked, looking suddenly interested.

“Alright, you asked for it—*bang!”* Sirius pulled the pistol up to blow across the tip. “But yeah, they’re for tomorrow. Gonna be totally rad spraying people with ‘em.”

“You’re only supposed to spray people if they’re acting lovey-dovey,” James corrected.

“I know! You and Evans aren’t gonna stand a chance, by the way. I’m gonna stick to you like a shadow. The moment you try to sneak off together—*bang! Bang!”*

James drew a pistol of his own. “Same goes for you and Moony, mate!” He began to make a poor array of gun noises before freezing entirely, like a deer in headlights. They'd almost forgotten—Marlene was in the room.

"I mean—! Not you and Moony, Sirius! You and—erm—girls! All the girls that are gonna be throwing themselves at you! Just—a shitload of girls! Ha-HA!”

Remus burst out laughing, unable to stop until there were tears in his eyes. On the other end of the bed, Marlene was also giggling, and even

Sirius had bent over in the middle, holding his stomach as he howled.

“What...?” James whined. "What's wrong?"

“It’s fine, Prongs,” Remus said once he’d managed to recover, “she *knows.”*

He looked to Marlene, who was wiping the corners of her eyes. “You DO?”

“Uh-huh!" She cackled. "But my god, that was priceless!"

“Oh… OH! Thank god! I thought I just ruined everything!”

Righting himself, Sirius swallowed the last of his laughter and set a hand on James’ shoulder. “You’re a good mate, Prongs."

After Marlene had made herself scarce and James went downstairs to help the girls and the other boys of the dorm decorate for the party the following day, Remus knocked sharply on the bathroom door. He got two cheeky knocks back, and for a second they made him so happy he nearly forgot his frustrations, but he hadn’t suffered through not touching Sirius for three days to be rebuffed now.

“I’m not asking if you’re alright, I want you to open the bloody door,” he snapped.

There was a muffled ‘oh’ and Sirius opened the door for him. “I’m about to get into the shower so make it quick.”

Pointedly, Remus grabbed the door and stepped inside, pulling it shut after himself. Sirius’ eyes widened as he pressed himself back against the sink so no part of them would touch in the tight space. “Oi! I ain’t losing just ‘cause you can’t wait to piss or something! Use the bathroom downstairs!”

“You just can’t avoid me to win the bet,” Remus said.

“Wha—? I’m not avoiding you!”

“You went and got those water guns on your own."

"What are you talking about? I wasn't alone, Prongs and Wormtail were there."

"And you conveniently forgot *me.”*

“Only 'cause we knew you were with McKinnon. Figured you’d want to be on your own, what with what she’s going through.”

Remus tried not to be irked, but he hadn’t told Sirius about Marlene’s break up so he could be left out.

“Oh Moony,” Sirius’ voice had turned sultry; “you’re not jealous, are you?” He smiled a bit, and stopped slouching against the sink. Then he took a step forward, so that only a few inches of space separated their chests. His shirt was open to the fourth button, and Remus could just make out the delicate curve of collarbone, and below that—his chest, and below *that…*

Suddenly Remus’ mouth felt as dry as paper.

“No, I ain’t jealous.”

“Concerned then?” Sirius leaned in a bit more, tilting his chin up like he might try to kiss him. “You don’t have anything to be concerned about. You’re my Moony, aren't cha? *Mon chou."*

Remus refused to break eye contact first. It was all he had. “You’re doing this on purpose.”

Sirius stretched up the tiniest bit more, mouth open so he could see his tongue. “Doing what?”

“I’m not gonna cave.”

“Sure, you’re not. But imagine how good it would feel to lean down and slide that pretty little tongue of yours into my mouth. Then you wouldn’t have to listen to me talk, you could just shut me up.”

Something inside Remus was sparked then. It was Sirius’ playfulness that had done it, and it left him with only one thought; *two can play at that game.*

“But why would I want to shut you up?” He asked, enunciating every syllable as if the words themselves could be drawn taut as a string. “If I’m going to put my tongue anywhere, *Black,* it will be in a place where I know I will still be able to hear your voice.”

Sirius stared at him a moment longer, humming low in the base of his throat. Then his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, and Remus knew he had him. Already feeling victorious, he leaned down until his lips were just barely brushing the shell of Sirius’ ear and whispered;

“Your move, Padfoot .”

Then he left him there. And promptly threw himself down the stairs to the dorm’s first floor where he whacked one out in the bathroom. By then post-orgasm clarity had set in and the satisfying nature of leaving Sirius had worn off. But he’d come this far (pun intended), and he wasn’t about to give up now.

Sirius Black was going to touch him first, if it was the last thing he did.

* * *

Valentine’s Day, 1978

It was almost funny to go about their regular Tuesday schedules all while anticipating the festivities to come. Remus had no idea how many people Mary had invited back to the common room, but he was expecting a rather exciting evening. James and Lily would probably try to hold out, but Remus knew better; their shirts would be stained before they knew it.

As for himself, he was determined to stay dry as an old crone’s hands in winter—at least until Sirius inevitably gave in and accepted his loss. Though that was looking to be easier said than done, considering Sirius wasn’t the one that had woken up ripped and raring to go again that morning.

Remus had to endure the taunts over his morning wood all through Music and History, and even James—who had managed to suss out the details of the bet thanks to Lily’s expert deduction skills—had joined in by lunch.

“I could’ve helped you out, you know,” Sirius offered snidely, “all you had to do was *ask.”*

“Piss off.”

“Come on Lupin, it’s Valentine’s! The perfect day for Sirius to *lend a hand.”*

Because Remus could touch *him,* James got a sharp wallop for that one.

Dinner was a flurry. Kids were rushing around, chattering about last-minute preparations, and no one was sure if they meant the dance or the mysterious party taking place at Godric. James had been officially crowned the coolest dorm monitor on campus, though he did seem to be sweating a reasonable amount over how many kids had appeared before him to ask this or that. Remus, on the other hand, was asked to the dance twice more in the span of time it took to get in line and gather his dinner. First of them was Allison, one of the twins, which really got Sirius going.

“Whatever happened to loyalty among fans?” he huffed, peeling the foil from a pink and red Valentine's cupcake. Marlene reached over and immediately squished it in her fist.

“She isn’t your *fan,* she’s a girl, you vain bastard.”

“You’re so mean, McKinnon!” Sirius moaned, before cheekily grabbing her wrist and attempting to lick the icing from between her fingers. Instead Marlene just batted him on the cheek, leaving a smear of pink behind as well as a rather mouth-watering feeling for Remus as he watched Sirius lick it off.

They’d spent what felt like hours filling up tiny plastic water pistols and rearranging furniture to make room for dancing of their own. Streamers were hung from the walls and bookshelves, and tarps had been laid across every surface to protect it from water-damage. It seemed as though the school had been split right down the middle, with those more interested in swaying along to a soundtrack of Tina Charles and The Bay City Rollers headed toward the Great Hall, and the others who had maybe worse luck finding a date, to their common room. There were only two conditions for entry: first that you wear a white shirt, and second that you concede to no shows of doting adoration—unless you were willing to get soaked, that is. Turns out most kids were more than willing to agree, and it made for a rather chill scene, with the exception of the occasional scream every time someone was caught snuggling slightly too close. Mary, to all of their surprise, led the fight against any and all canoodling like a ruthless sergeant major in the army, with Lottie as her iron-fisted lieutenant.

“We were just dancing!” A girl named Katey Johnson protested after Mary had soaked her and her boyfriend through their shirts.

“This is an *anti*-Valentine’s party. You wanna bump and grind, try the Great Hall.”

Looking rather satisfied with herself, Mary spun one of the pistols around in her hand like she was John Wayne and she and Lottie began weaving back through the throng to where Remus was standing next to the stereo, drink already in hand.

“I never knew how good this would feel,” she beamed. “Just a party! None of the messy, ‘you stole my boyfriend’ or awkward ‘should we kiss now’ bullshit!”

“It’s much preferable to spending a Valentine’s without Roger,” Lottie agreed smugly.

“I already told you,” Mary warned, “just ‘cause he’s not here don’t mean I won’t spray you if you keep going on about him.”

Lottie rolled her eyes before poking Remus in the arm. “Remus, did you guys leave your bedroom door unlocked? I gotta use the lav but I don’t want to risk your guys’ public toilet down here.”

“Yeah, go on, door’s open.”

She smiled gratefully and tucked her water pistol under one arm before weaving away. “Didn’t know she was still seeing that Roger guy,” Remus said to Mary, sipping his drink.

“Ugh. They talk almost every night on the phone. She’s even been going on about marrying the guy.”

"Marry? She’s seventeen."

“Tell me about it. I had to threaten her that just because he’s six-hundred miles away doesn’t mean she can’t be caught acting insufferably in love. Called it an ‘emotional soaking’.”

“On that note,” he cleared his throat awkwardly, “we’ve already run out of water guns.”

She shrugged. “Then they can throw the cider. How’s it taste, by the way?”

“Like lukewarm cranberry juice and vodka."

Mary pulled the cup from his hands to try it and nodded amicably. “Oh yeah, that’ll get everyone pissed for sure. Have you seen Marlene?”

Remus gestured across the room, where Marlene was standing and

talking to Nicole. It'd been a surprise and a half to see her show up, but she and Marlene seemed to be talking civilly, so that was a plus.

"Oh good, Nicole came!" Mary cried. "I thought she'd blow me off for sure, but I'm trying to put out the flames between us—show Marls I'm not just her jealous best friend. I'm her *best* best friend."

The sentiment was almost admirable, if only had Mary known that what was going on between the two did not just have to do with her and Marlene's friendship.

"C'mon, come say hi with me."

"But I have to change the tape!" Remus whined, gesturing fruitlessly to the stereo.

"How about we let someone else have a go, love." She grabbed his arm and began pulling him through the crowd toward the pair, stopping just short of Marlene's elbow. "Nicole! I'm so glad you came!"

Nicole nodded at Mary, trying for a reasonable smile. "Thanks for the invite, Mary."

"Wait, *you* invited her?" Marlene asked.

"Of course! She's your friend."

Nicole raised an eyebrow and sipped her drink, but Mary didn't seem to notice. She looked between the two of them, as if scrambling for something to say, and finally dropped Remus' arm. "Nicole, would you mind helping me get some drinks? Marls sucks at mixing. Always too much mixer, not enough spike, if you know what I mean."

"I do not suck."

"Yeah, you do," Nicole said, before nodding Mary on. Mary bounced eagerly on the spot before bobbing her own head in stilted agreement.

"Ah—okay! C'mon, drinks are this way."

They broke off from them together, and Nicole sent Marlene one final glance before Mary actually took her arm in solidarity and tugged her through the fray.

"How long d'you figure that's gonna last?" Remus asked.

“Meh. I say ten minutes until they get so annoyed with each other that they’re both fighting to complain to me about it,” Marlene said, a small smile on her face. “I’m surprised Mary invited her. More surprised Nicole actually came.”

“Good surprised or bad surprised?”

“Good. Makes me think there might be a possibility of mending things.”

“And do you want that?”

“Hm. I think I’d like the chance.”

“Well,” Remus raised his drink, “cheers to that then.”

“Moony!” Sirius’ shout carried across the room. “C’mere!”

“Go,” Marlene said automatically, “your boy-toy’s waiting.”

"Don’t ever say that again.”

“MOOOOONY!”

“He’s calling you!” Marlene grinned, snatching his drink and winking at him over the brim of the cup. Shoving her fondly, Remus allowed the thievery and turned, slipping over to the spot where Sirius was waving his hands. James and Lily were standing next to him in front of one of the bookshelves, which Mary had been smart enough to tarp off as well in case any of them were doused with water.

“Finally. Stand there,” Sirius ordered, directing him to Lily’s side.

“What’s this?” Remus asked, obediently taking his place.

“Padfoot wants to take a photo,” James said, sliding an arm around Lily.

“Come in close, Remus,” Lily beckoned, while Sirius grinned from behind the camera.

“Yeah, get in close, Moony,” he leered, before suddenly dropping the camera so it hung from around his neck and whipping out a water gun. “EVANS, QUICK! You have ten seconds to make your choice or both of these suckers get soaked.”

“W-What?” Lily demanded, erupting into laughter.

“That’s against the rules!” James contested. “You’ve got us lined up for the slaughter!”

“Yes, and if you attempt to run I’ll shoot you in the backs like dogs. Now Evans, *choose!”*

“I don’t understand!”

“He means you gotta pick one of us—me or James,” Remus said, enjoying the game despite himself.

“That’s right! I knew you were smart, Moony. Loser don’t get a smooch, but at least they stay dry, HA!”

“I’m not gonna choose,” Lily scoffed. “I simply can’t!”

“Then they both die!” Sirius shot a short squirt at James’ shoulder, instantly dying his white school shirt a damp pink.

“You bastard!” James crowed, holding his shoulder. “Moony, I’ve been hit!”

“No, James!” Remus cried, putting his hands up in surrender. “Lily, you must choose!”

“Yeeeees, you’re already lost, Evans, but you can still save the one you love by denying him a final kiss, or breathe your last in each other’s longing embrace! You’re out of time— *you must choose!”*

“I can't, I—oh hell, this is so dumb,” Lily snorted, before lacing both her arms around Remus and James’ shoulders and bringing them down to her left, planting a fat kiss on both of their cheeks.

“YES!” James cried; “ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE!”

Sirius promptly doused them all in red. He emptied the gun’s canister and when he was finished they were all left dripping from head to toe. Remus pushed his hair up out of his eyes and Lily giggled, kissing his cheek again while James shook his hands out and went to Sirius’ side, lifting the camera up over his head.

“Taking a photo to commemorate the moment where your girlfriend couldn’t choose between you and Moony, Prongs?” Sirius teased.

“No, just wanting to set it aside for this,” James said, dropping the camera on a table behind him before throwing himself at Sirius with a cry and laying several fat, wet kisses on Sirius’ cheek. Sirius yelped,

spiralling backwards, but James was relentless, and eventually everyone who'd noticed was spraying them with water pistols of their own. They were instantly soaked to their skinnies, and Lily just shook her head.

"We should've put down more tarps."

"Guess so."

After that it was a free-for-all. No one cared about staying dry. Some were just getting handsy just so their friends might catch them, driven by the rowdy ambiance until they were simply throwing themselves at each other in any open corner. The punch bowl had long since been emptied, but the booze kept flowing, and Remus spent half the night avoiding Sirius' advances.

"Come on, dance with me!" He slurred, swiping at the air in front of Remus' chest.

"You almost touched me there!" Remus said. "What? Trying to lose now, Padfoot? That desperate to hold me?!"

"Someone give me a water gun!" Sirius demanded. Remus had been pretty sure all of them were emptied, but not thirty seconds later Sirius was chasing him around the common room with a water pistol in hand, both of them dodging kids and getting cheered on like a pair of lunatics. Remus found solace only behind Marlene, who had somehow maintained an immaculately white shirt throughout the night's chaos.

"Cherry, save me!"

"Give it up, McKinnon! He's mine!"

"You can have him, just don't hit me," Marlene shouted, trying to pull Remus out from behind her as he moaned like an indignant child.

Appearing out of thin air, Mary thrust a finger out at the two of them. "Oi! Is that fraternizing I see?"

"No!" Marlene cut back. "Remus is just being a baby! Now get off me!"

"But he can't shoot me if I'm next to you!"

"Oh just shoot them already, Sirius," Mary giggled. Sirius raised his

pistol, but Marlene held a hand out.

“I haven’t done anything, now piss off, Black!”

“You didn’t take a vow of celibacy when you came in here tonight, did you?” Mary teased; “It’s just water, Marls!”

“I’m not playing anymore. Remus—OFF!”

He may have been drunk, but Remus knew when the game was finished. He released Marlene’s arm and backed away, and Sirius promptly drenched him with a snigger.

“Gotchu.”

Mary watched them, looking disappointed. When she spoke it sounded whiny, and she was clearly drunk. “Oh, come on, Marls! Have you tried reading the room? It’s a *game.”*

“Well, I don't want to play anymore!"

“Then why are you still here?”

Marlene clenched her jaw and in answer, made to step around Mary and head for the door. Mary caught her arm at the last second, dragging her back as she whimpered. *“Nooo!* I didn’t mean it! I just want you to have a good time!”

“For Christ sakes, Mary, I am having a good time! When did I say I wasn’t?”

“It’s just—I know you hate Valentine’s Day! I know it’s because you’re insecure and you think people don’t like you—but they do!”

“You’re the worst when you’re drunk,” Marlene snapped. “Now let go of me!”

Mary did not yield. “I like you! You’re my *best friend!* I can’t let my best friend walk out of here in a white shirt!”

“Yes, you can!”

“Oh! You’re upset, what can I do? Please tell me what I can do to make it better!”

“You can let go!”

But Mary did not let go. Instead she grabbed onto Marlene with both hands and kissed her, full on the mouth. Remus' jaw dropped open and next to him, Sirius' eyes nearly bulged right out of his head. When Mary pulled away she was beaming, flashing that dazzling smile that made guys everywhere melt, and probably Marlene too. But not this time.

"There!" She cried. "Now... Now we're the same!"

Oh Mary…

Remus wasn't sure which was more likely, Marlene bursting into tears on the spot or merely fading away in nonexistence. Turns out she didn't have time to do either. All of the kids who'd bore witness to the kiss turned, and instantly the pair of them were being bombarded by water from every side. Mary threw her hands up and screeched in delight, but Marlene simply seized up all over, horror-stricken like the miserable Carrie White on her grisly prom night. When the whole thing was over Mary lifted her wet curls away from her face, muttering about her poor hair, and Marlene just stood there. There was pink dripping from her face and hair—even her eyelashes. And when she looked at Mary...

Sensing the oncoming slaughter, Remus surged forward—but he was too late. Nicole got there first. She tapped Marlene on the shoulder and she turned, shame overcoming every one of her features.

"Nicole…"

Face blank, Nicole raised her arm and overturned her drink, directly over Marlene's head. No one said a word, and even Mary's smile warped into that of shock as Nicole tossed the empty cup away and walked off without a word. Mary's voice was but a squeak in the din.

"Marls…?"

Marlene looked back at her, and Remus was sure he'd never seen her look so hurt. "Don't you ever speak to me again," she said lowly, before sweeping from the room. Mary made to follow, confusion and regret on her face, but Remus got there first.

"Mary, no. Just—Just *don't."*

"What'd I do?" Mary demanded. "Sirius, what'd I do?"

Even Sirius didn't have an answer. He looked at her regretfully, and

Remus turned and left.

Thankfully, Marlene had sought refuge upstairs rather than run out of the dorm dripping wet. He had to fumble with his keys just to open the door, and when he did Remus found water puddles next to his bed and the curtains drawn shut.

“Cherry? Cherry, it’s only me.”

“Go away, Remus!”

“Can’t,” he lied, shutting the door after himself, “they’ve started square dancing and I suck at geometry.”

It was a lame attempt at a joke, and Marlene didn't laugh anyway. Feeling guilty, Remus sat down next to his bed, leaning up against the curtains. He was drunk and only half-decent at consoling his friends on his best days, but he couldn’t think of anything else to do. It was Marlene.

“I’m sorry, Cherry.”

No answer.

“Mary really fucked up. That was fucked up…”

“She’s such a bitch.” It came out as a vicious sob. “Some bloody Valentine’s Day—why can’t she just leave well enough alone? She always has to be doing *something!”*

Remus looked down at his lap, twiddling his thumbs. "Yeah..."

“You know what hurts the most, Remus? She kissed me without a second thought. She kissed me so that I’d *fit in.* Because to her, I’m no different from everyone else!"

"That's not true. You're Mary's favourite person in the world."

"Besides herself, you mean!"

Because he couldn’t think of anything to say, Remus reached back, sliding his hand up underneath the bed curtain and leaving it open in the air. There was a sniffle, and then Marlene took it, squeezing so tightly his knuckles twinged. Remus didn’t care.

“Cherry, you know you’re my girl, right?”

Marlene laughed then, through her snuffling.

“Idiot.”

“I’m serious—or well, *heh*... I'm Remus, but..."

"Great. Now I have to hear you make that joke too. Drunkard."

"You wanna know something, Cherry? I don't think anybody's called me a drunkard before. You wanna know something else?"

“… What?”

“I’ve got... sunshine…”

“Oh *no.”*

“On a cloudy day… When it's... shit... Oh! *When it’s cold outsiiiiide, I’ve got the month of May…”*

Marlene gave an embarrassed whimper, but didn’t let go of his hand. Remus took that as permission to keep going. He *was* drunk, after all.

“ ‘I guess you’d saaay—what can make me feel this waaay? My girl! Talkin’ ‘bout my girl’...”

Marlene whipped the curtains back and threw herself forward. She hugged him from behind, still dripping wet, and Remus clung to her arms, so, *so* relieved.

“Sorry about your sheets,” she mumbled.

“Don’t even worry about it. I’ll steal Sirius’ bed.”

“I love that. I love that you can talk about him like that. Like it’s so normal.”

Remus felt warmth spread inside his chest. “You know, Cherry, I haven’t put much stock in ‘normal’ lately.”

She chuckled lightly and it tickled the back of his neck, but before anything else could be said, a small knock came at the door. Mary.

“Marls…? Marls, I’m sorry. Will you please talk to me?”

Remus heard Marlene suck back a breath and he gently stroked her arm. “How are you feeling?”

“Awful.”

“Do you want me to send her away?”

“Yes.”

He went to pull away, but she clung to him.

“No.”

“I get it,” Remus whispered. “She’s important to you.”

“Yeah… but she’s never sung to me.”

“I bet she would if you asked.”

“Marls? Marlene, please let me in. I’m so sorry. I want to explain…”

Marlene sighed deeply and slowly unfurled her arms from around his neck. “This is gonna suck.”

Remus stood, turning around to face her. “You don’t have to tell her anything. You don’t owe her an explanation.”

“I know,” Marlene answered, looking up at him with those true blue eyes. “But I think I owe myself one.”

"Okay."

When opened the door, Remus found a rather pathetic-looking Mary standing in her wet clothes. She was missing an earring and had mascara running down her face and smudged lipstick to her chin. Her usually-perfect hair was flat and damp, but she was still sucking back air through a sniffling nose, trying to look brave.

"Oh, Remus. I—"

“Don’t talk, Mary. Just listen.”

She nodded, vigorously, and stepped past him into the room. She didn’t rush the bed, just approached quietly and sat down next to her friend. Satisfied, Remus shut the door and returned downstairs. He ran into Peter and Moira first, who were pulling their boots off by the threshold and still dressed up in full formal attire. Moira had made him go to the Valentine's ball after all, but judging by the smiles on their faces, it'd been a good time.

“Hey, Wormtail. How was the dance?”

"Great!"

“But we’re ready to party,” Moira added quickly. "Got any booze, Lupin?"

Almost impressed, Remus jutted his head toward the kitchenette. “I hid a flask of vodka behind some peas in the freezer. Have at ‘er.”

They shuffled off, while Remus followed the music back into the common room. James, Lily, and Sirius set upon him at once and it took Remus several minutes of reassurance to get them to stop yammering.

“But Marlene’s alright, right?” Lily demanded.

“They’re talking. But yeah, I think things’ll be alright.”

“This is just too wild,” James sighed, putting an arm around Lily’s shoulders. At the same second Davey Gudgeon appeared behind them and splashed James’ back with water, which ended with James giving chase. *“Damn it Gudgeon, that wasn’t romance!”*

As Davey fled, hooting the entire way, and Lily chased them both looking rather worried, Sirius shuffled up to Remus’ side. “You think McKinnon’s gonna fess up? Tell her everything about Nicole and stuff?”

Remus shrugged. “If she does, Mary’ll have to accept it.”

“She will,” Sirius said firmly. “It’s Mary.”

Somewhere across the room, the stereo fell silent as the tape was changed and suddenly punk pop was blaring from the speakers.

‘Hey ho, let’s go! Hey ho, let’s go!
Hey ho, let’s go! Hey ho, let’s go!’

“OH FUCK YEAH! Someone's got taste!” Sirius cried, instantly zeroing in on James across the room. He had Davey in a headlock and was currently grinding his knuckles into the top of his head—completely good-naturedly, of course—but the moment he recognised the song, he also looked in Sirius’ direction. They reunited in the centre of the

common room, head-banging furiously enough that it began to catch on like a bad cold. Before the first verse was even done, the entire room of kids had joined in, thrashing around in a circle and erupting into a chorus of shouting.

“ ‘THEY'RE FORMING IN A STRAIGHT LINE!
THEY’RE GOING THROUGH A TIGHT WIND!
THE KIDS ARE LOSING THEIR MINDS—
THE BLITZKRIEG BOP!’”

Enjoying himself immensely already, Remus had gone in search of another drink, which was supplied to him after Peter and Moira’s reappearance.

"Is that Black and Potter standing on a table?!" Moira howled.

It was. Remus had turned his back for two seconds and somehow they'd managed to wrestle a table into the centre of the mosh pit. Now they were standing on top of it, teetering back and forth precariously and singing without a care in the world. Other kids cheered them on of course, and Sirius—busy playing air guitar like it was going out of style—looked up and picked Remus out from the crowd.

“MOONY! HEY MOONY! I’M UP HERE!”

“I SEE YOU!” Remus shouted back, just as a couch pillow arched through the air and caught Sirius upside the head. He nearly toppled off the back end of the table but caught himself at the last second while Remus’ heart did a reset.

“Okay, that's enough!” He called warningly, passing the flask off to Peter and stepping forward. He had to fight to get through the throng of other kids. *"Sirius!"*

'HEY HO, LET'S GO!
SHOOT 'EM IN THE BACK NOW!'

“Sirius—Sirius, come down from the table!”

'WHAT THEY WANT, I DON'T KNOW—
THEY'RE ALL REVVED UP AND READY TO GO!'

"Don't jump!"

“YEAH, JUMP!” Someone shouted. A chorus immediately picked up, and Sirius’ mouth dropped open in maniacal delight as his classmates cheered him on;

“JUMP! JUMP! JUMP!”

“NO!” Remus shouted, war flashbacks of James on acid making his stomach drop. Not it mattered; he was immediately drowned out by the song's chorus as it got ready to come to a sharp close, and Sirius, it seemed, would not be stopped.

“OI, MOONY!"

‘HEY HO, LET'S GO!
HEY HO, LET'S GO!'

"WATCH THIS!"

'HEY HO, LET'S GO!'

On the final beat, Sirius threw himself into a stage-dive right off the end of the table, and Remus saw his entire life flash before his eyes. Kids shrieked and fled to avoid being crushed, which allowed him to stagger forward suddenly—just in time to catch Sirius out of the air and go down painfully on his back in one grand heap. There was a round of wincing *‘oooh!’* and James, still on the table, gaped down at them from above.

Remus groaned. His entire body hurt and might've been dislocated, but when he sat up to check on Sirius, he was surprised to find him completely fine—and despite it all, *grinning*.

“Moony, you saved me,” he sniggered.

Remus growled, pushing himself up into a sitting position. “You are—*without a doubt*—an absolute fucking arse!”

“One that *you* saved!”

“Whatever, just get off me!”

But Sirius didn't get off; rather he turned so he was straddling him across the middle, making Remus groan all over again.

“But don’t you realise what this means, Moons?” He leered.

It took a moment for realisation to actually set in. That Sirius was lying on top of him—that they were *touching.*

“I won!” Sirius boomed. "HA!"

Remus first felt utter devastation wash over him, then pure relief. *Winning?! Who cared about winning...*

“So the bet’s over? I can touch you again?!”

"Oh yes!" Sirius cried. "You can! 'Cause I know you want to, ya big fat loser!"

"Good."

And then Remus threw himself forward, tackling Sirius and sending them both tumbling across the floor. Cheers went up—*a brawl!*

“AHHH!” Sirius wailed. “Get him off me, someone *heeeelp!"*

“C’mere, I’ll beat your win into you, you fucking nob!”

Their classmates rallied with laughter, pulling ankle after ankle out of the way and leaping over them as they tumbled. Sirius ultimately freed himself long enough to scramble away, and he fled into the hall with Remus and much applause right on his heels.

“Hey, don't be mad! You lost fair and square, Moony!”

“Then why you runnin’, Pads?!” Remus screamed, slipping on the damp carpet as Sirius yelped and threw himself up the stairs.

When he reached the third floor Sirius stopped long enough to tear off his shoe. He threw it, in a true show of athletic ability, Remus caught the shoe straight out of the air and flung it back at him. It bounced off the wall when Sirius ducked, but the surprise it gave him was just enough of an advantage. With a loud cry, Remus grabbed him round the middle, taking them both to the carpet in one fell swoop.

“Augh—shit!” Sirius groaned. “You’re so cruel! I need at least one of

my kidneys to survive, you kn—”

Remus didn’t let him finish. Like a starving animal, he threw himself down over Sirius and pressed his lips to his, sedating every last urge he’d been stifling since they’d agreed on the stupid bet in the first place. Sirius kissed him back, every bit as ferocious, and buried his fingers in Remus’ hair, pulling taunt until they were moaning into each other’s mouths. At that moment it wouldn’t have mattered if the whole world saw them, which was good considering Mary and Marlene had just come down from the floor above.

“Oh my GOD!” Mary shrieked, as Marlene practically fell into the bannister in her own laughter. “YOU TWO TOO?!”

They broke apart, and Remus had just enough time to gape before Sirius was pulling him back by the lips.

“Do you mind, Macdonald? We’re sort of busy here.”

Chapter End Notes

'Picture Post' was a British photojournalism magazine started to imitate 'Life' magazine in the 30s-50s.
'All fur coat and no knickers' refers to someone who seemed elegant and proper on the outside, but is actually immoral underneath.
Lying 'top and tail' just means like two people lying with their heads at opposite ends of the bed.
'Send[ing] someone to Coventry' is an idiom for ostracising someone.

Songs featured:
"Little Girl Lies" by Blondie, 1976
"My Girl" by the Temptations, 1964
"Blitzkrieg Bop" by the Ramones, 1976.

& don't worry, not all of the sexy talk from here on out will be in French, lmfao. Just let me have a bit of fun, haha.

[Again] Author's Note: Due to a conflicting work schedule, I've decided to make upload day Sundays of every week. This will hopefully make it so my uploads aren't as late in the day anymore.

Next upload: July 17

Chapter 88: Reunion

Chapter Summary

Sirius has always enjoyed putting on a show. Turns out it's a family trait.

Chapter Notes

The song at the beginning of this chapter wasn't actually released until October of 1978 but I couldn't resist so meh to the details.

CW for this chapter:
Intense references to child abuse, including physical but mostly emotional/psychological as well as strong references to homophobia.
This chapter's got some solid hurt/comfort, so please be mindful of these content warnings. They all go through it, but come out on the other side stronger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't need you to worry for me 'cause I'm alright,
I don't want you to tell me it's time to come home;
I don't care what you say anymore this is my life,
Go ahead with your own life leave me alone...

- "My Life" Billy Joel, 1978

Regulus' second message had arrived just after Valentine's Day, this time addressed to James. *Still alive,* it read; *Idiots*.

James of course, got a kick out of it, but Sirius remained unimpressed. He tried his best to insist that he was thankful for any word at all, but when a third postcard arrived one week later with Peter's name on it, Sirius just about ripped it in two.

"Would it kill the little git to put *my* name on a card for once?!"

"He's just doing it to get a rise out of you," James sniggered. "It's cute."

When it was Remus' turn to read the postcard, he couldn't help but

smile. *I'm fine. Not in fucking Belgium. Stop calling. Bloody prats.* He imagined him writing it; *Of course I should call them all prats. It's very important that they know.*

"Looks like he's finally developed a sense of humour at least," Sirius gripped, taking back the card and turning it over in his hands several times. Remus didn't say it, but it was obvious he was relieved. They'd been going on two months with no word apart from a few flimsy postcards, but as long as Regulus was still finding ways to insult them things must've been somewhat normal.

"I'm still serious about going, if you are," Remus said later on, when it was just him and Sirius again. They were in the laundrette house, flipping their sheets and things into the dryer. It was early evening; a radio was playing atop one of the shelves along the far wall, seemingly forgotten by another student. It was as good a moment as any for such depressing parley.

"We could get a car over Easter break, drive out there. Bring him… Well, bring him somewhere else."

Sirius shut the squeaky dryer door with a slam, nearly upsetting the box of powder detergent sitting on top. "And just where are you planning on getting a car? Seems a bit far-fetched, that one. And I don't think Stan'll fancy a road trip to fucking Bath."

"We'll figure it out, we always do. Why? Are you saying you don't want to go?"

"No!" Sirius snatched up the detergent, moving up to the washer. "It's just... What if he says no? Like picture it, Moons. We go all the way there, and by some miracle manage to talk to him and say… what? Come back? Leave them? I'm not sure he'd do it. It was easier for me, I never fit in there, and I had Alphard's inheritance. Reg has nothing."

"He has you."

Sirius looked at him then. *Really* looked at him. "You make it sound so easy."

"Maybe it is."

"... You sop."

It was a foolish idea, but they were young and foolish anyway so it was something. Even if they didn't have a car or the license to drive

one, it wasn't as though the Black family manor was some impregnable fortress. Sirius knew all the back entrances, which servants' hallway was least likely to be used, and how often the gatekeepers switched shifts. If they could just get to Regulus without being seen, then maybe they'd have a chance. Remus had already mapped the route; if they borrowed the money for the train from their friends they could be there and back in three days. Giles might help, given the right incentive, and if not they could always hitchhike. At the very least it'd be an adventure. Perhaps they'd even be arrested! Wouldn't Tomny be impressed then.

Eventually they were counting down the days until Easter. Sirius was convinced Regulus could last another month on his own, but he never stopped calling either. Perhaps he thought he could annoy his brother into coming back, but most likely he was just hanging on a hope. Funny thing about that though... on a few very rare occasions, a little hoping could pay off.

It was a Tuesday. Remus only remembered because he taught music to the fifth years that day. Things had been tough going without Regulus there to help, and his acting replacement, Anton, was positively useless when it came to all things music and children.

"Finally! I thought it'd never end," he groaned, digging the foam plugs from his ears. He insisted on wearing them to every lesson, and though Remus doubted they did much against a nine year-old and a tuba, he wasn't interested enough to ask.

"New assignments from McGonagall today, eh?" Anton said, as they said goodbye to the kiddies and made their way back toward their half of campus. "Hope I get something easy, like office duty. No one cares if you slack off there, all you've got to do is show up! How 'bout you, Lupin?"

"Don't matter to me." *As long as it's away from you.*

They were running late by the time they'd made it back to Castle Hall, and Remus was half worried they'd have missed out on all the decent jobs. Outside the building, pulled straight up front was a sleek black Bentley car, complete with the flashy hood ornament. Anton whistled when he saw it, but veered away when he noticed the car's driver standing on the pavement. He glared at them, then gave a sharp flick of the pipe he was smoking, indicating that they should move on.

"Who do you think that beauty belongs to, Lupin?"

"Maybe the Queen's come to visit," Remus replied snidely, not really interested.

Still rushing, they went up the front stairs together only to come upon a cluster of other prefects on the ground floor, all mulling around like nervous sheep. Between all the bodies and the building's constant use of central heating, the hallway was positively stifling and no one seemed to be in a good mood.

"Blimey... What are we waiting on?" Anton complained. "Thought we were getting our new assignments today."

The prefect beside him shrugged. "McGonagall's still in her office, I think. Supposedly she's meeting with a parent."

"Hope it's not mine," Anton grimaced. "Mum'll kill me if she sees my geography marks."

"Remington!"

It was Trish. She pushed through the crowd and took him by the sleeve, practically yanking him up the opposite staircase so noseys like Anton wouldn't be able to overhear.

"Trish, what is it?" Remus asked, nearly missing a step when she finally slammed to a halt ahead of him.

"It's McGonagall," Trish answered, anxiously brushing her hair from her face. "She's in her office now meeting with his parents."

"Yeah, I heard. Can't be mine though. My dad would never make the trip."

"I said his!" Trish snapped. "And I ken who it is, ya numpty! It's Regulus' parents... and he's with 'em."

For a moment it was like the floorboards had come out beneath him.

"Regulus is here... at school?!"

"I saw them me'sell. They came in that fancy car out front. Black wouldn't even look at us, and his maw, she..."

He could tell by her face that it'd not been a pleasant experience, but Remus was already miles ahead. Regulus was there—at school! They weren't going to have to hitchhike all the way to Bath after all!

"I gotta see him."

Trish got in front of him before he could move, blocking the way up the stairs.

"Don't be a wee clipe!" She hissed. "What are you gonnae do, walk in there and invite 'em to tea?! You should leave it... He's alright, I ken it."

"I have to see for myself," Remus insisted, pushing past her.

"You dafty! I'm going to get Sirius!"

Remus let her go. The stairs he took two at a time until he'd emerged on the third floor landing. It was less stifling so high up and hardly crowded, and yet Remus couldn't get a breath in. It was like a stone had lodged itself in the middle of his chest. *Sirius,* he thought cowardly, *I can't do this, maybe we should get Sirius!*

But he didn't want to risk it. Regulus was back now, but how long until his mother decided it was all a mistake and took him away again? How would he ever be able to face Sirius knowing he'd let his little brother slip right through his fingers?

Don't be a bloody pansy, she's a woman not the devil!

He wasn't sure how much of that was true, but he approached the Headmistress's office anyway. He'd just about grasped that heavy golden knocker when a sharp, reedy voice cut through the quiet.

"I cannot believe *you let that filth back in here. This is why we thought to keep our son home, do you even realise the damage I could do to this school's reputation with a single phone call?"*

The voice was coming from inside the Headmistress's office. He was sure he'd never heard it before, but somehow it was still familiar. It was every sordid creak of the Shrieking Shack, every shrill piano note in the late-night horror films, every ghastly screech in his nightmares. But there was something else too; a certain hitch in the consonants, and the way she seemed to hold her breath before certain words—as though she knew exactly what would create the deepest and most efficient cut.

It was a woman, and she was angry. She wasn't even yelling at him—there was an entire door between them—and yet Remus felt it in his bones. It was like being thrust back in time. In all of his memories, he

could only recall one time Hope had really yelled at him. It was after he'd overheard a few of the house staff gossiping; *deranged,* they'd called her, *raving mad, likely to cave her own head in. And those pills, someone ought to flush them away, save us the trouble.*

So he did. He thought he was helping, and she never bothered to keep them out of reach anyway. He realised his mistake only when she found him with the empty bottle in his hand.

REMUS! OH—What have you done? What have you DONE?! *Those were important, darling! We talked about—oh my… Bad! You are so bad, Remus! You're a BAD boy! I needed those! Where am I going to get them now? Are YOU going to get them for me? ARE YOU?!*

Remus felt ill. He couldn't breathe. Then he heard McGonagall's voice, and he was no longer six years-old and hiding beneath his mother's bed.

"Mrs. Black, you should know that we here at Hawkings treat all students equally, regardless of background or extenuating circumstances."

"Equal? You think that any of the miserable brats you house come close to my son? That I should consider that little beast equal to **my** *son? You have no idea the disappointment I've been made to endure, the shame we've been made to bear? We have been cursed! My husband health has been put at risk because of that wretched little—"*

"Mother, please."

"Be quiet, Regulus! You're lucky I haven't changed my mind already. The only reason we're back here is because you agreed to our deal. If you cannot keep your end of the bargain, then I don't see any further point in staying."

A lapse of silence, and Remus felt his blood run cold. *A bargain, what bargain?*

"Our family has been generous, Professor, very *generous. Every year this college receives thousands of pounds in donations, I would feel sorry to have to write to your other sponsors, many of whom are good friends, you remember. I'm sure they'd be disheartened to know how this mighty institution has failed to uphold its principle of standards. Why, just last month I heard that you're admitting over two dozen students whose families couldn't even hope to cover the admissions cost. Really, Minerva, how do you think that will look?"*

"I believe everyone is deserving of a quality education, regardless of how deep their pockets are, Mrs. Black."

Another pregnant pause, and Remus imagined Walburga readying her fire and pitchforks.

"If Regulus is to remain here under the care of your appointed staff, then I have a list of demands that must be met. First is that he is to have a private room. He is not to fraternise with anyone ineffectual, and he's to stop all frivolous chore-keeping. What is the point of being a prefect if you've left yourself no time to study? Outside of lessons, he is also to be kept separate from the rest. None may look, none may touch—we are not here to make friends. You should know it's against our better judgement that we are allowing him to return to Hawkings and I will not have my faith sequestered again. Not when that filthy boy is allowed to run amuck without punishment!"

"Mother, Sirius isn't—"

A sharp sound, like a smack.

"Mrs, Black! I cannot condone such heinous treatment of a student!"

"Don't be foolish, Minerva. If you don't teach them now, how will you ever expect them to behave? Do you hear me, Regulus? You will behave, won't you? Answer me!"

You bad boy, Remus, I needed those! Are you going to get them for me? ***ARE YOU?!***

He couldn't stand it anymore. The door fell open under his palm without a breath's bare effort, and just like that three pairs of eyes fell on him. McGonagall was behind her desk in that high-backed burgundy chair, while Regulus sat across from her, practically cowering in a small armchair. Standing behind him with a vice-like grip on either shoulder was his mother, Walburga Black. Remus would've recognised her anywhere, she had the same black and grey colouring as each of her sons, but where Sirius' eyes were captivating like a live thunderstorm, hers were cold and shadowed. She had tiny shoulders with arms as thin as a bird's, and wore a black frock coat laced so tightly around her throat it was as though she must've existed by not breathing at all.

"What is this? Who are you?" She shrieked when she saw him. "Is Hawkings now teaching its students that it's a virtue to eavesdrop?"

The woman's like five foot nothing, Sirius' voice echoed in his head; *You see her and think 'a swift breeze could knock her over', but I swear, when she's angry... It's like watching that kid from the fucking Exorcist. Nothing can stop her.*

She hadn't tried throwing him out a window yet, but the expression on her face didn't feel so far off.

"Orion! Orion, get him out of here!"

Inexplicably, Remus had almost missed him. He'd been sitting apart, looking almost bored, but when he stood up from one of the velvet armchairs ahead of the fireplace, there was no mistaking him as Sirius' father. Mr. Black was silent in his opposition, but didn't hesitate to step toward him, almost crowding Remus into the doorway.

"You're not where you're supposed to be, are you?" He asked, as though it was as scathing a reprimand as Remus had ever received.

"Orion, I said remove him!" Mrs. Black seethed. "This is a private meeting!"

"Thank you, Mr. Black," McGonagall said, appearing behind him, "but I will handle Mr. Lupin. He is, after all, *my* student."

He peered at her over his shoulder, and Remus had just enough time to picture his professor going in on a round of fisticuffs before Mr. Black withdrew a silver cigarette case from his jacket pocket.

"As you wish, Professor."

He stepped away, lighting the thin cigar as he went. Remus recognised the smell immediately. It turned his stomach to think of Lyall.

"Mr. Lupin," McGonagall cooed, uncharacteristically soft, "what is it, what can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to..." He gestured dumbly toward Regulus, and Mrs. Black instantly began bleating again.

"Regulus, who is he? Who is that boy?"

"He's no one, Mother," Regulus murmured, eyes rimmed with purple from fatigue.

"Regulus, how many times have I had to tell you to *speak up?"*

Regulus looked away, and Remus knew it was shame. *Don't look at me.*

I can't. What have they done to you?

"Remus, I'll have to ask you to wait downstairs with the other prefects."

Professor McGonagall began backing him out the door, but Remus couldn't tear his eyes away.

"Did you not hear her!?" Walburga howled. "Go!"

Regulus.

Don't look at me.

"Are you a child or a mongrel? *Get!"*

"Remus, please."

She shut the door, and there was more ranting, but Remus could barely understand it. His mind was racing a mile a minute. He had to see Sirius, had to get him before anyone else did—had to warn him! He couldn't let Trish bring him there, he'd be done for. She'd ruin him.

He must've flown down the staircase, it was a miracle he didn't stumble. The other prefects were still piddling about the ground floor, irritated and tired of waiting. Several of them made noises of discontent when he shoved them aside, but there was no waiting to be polite. Outside the cold air seized in his lungs. Remus only got a few feet before he finally skidded on one of the slick steps. Thankfully someone was there to catch him.

"Woah! Where's the fire, Moony?"

It was James. He caught him near the bottom of the stairs, which was terrible of course because where there was a James, there was always a—

Sirius grabbed his sleeve.

"You saw him then?" He demanded. "Is he still inside?"

Remus looked at Sirius desperately, then at Trish who stood behind him.

"You actually brought him here?!"

"It's his brother!"

"I'm going in," Sirius said, already turning away.

"No, Sirius, don't—"

The front doors opened, and three figures clad in black strode out. They looked out of place at their school, like nightmares come to life.

"Stand up straight, Regulus! I thought I already told you to stand up straight."

"Walburga, that's enough."

They were getting closer. Remus felt his breath hitch. Five feet, four feet, three!

They passed by.

"And your hair is far too long. You must get it cut if you're to stay at all. I won't have you running around looking like some woe-begone queer. Are you listening, Regulus?"

“Yes, mother.”

"Into the car, Walburga. It's time to go."

Remus stared in disbelief. They were only standing a few feet off to the side, and yet they hadn't even noticed them. As the family approached the lush car, their driver hopped-to, opening first the far side for Mr. Black, then the curb-facing for his wife. Mr. Black was first to pull Regulus aside, and after whispering something into his ear, he stepped round the car and ducked inside. Then it was Walburga's turn.

"You remember what I told you," she hissed, grasping Regulus by the elbow like her were a scolded child. "One toe out of line, and you will never see this place again. It would be like nothing. One call, Regulus. *One."*

“Yes, mother.”

"Remember what you agreed to. Mind your lessons, and do *not* disappoint us. This is a gift. You should be grateful. Now... kiss me goodbye.”

“That fucking bitch...” Sirius started forward, hands fisted at his side, but James got in front of him first.

“Mate, you don’t wanna do this."

“Get out of my way, James."

"But they’re leaving!”

"I don't care! I’m not gonna let her talk like that. Not—Not *here!”*

And for all his wild and irrational nature, it almost made sense. Sirius loved the Potters, loved even more guessing what their life could be one day, but for the last thirteen years Hawkings had been his home, and one did not let others lay waste to that which they loved.

Ripping free of James, Sirius cut down the final set of steps.

"Oi! Oi, hey, Mum!"

It was crude, but that was the point. When Walburga heard the unrefined shouting she instantly recoiled like a spider. Her spindly fingers formed tight fists across her stomach as she set eyes upon them, her face forming the most unsettling scowl. She was like every angry teacher, tutor, and housemaid Remus had ever had, all rolled up into one—and yet somehow still worse.

“You. I knew you'd be here."

“And where else would I be—Belgium?”

For the not the first time, Remus thought Sirius would've made a wonderful actor. Like the flick of a switch his tone became boorish and disinterested, until the ten feet between them might as well have been ten miles.

"Been a while since you made the big trip up north, did you enjoy the sights? Hope the refreshments were up to your standards. I know you prefer your blood fresh, ya old vampire."

"Orion!" Walburga screeched. "Get out here this instant!”

There was a moment of hostile silence, and then a click as the back door opened and Orion Black stepped back out in his sweeping winter coat. He shut the door with a sharp flick of his wrist and rounded the car, stopping only at his wife’s side.

“Hey Dad,” Sirius sneered. “Lookin’ stellar. Absolutely mint. How’s the heart condition treating ya? Guess Mum hasn't completely written you off yet, otherwise who would be left to listen to her shriek about the neighbours?”

"You little beast. How dare you speak to your father like that!"

Mr. Black set a hand on his wife's shoulder, temporarily silencing her shrieking. Next to him, Regulus still hadn't raised his gaze from the pavement. Perhaps it was because he felt so many eyes on him; he couldn't stop shifting his weight, hands tapping rhythmically at his sides the way they always did when he was nervous. No doubt drawn by Mrs. Black's cries, a small circle of prefects had emerged from the Hall and stood looming on the stairs above, like vultures to a fresh carcass. It was the perfect feast, with the perfect cast; they waited to see who would draw first blood. Remus could only hope one of them had the sense to send for McGonagall.

"Sirius," Mr. Black started, with a voice like rolling thunder, "you should know better than to test your mother.”

“Yeah, well… You know how it is. I get so choked up at family visits. And I'm the only one who can get under that scaly skin of hers, why deny myself such simple pleasures?"

Sirius tucked his hands up behind his head casually, but no one looked impressed. Remus could feel the sweat on his palms while James' dread was pouring off him in rivets.

"Sirius..."

“Enough," Walburga hissed. "I’ll say this only once. All of you—*stay away from our son.”*

Sirius slapped his hands to his heart. "Who? Me?"

"You are not our son. You are nothing but a mistake."

It was dismissive. It was cruel. It was everything Remus had imagined of the Blacks. Superior, brutal, unyielding. There was no room for argument; Regulus was their son, and Sirius was, well…

Sirius smiled, lifelessly, and Remus imagined he could see the energy seep out of him like blood from a wound. Then he surprised all of them. Instead of rising to the obvious bait, Sirius looked away from his mother—dismissing *her*—and faced his brother.

“Are you okay, Reg?”

Walburga swept in almost before Sirius could get the words out; “Don’t you *dare* speak to him,” she snarled, while Regulus looked on, shoulders caved in on themselves like an animal bound for slaughter.

“He’s my brother,” Sirius said through his teeth. "Piss off."

A short gasp went up from the other prefects. Trish covered her mouth.

Wow, did you hear that? He told her to piss off...

Ha, look at her face!

"You pathetic little welp..."

With eyes like fire, Walburga Black raised her hand. She might've hit him, right there on the school's front steps, but luckily for them not everyone was as interested in making a scene.

"Walburga!"

Mr. Black had his wife by the wrist instantly. Meanwhile, James and Remus had their friend by either elbow, yanking him backward to keep some space between them. It was protective, but Sirius fought it every step of the way.

"You can't do this forever! We're not your little puppets!"

Walburga began to laugh. A deep, manic, belly-driven laugh. It cut into everyone watching like a knife; surely used the madness, Mr. Black threw down her arm and stomped back toward the car.

"Oh, Sirius, you aren't *our* anything. You aren't even a part of this family... You're nothing, really."

"You think I wanted to be a part of this family? This isn't a family, it's a curse!"

"Oh, you should be so ungrateful. I didn't curse you, brat, I gave you a gift! It was me who made you, who sat your miserable little behind in front of that bloody piano. I gave you everything, even though I knew —I *knew* you’d come out wrong the moment you opened those dirty eyes and looked at me. It's you—you're the curse. I couldn't so much as comb your hair without seeing it."

“You never combed my hair! *Not once!”*

“Oh don’t *whine,* Sirius. It is so unbecoming."

"I hate you," he moaned. "I wish you'd die already, both of you! I hate you!"

"Is that really the best you can do?" She smiled wickedly, and then clicked her tongue in disappointment. "Just one little bit of hatred?"

I would’ve expected more from you.

I would've expected more.

Expected more.

More.

It was a waterfall. Remus didn't remember letting go of Sirius' arm, of getting in between them. All he saw was her shocked expression, the indifferent face of his father, and that horrible landscape painting that hung on the wall. *Hurt me, not him. I'll kill you if you hurt him.*

"Moony!"

There was a hand on the back of his neck, another on the side of his face—Sirius. When Remus came back to himself they were nearly nose to nose, Sirius holding him back like a grounding rod in a rabid storm. Everyone was watching but it hardly mattered, the Blacks were already getting back into their car, and Regulus was gone.

"I do hope you can make Alphard's money last, Sirius," Walburga called, eyes wide like she too had been spooked by Remus' sudden threat. "I knew letting that man near my family was a mistake, and look, here's the proof."

"Walburga, get in the car."

With a sharp glance her husband's way, Mrs. Black folded herself into the back seat, pausing long enough to smile at them once more.

"Goodbye. We won't be seeing each other again."

The driver shut the door, and the vile face of Walburga Black disappeared behind tinted windows.

“Yeah, go!” Sirius cried, wrenching himself free of James and rushing

the car's boot. He placed a sharp kick on its back tire and continued until the expensive lift was pulling away from the curb. "GO!" He shouted, wrenching up piles of snow and throwing it at the back window. *"Get out of here! Get out of this place!"*

A sudden slamming came from the top of the stairs as Professor McGonagall burst through the doors, scattering a row of gawking prefects. Someone must've fetched her then, or she'd overheard the shouting all the way from the third floor.

"What the devil is going on here? Speak now, somebody!"

A few kids pointed, and McGonagall's eyes found them in a second.

"Sirius! Sirius Black, come up here this instant!"

It was Trish who moved first. "Go!" She urged, shoving Sirius from behind. "Regulus went toward the dorms, I bet if you cut through the trees you'll be able to head him off! I'll distract McGonagall."

Shooting her a grateful look, James grabbed Sirius by the arm again. "C'mon, before she hauls you in for questioning or therapy. Moony, hurry up!"

Taking the shortcut had been a good idea in theory. On good days they shaved off at least a few minutes but come winter the forest paths were scattered with snow and various tree debris. They had to slough through ice and mud, and even then they only emerged with seconds to spare. Already Regulus was cutting across Salazar's front lawn, face red like he'd been sprinting.

"Reg!" Sirius hollered. "Reg, stop!"

"Don't come near me! I don't want to see you!"

"I said stop, you bloody twat!" Then Sirius picked up a snowball the size of his fist and hurled it right against the back of his brother's head. Regulus went down hard on impact, spooking a group of boys who'd just made their way out of the dorm. When he stood up again, Regulus' entire front was covered in snow. He gaped like he couldn't believe it, and rounded on Sirius viciously.

"I hate you! You ruin everything!"

"Yeah, well I hate you too!" Sirius fired back. "You're a boring, skittish little prude, and all you do is rag on me! Ever since we were kids, it's

always whinge, whinge, whinge! And I listened to it because—because *DAMMIT*—you're my brother!"

With a great wail, Regulus picked up a snowball of his own to throw. Sirius was already so close, it should've hit him dead-on, but his pitch went wide and he missed, nearly toppling back down to his knees. Luckily, Sirius was there to catch him.

“It’s not my fault!” Regulus cried. “I told them not to come—It isn’t my fault!”

“I know."

"You ruin everything!"

"I know."

Regulus pushed—pulled—anything to get Sirius to let go, but he clung on.

“I know,” he kept saying. *I know. I know. I know.*

Beyond them, James and Remus could do nothing. Faces were peeking out of painted green windows; soon news of the brawl would be everywhere. Everyone would finally know the Black family legacy, and how it all culminated in two traumatised boys. Perhaps it'd always been building to this, perhaps this was the give.

"You're a bad brother," Regulus wheezed. "I hate you."

"I know."

"I *want* to hate you!"

"I know."

The dorms to Salazar opened and Barty Crouch spilled out, along with Yaxley and Travers. All three boys looked shocked to see Regulus, even more so to find him grappling his brother.

“Regulus? ... Reg?"

It could've been a trick of the light, or maybe Remus was just going snow-blind, but the concern on Barty's face almost looked real. His brow was deeply creased, and he realised it was concern; concern for a friend that he'd always assumed was one of convenience. It was enough to shake Regulus back to his conceited senses though, and

immediately he was thrashing against his brother.

“Let—Let go of me!”

“No.”

Sirius kept his hold, locking arms behind Regulus' back like shackles in the gallows.

“Get off—get off! GET OFF OF ME!”

“No!”

Denied freedom, Regulus’ writhing eventually turned to fists and he began to beat Sirius wherever he could; in the sides, on the back, even the head when he could reach it. James started forward in his defense, but Sirius just let loose a ferocious 'DON'T!' and it was enough to ward all of them off. Soon enough both brothers lost their footing, and together they rolled like crocodiles across the snow. Regulus spat as he struggled, gleaning a particularly nasty shot off of Sirius' ribs.

“I HATE YOU!” He raged, voice cracking. “I WANT YOU GONE!”

“I KNOW!” Sirius bellowed back.

“LET GO!”

“I WON’T!”

“Damn it, Black!" Barty shouted. "Bloody let go of him!”

Before he knew it, Remus had intercepted him. "Don't interfere, Crouch.”

“I ain't afraid of you, Loony! Get your bonkers mate and get the fuck off our lawn!”

“No, you’re not stopping this,” James added severely, appearing at Remus’ side. Barty faltered at that, and ultimately glanced back to where Regulus was still screaming, flopping back and forth with Sirius pinning him in an iron-clad embrace.

It took a while for the struggling to cease, but once Regulus had finally managed to tire himself out, both he and Sirius sagged back against the ground, heaving and covered head-to-toe in snow. No one knew what to say, so no one said anything at all, and eventually Regulus wiped his sleeve over his eyes and sat up.

"I never want to see you again," he said bitterly.

"Well then, Reggie... you're just gonna have to learn to live with your eyes shut. 'Cause I ain't leaving ya... Not this time..."

With a conflicted expression, Regulus pushed himself to his feet and turned back to his dorm. He stepped forward and stumbled, but Barty was at his side immediately, grabbing his friend by the arm and leading him away. No one stopped them, and James was already back at Sirius' side, helping him to his feet.

"Are you alright, Pads?" He murmured, while Remus gave all their on-lookers a nasty glare and even nastier gesture.

"PISS OFF! SHOW'S OVER!" He looked back to Sirius, and darted over. "Sirius...?"

"I'm alright," Sirius croaked robotically. "Just... gon' take a walk, I think. You two can go find Pete, or whatever..."

"It's okay, mate," James told him; "we'll fill Pete in later. Let's go on your walk."

Sirius exhaled like he wanted to fight them too, but only nodded. With one last look at his brother's dorm, he turned and limped his way toward the nearby pavement. Remus, and James too probably, had expected Sirius to turn away from the dorms and head toward the main campus, or maybe the music room. He'd always gone that way when he needed to be alone. Now instead he carried on up the lane, silently moving ahead of them like a leaf on the wind.

The chapel was an unexpected end to their journey. Sirius was a self-proclaimed agnostic, and the church held very few good memories for any of them. Of course there was the odd prank or two—even the failed ones could be remembered fondly, but not fondly enough to bring actual comfort. At least the place was empty, Remus told himself. They were able to walk right in, past the confessionals, beneath the organ balcony, and right into the very heart of the building. They stopped only when they'd reached the first pew, and there Sirius finally collapsed, bent over with his head between his knees.

Wordlessly, James and Remus took up their seats alongside him, waiting for something—anything—to happen. It almost felt odd for them. *Them,* who'd never waited for anything but rather, made anything happen.

When Sirius sat up again it was like they all let out a collective breath. He sniffled only once, before squinting up at the large statue of Christ that hung at the head of the church. It'd been there all year, hanging above them with it's tortured expression. Remus felt no love from it.

“The Blacks paid for that statue, you know,” Sirius said, almost musingly.

“We know, Sirius,” James answered, in a gentle voice. Sirius responded with a humourless chuckle and pressed a finger beneath his nose, which was bleeding slightly.

“Blimey, that little blighter got me good. Look, Prongs—real blood.” He held his hand out to James, who just looked uncomfortable, before bursting into sudden laughter. “It’s almost funny, ya know! They come all the way here… just—just to be angry. Just to *poison* everything. When I was a kid I thought that maybe if they were to just get out of the house for a bit they might finally be happy. I mean, I was happy here and dad had that bird in London he was fucking so I couldn’t have been all wrong, right? Ha… I was left-handed as a kid, wasn’t I, Prongs?”

“Yes, Sirius…”

“Yeah, and she used to order my tutors to smack me on the hand every time I reached for a pencil with my left, remember that? Broke me of the habit... Then there was this one summer when I was seven, she wanted to make sure we were learning *useful* things, like our languages. So she refused to let us speak English the whole time. Reg was only six—*six!* Can you believe that, Moony? Well, this one day it was Italian, and I couldn’t remember how to ask to go to the bathroom at dinner. So she made me sit in it. In front of everyone… I just… sat there…”

Remus was biting down hard on his knuckle. He could feel the pain in his bone, and wondered briefly how much more pressure was needed to break skin. He had no words, nothing that could make any of it better. He and James sat in the same silence they’d walked in with. They didn't know what to do, how to help.

Suddenly Sirius leapt up from the pew. “Fuck you!” He hollered, pointing a vicious finger at the statue. “Fuck you and your money! And your house! And your bloody religion and stupid shitty pride! Fuck your parents—and your parents’ parents! I can’t wait to drag your name through the fucking mud! Fuck you! FUCK YOU! *FUCK*

YOU!”

Sirius turned and reached for the nearest bible, ripping it up from the pew across the aisle and sending it flying through the air. It barely brushed the statue’s foot and fell with an unceremonious thud against the choir stands, but by then Sirius already had another in hand. He threw it too, getting closer to the statue this time but still missing its mark.

“FUCK!” He roared, throwing a third and then a fourth, their pages whipping through the air like flightless birds.

“Sirius…” James stood up from the pew, following his friend down the aisle as he came apart in pieces.

“They ruin everything, James! They’ve fucked me up forever! I’m gonna be like this—*FOREVER!”*

Remus came too, desperate to soothe him, but there was nothing to be done. Sirius kicked the baseboards at the foot of the chancel and shoved aside a large golden candlestick, shattering the wax into pieces on the marble floor.

"Sirius." James reached for him. "Sirius, please. It'll be alright, I promise!"

"Get away!" Sirius howled, stepping away and not hearing any of it. "It's you, too! You think so too!"

"No, never."

"You do! She said I came out *wrong,* do you know what that means? It means it's my fault! He got sent away and it's MY FAULT!"

"Who?" James pleaded.

"Miles," he whined, like a kicked dog. "It was my letters they found, mine! *I'm* the reason his grandparents found out, *I'm* the reason they took him out of school, and you won't even say his fucking name anymore!"

Sirius might as well have punched him. James looked at Remus, astounded, and shook his head stiffly.

"I—I don't... But it upsets you, Sirius! I mean, what if he'd died or something? It's not your fault he got sick."

“Jesus Christ, he wasn’t sick, James—he was gay!” Slamming his hands on the chancel bench, Sirius turned and knocked over another candle holder. "He was a fucking queer, just like me, *and I liked him!"*

It was as though all the fight left Sirius at once. He staggered before that great statue of Christ, breaths turned raspy while James slumped down on the end of a pew. Remus half expected God Himself to appear and strike them down for such sins, or at least send Father Minsin to do it for him, but there was nothing. Just the hollow silence of the church.

“And you wanna know the sickest part?" Sirius whimpered finally. "I’m thankful... Yeah, I’m glad Miles is gone, 'cause otherwise, we might not have known Moony, and I can’t imagine not knowing Moony. So yeah, I am the curse. I got my best friend pulled from school, and I’m fucking glad for it.”

James had gone silent, and Remus felt the sharp sting of his nails as they dug themselves into the palms of his hands. Sirius had quieted too, but Remus could tell the rage hadn't gone; it'd simply seeped back under his skin like oil in a desert. And he was angry too. Not at Sirius, at the world. At fate for being so graciously ironic. To have him Sirius had had to give up Miles, and it'd carved a wound in him so deep that only his greatest undoer, his mother, had been able to dredge it up again.

It wasn't fair.

Glaring down at the floor, Remus spotted one of the bibles Sirius had thrown lying at the foot of the chancel. Silently, he moved forward and picked it up, before wrenching his arm behind his head and whipping the heavy book directly at the statue. It hit Christ just off the forehead, and the top heavy statue teetered for just a moment before settling.

"Fuck you," Remus told it. Then he picked up another bible, and offered it to Sirius. "Fuck them."

Sirius stared.

He took the book.

Pages tore as it ripped through the air.

"Fuck you!"

"Yeah!" James shouted, picking up a bible of his own. "Fuck you!"

They beat the statue into submission, until each of them were shaking and heaving with the effort of their rage. The stone Christ remained upright, but Remus imagined it was as close as they were going to get to smiting God on a Tuesday.

"Kay..." James panted. "No one tell Marlene."

It must've been the right thing to say, as Sirius snorted and clapped his hands over his face.

"Eugh... fucking hate crying... You bastards, why'd you let me cry?"

"As if we could stop you from doing anything, Padfoot," Remus teased meekly. Sirius dropped his hands to look at him, and a shade of doubt passed over his face.

"Moons..."

"Don't be sorry," Remus told him, firmly. "I'm only glad you're alright."

He gathered Sirius against him and kissed him once on the cheek, twice on the lips. It didn't matter if Sirius was thinking of Miles while he did it, for once Remus did not feel jealous. If this was Sirius' pain, then he would bear it too.

"Hey," Remus said, when they broke apart. "Is that my jumper?"

Sirius glanced down at the school vest, which was clearly too baggy in the chest.

“Oh, is it?”

“Yes, it is.”

Sirius smirked, pushing up the oversized sleeves for good measure. "Wondered why I liked it so much."

They kissed again, until Sirius snapped his face away.

“Potter, stop staring!”

Across the aisle, James’ mouth dropped open in mild offence. “I’m not staring, you two just happen to be kissing right in front of me!”

“Avert your *eyes* then, Peeping Tom.”

James scoffed, but obediently clapped a hand over his eyes. Sirius chuffed then, while Remus glanced around them at the mess.

"We should probably go anyway, before someone catches us."

"You two aren't planning on heading back to the room for a shag, are you?" James called, eyes still covered. "Because I'm suddenly in need of a kip."

Sirius kicked a bible toward him and tackled his friend.

"Some ally!" He cried, while James laughed and wrestled him into a headlock. Remus followed them down the centre aisle, before a flash of gold caught his eye. Along the far wall, sitting on an altar, was a row of communion chalices, probably left out to be polished after that morning's mass. Remus went to them, and picked up one of the heavy metal cups, before returning to Sirius and offering it to him.

“Whaddya say, Pads, one more round?"

Sirius looked up, and quickly unravelled himself from James' headlock. When he snatched the cup to race back to the head of the church, he was grinning.

“I used to think he was the bad influence on *you,"* James said. "Now I know better. You're an enabler, Moons."

"We enable each other," Remus smirked. "It's a symbiotic relationship."

"More like neurotic."

"Semantics."

James shook his head. "Look, there he goes."

Up ahead, Sirius raised the chalice into the air.

“FUCK—” He grunted; *“YOU!”*

The dish soared, arching through the air like a single golden star—and smacked Christ square in the face. With a violent clang, loud enough to make all of them flinch, it bounced off the statue and clattered back to the chancel floor. Again Remus waited for the smiting, but nothing happened, and eventually Sirius turned back around.

“There! Feels good… Now we can go—”

There was a low cracking sound—*smite!*—and Christ's nose snapped clean off, crumbling to the floor with a dull thump.

"Uh... Whoops."

"I think that means it's time to go!" James bleated, already sprinting for the doors. He ditched Remus, who was fully frozen until Sirius took him by the hand, laughing while tugging him down the aisle.

"C'mon, Moons, leg it!"

Outside the sun was warm. Remus stared at the back of Sirius' head and breathed a sigh of relief.

Justice .

* * *

The statue had been discovered by the following morning, sans a nose, and promptly covered up. By dinner rumours had already begun to swirl, but neither Marauder was quick to claim credit. They took up their usual seats in the dining hall with stubborn silence, pretending as though they didn't notice the swirling rumours surrounding the Blacks, as well as Sirius and Regulus' fight in front of Salazar. Thankfully none of the girls had attempted to pry into what had happened, which was a relief, but Peter insisted on knowing the whole story.

"It's not my fault I missed it," he said, when Sirius dismissed the interest. "I had AV Club..."

Sirius didn't condemn him at least, but Remus knew he felt embarrassed, perhaps even more so over his outburst in the church afterwards. In the end they told Peter what was necessary, and dropped it. Other kids steered clear, afraid of being called out by James' protective wrath. Not even Barty said anything, though that was to be expected.

Across the dining hall, no one had attempted to approach Regulus. The amount of eyes on him doubled when he and his roommates sat down for breakfast. He didn't look any better than the day before, but he wasn't entirely withdrawn. Every now and then Barty or one of the others would lean over and whisper something, to which Regulus would nod or shake his head.

“You think I fucked up?” Sirius asked quietly, drawing Remus’ attention back from the table.

“No,” he answered. “He needed to know someone cared.”

“Guess I’m not the only one. Don't look now, but Penny Prefect's on the move.”

For a moment Remus assumed that Sirius had meant him, but then Sirius jutted his chin back toward his brother, and he turned to look. Trish was standing next to Regulus’ table, a cup of tea in her hand. She smiled and set it down next to him, but Regulus never met her gaze. He appeared nervous, embarrassed maybe. He kept nodding along to whatever it was she was saying. Barty and the rest of his roommates shared perturbed looks but none of them rebuffed her, and in the end Trish stepped back from the table and retreated to her own. On the way she caught Remus’ eye and gave him a small wave.

“I swear to god,” Sirius mumbled, “if he turns into a lady killer…”

“There's potential," Remus smirked. "Maybe."

He got a sharp elbow to the ribs for it, but they stopped obsessing after that, and returned to their dinner and shared talk of Marlene’s latest social justice plight; the amount of meat and animal byproduct served at meals.

“I just think that if God meant for us to be herbivores, he wouldn't have given us kebabs," Mary reasoned, waving her chicken döner ahead of her nose.

"Are you Buddhist or Catholic, make up your mind!"

Mary giggled and bit into the kebab, while Sirius did the same.

"I'm with Snatchy. McKinnon, you’ve been resisting your nature for the last six months, but we can't all be so resilient. We’re meant to be carnivores, we need the protein, otherwise how could we ever expect to stay on top of the food chain?”

“Humans are *omnivores,”* Marlene shot back. “And we’re not actually at the top of the food chain, that’s an outdated expression. It’s more of a circle, but if there was going to be a top it’d be animals like polar bears and killer whales—actual apex predators. If anything, we’re more similar to pigs.”

Sirius chewed on the kebab, before pushing his nose up. *“Oink! Oink!”*

"Ooh, go do one, Sirius Black."

“Maybe you should go into public office, Marlene,” Lottie offered. “I mean, you have so many opinions on everything. That’s what politicians need, right?”

”Yeah, I’d off myself before ever considering a career in politics. No, I think I might try and go back to Africa after we finish school. Somewhere like Mali or Burkina Faso.”

“I can’t visit you in Mali or Burkina Faso,” Mary complained. “Do they even have phone service?”

“Of course. In the cities.”

“Why can’t you ever volunteer somewhere nice? Like Austria or Portugal or... Latvia?”

It was a quarrel they had often, but Marlene just smiled and nudged Mary fondly. In return Mary gave her a long look before ultimately sighing and bringing her tea cup to her lips.

“Honestly, there’s no winning with you.” She set the teacup down. "Well, it's not Burkina Faso, but I might as well tell you guys before word gets out. I've decided to go on to university."

"Were you not going to before?" Lily asked, alarmed.

"I considered taking a year off, my cousins in Montpellier even invited me to come stay with them, but I've decided against it. I've been talking to Mrs. Buchanan, and she's helping me apply. French, with a focus on vocal arts on the side."

Sirius nearly spat his tea. “Vocal arts? Since when has singing appealed to you, Macdonald?"

“Since I started voice lessons with Mrs. Buchanan last year, thank you very much. Sorry if you've only just noticed."

“And what does your family say?” Peter asked, mouth agape like the rest of them.

“Daddy doesn’t care, as long as I'm doing something with my life. Honestly he’d probably rather I just get married, but that sounds like a horrible waste of time if you ask me. Men are only nice to wake up to

when you know they're leaving after breakfast. I'm sure you'd agree, right Lottie?"

Lottie sneered. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to get married. Love is the most powerful emotion in the world. It can save lives, even."

"Or ruin them," Sirius answered, hopefully thinking of his parents and not Remus. "You really want to be a singer, Macdonald?"

Mary shrugged indifferently. "Dunno. Maybe. But not everyone has to be as loud about their dreams as you, Black."

The table's mood felt more thoughtful after that, and Remus got the sense that each of their friends were imagining their own incoming futures; who and what they wanted to be, where they might end up. Would it bring fame or fortune, maybe love? Ideally it would be all three but if Remus had to choose, he knew which one he would rather have. Lily may have still been waiting on an Oxbridge acceptance letter, but school didn't interest him. As long as he and his friends could stay together in whatever capacity, he'd be happy.

"Hey."

All eight of them glanced up to find Regulus standing at the end of the table, staring at Sirius with his hands tightly at his sides. Regulus wasn't the type to pick a fight first, and though a second round of their brawl seemed unlikely, the rest of them were instantly put on edge.

"H-Hey," Sirius answered. "How… are you?"

Regulus tensed up, like just speaking to them was causing physical pain.

"Fine. Do you have a few minutes?"

A beat passed, and Sirius glanced around dubiously.

"You mean... Me?"

"Yes, you. Idiot."

Remus had to bite his lip to hide his amusement, but Sirius remained stunned. It took him a few moments to get moving, but once he'd recovered he stood up from the table.

“Er—yeah. Yeah, totally.” He cleared his throat. “Lead the way.”

Not needing to be told twice, Regulus turned and began striding off. Sirius rushed to follow, but turned back around one final time to flash the rest of his friends an excited thumbs-up.

Mary started; “Did he just…?”

“I think so…” Marlene finished.

Peter looked at Remus. "What happened to never wanting to see him again?"

"Dunno... but suppose miracles happen every day, Wormy."

“Nah, no way,” James chuckled. “Five pounds Regulus means to drown him in the lake.”

“Potter!” Lily smacked him in the arm, but they all laughed anyway and returned to their meals. As it turned out, Sirius did not return for the rest of supper, and eventually it was time to retire to the dorms. Remus almost wondered if Regulus had managed to drown him in the lake after all, but his worries were satiated just before curfew, when Sirius stepped through the door looking weary, but content.

“You're back!” James cried, shooting upright on his bed. "Well, how'd it go?"

“Alright, I think. We went for a walk."

Peter raised a brow. “Did he try to drown you in the lake?"

“No, we just walked,” Sirius said, dropping his boots by the door with a thud. He paused for a moment, before dissolving into a fit of overtired sniggering. “Shit, all we did was argue! About the house, our parents, school—all of it.”

“But it was still good, yeah?” Remus asked gently.

Sirius nodded. “I think we might understand each other a bit better now. Neither of us is gonna win ‘best brother of year award’, but… It was something at least.”

"Well, he didn't murder you, I call that a win." Peter flopped back into his pillows, comic book hanging low over his nose. Then he perked up; "Oh and James, you owe me five pounds."

* * *

Tuesday 28th February 1978 – One week later…

Sirius and Regulus had a lot more meetings after that. Some days Sirius would return elated and high off life, others grumbling and irritated, but he always went. It meant they were trying, which was all anyone could hope for really.

“He’s pretty smart, that Regulus,” Sirius would sometimes say; “I mean I always knew he was *smart,* but he’s like—actually clever. Proper funny too, when he’s not in one of his little moods.”

“You *are* related,” Remus would say back. Early on he'd gotten the feeling that it was the first time Sirius had been happy about anything regarding his family. They weren't kidding themselves—the two still fought like scrapping rhinos—but if Regulus had chosen to rebel against their parents by seeing his brother, then Sirius wasn't likely to complain.

“I think he’s got potential. Who knows, maybe he’ll make a good roadie someday.”

“I’d keep that comment to myself if I were you, Padfoot.”

“Heh. You’re probably right.”

Sirius wasn’t the only one happy about Regulus’ return either. That morning, while Remus was on his way to the elementary campus to teach his bi-weekly music class, Trish skived off her chemistry class to join him. Now normally Remus did his best to stay out of other people’s romantic business (whether that worked or not was generally not up to him) but Trish’s interest had become so obvious that it hurt. She walked alongside him, chattering happily away about Regulus’ first week back and how he ‘already seemed so much better’.

“And it’s partly cheers to you too,” she beamed. “You’re the one wha' got through to him first.”

“We were just prefect partners.”

“But Reginald talked to *you!* And he never talked tae anyone save Crouch, not really.”

“He’s talking to Sirius now.”

“I heard. Sorta thought the two of them were a lost cause, what wi'h the way they were always going after each other. But well, I’m just glad he came back. Er—glad for him, I mean.”

Remus couldn’t help teasing her; “Sure, Trish. Whatever you say.”

They stopped outside the elementary building and Trish nailed him in the arm. “You watch your mouth or I’ll feed you your guitar or something."

Remus quickly pulled Sirius’ acoustic out of her reach, but Trish only sighed happily.

“You know, Remington, you should have a bit more confidence in yourself. You’re really very good.”

“Good at what?”

“At whatever you want to be.” Then, without another word, Trish spun around and drifted back up the lane, humming loudly to herself. Remus watched her go, before turning back to the door. He’d just gotten it open when someone rounded the far side of the building, carrying a violin case.

"Regulus?"

Regulus raised a brow, marching straight up to him. “Aren't you going inside?” He asked, completely blasé.

“Are *you* going inside?”

“We have a music lesson to teach, don’t we?”

Remus just about started. “I—I just assumed that you weren’t doing prefect stuff anymore.”

“Does that mean you're going to tell my parents?"

"No," Remus said, before a smile took over his entire face. "Wow! This is great. The kids totally missed you, you know.”

“I doubt that.”

“No, they did. Really!”

Puckering a bit, Regulus looked away shyly. “Fine, but can we go in already? I'd like to get this over with.”

Remus yanked the door open. "After you."

They made their way down the familiar hallway, passing row after row of colourful cubbies and racks filled with tiny boots. The closer they got to the classroom, the happier Remus began to feel. Maybe Trish was right after all.

“Wait!" Remus called when Regulus stopped outside the correct door. "Don't move!"

"What is it now?"

“Please, let me just do this one thing.”

With a vexed look, Regulus gestured for him to go on and Remus stuck his head inside the classroom. There he found twenty kids all pittering around, blowing their flutes and banging their drums. The sight had once made him sick to his stomach with nerves, but not anymore. Now he looked forward to those few precious hours a week he spent teaching music, and clearly Regulus did too.

“Hey everyone!” Remus called. “I've got a surprise for you!”

There was an instant chorus of 'WHAT?' and 'SURPRISE?!', but when Remus stepped aside to reveal their second teacher, looking rather embarrassed himself, the kids began to shriek in delight. They rushed the door, and Remus had to tug Regulus inside to avoid letting him bolt. He might've still tried, if one of the girls—Charlotte—hadn't caught him around the waist in a great hug.

“I thought you were never coming back!” She wailed. “You promised to teach me the violin!”

“I-I didn’t...”

“See?" Remus grinned. "Told you they missed you."

“Shut up, Lupin.”

"MR. BLACK SAID A BAD WORD!"

More shrieking, and Regulus had freed himself from Charlotte's clutches. "Yes!" He cried. "And I'll say more unless you all get back to your seats!"

“You heard him!” Remus ordered straight away; “Back to our seats so we can show Mr. Black what we’ve been practising.”

The kids needed no further encouragement. Charlotte rushed back to the tiny strings section, taking up her violin and practically vibrating out of excitement. They all knew what was happening—Remus had planned it in case Regulus ever returned. A big surprise.

“Everyone find your songs! Come on, you know the one."

There was a flurry of paper shuffling, and Regulus stepped up to his side, almost suspicious. “What have you planned now, Lupin?”

“Oh, it’s just a little something we’ve been working on. Now stand back and prepare to be amazed.” He ushered him off, and Regulus reluctantly obeyed while Remus took up his spot at the front of the class, hands extended to lead them. “Alright. On my count—and a one, and a two—!”

The clamour started instantly, several instruments just pounding right over one another with little regard for real rhythm or beat. The notes were nearly correct, but everything else was terrible. The violins squeaked enough to make one cringe, and the trumpets sounded like balloons losing their air. Already appalled, Regulus watched from the front of the room and when the piece finally came to a staggering end (they really only knew about six bars), the kids all lowered their instruments and turned to him gladly.

"Well?" Remus asked. "What'd you think?"

“Was that… supposed to be ‘Für Elise’?”

“Oh, good you got it!"

Regulus gaped at them. “Holy shit.”

“YOU SAID A BAD WORD!" Came the entire class. *"BAD WORD! BAD WORD!"*

“Oi, enough of that!” Remus called, trying not to sound too amused. “Let the man think! We just rattled him to his core, didn’t we? You alright there, Mr. Black?”

“That was, uhm… it... Well, it was terrible really.”

For a second the room was deadly quiet. Remus had just begun to

wonder how he was supposed to comfort twenty sobbing nine year-olds when, quite inexplicably, Regulus began to laugh.

"Terrible!" He crowed. "Oh my god, my ears! What have you been teaching them while I was gone, Lupin?"

The kids shrieked in delight, all giggling and pointing fingers at Remus while Regulus practically split himself at the seams.

“What? I taught them ‘Für Elise’!” Remus shot back, while every kid giggled horrendously. “I thought we sounded quite good! Didn’t you guys?”

“NOOOO!” The kids all bellowed.

“Looks like I have my work cut out for me,” Regulus said, wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes. “Starting with strings, you guys were just—*yeesh.* I mean really, Lupin.”

“They need a teacher! They need you.”

That seemed to do it. Regulus peered down thoughtfully, before opening his violin case. “You’ll take the brass section, then?”

Remus winked. “You got it.”

They weren't exactly the London Philharmonic Orchestra by the time the lesson was done, but Remus was sure he’d never seen Regulus smile so much. After he’d assured them that they'd both be returning next class, they sent the fifth years on to lunch and went about the room, collecting chairs and sheet music.

“This one wrote ‘Beethoven sucks’," Regulus said, picking the page up off the music stand; "Only they mispelt ‘Beethoven’. And ‘sucks’.”

Remus set down a stack of chairs with a grunt. “They’re kids, what can you expect?”

Regulus tucked the stack of music sheets under one arm and carried a chair over to add to Remus’ pile. “You did good with them these last couple months. They sound better, truly.”

“I must be hearing things. Did Regulus Black just give me a compliment?”

“Don’t get used to it.”

Remus shrugged, stopping to return Sirius' guitar to its case. "I'm glad you're back. It was shit to have to teach them on my own... and I'm even more glad that you and Sirius have made up."

"We haven't made up," Regulus said quickly.

"Right, sorry. I'm glad you're *talking* to one another."

"Mostly we just talk about you, actually."

"You do?"

"Don't get excited, it's all Sirius. He really likes you. No idea why, of course."

Remus chuckled. "Regulus, can I ask, how long have you known about us?"

Regulus shifted uncomfortably. "Since last year..."

"But Sirius and I weren't together last year."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Uh..."

Regulus smirked very briefly. "Well, whatever. Like I said, I'm not gonna tell anyone. It's your business, as long as you don't go flaunting it in everyone's faces."

Unsure of how to feel, Remus slowly closed the case's lid and let the clasps snap shut. He recalled his list and began counting the names off in his head. They'd probably have to tell Peter soon, only seemed fair. *Fair... oh christ.*

"Lupin? ... Lupin!"

"Yes!" Remus spun around, back snapping straight up. He'd expected more questions, maybe even some teasing, but Regulus had crawled in on himself too, it seemed. He was white-knuckling his violin case.

"How do you do it?" Regulus asked quietly.

"Do what?"

"Talk to people, make them see you... I mean, really *see* you."

This made Remus soften. He stopped wringing out his fingers and relaxed, letting out a long breath. “Do you think people don’t see you, Regulus?”

“I don’t mean it literally. I mean… Well, I’m not what other people think I am.”

“I know that. And Sirius knows that. Others might too, if you took the time to actually *see* them back."

Clearly it wasn't the answer Regulus was looking for. He seemed to pout, but Remus kept pushing.

"People aren’t just going to be able to know you right away, Regulus," he told him. "You have to talk to them, try to understand them, and tell them things.”

“Like what?”

“Like anything. Like what you like, and don’t like. What you think about things and how they make you feel. Not what others expect you to say, but how you *actually* feel.”

“And what if I’m not sure how I feel?”

“Then you tell them that too.” Remus licked his lips. “I’ve spent way too much time worrying about what others think of me—I was doing it just now. But like you said, Sirius likes me, and I like him too. That’s what’s important.”

Regulus regarded him for a moment longer, before nodding his head. “He’s kinda stupid, you know. My brother... He really is a bit of an idiot.”

"Funny though, right?"

Regulus smiled faintly. "Sometimes."

Just then, the classroom door opened and James stuck his head in. “Oi, Moony, let’s get a move on! Remember, we said we'd all practice for that quiz in music tomorrow—oh hey, Reg!”

Regulus averted his gaze, mumbling; "Hey, Potter."

"Good music class?"

"Terrible, actually."

"Right..." James gave Remus an uneasy smile, and Remus nodded.

“Be right out, Prongs.”

"Kay!"

Before James could shut the door, a thought suddenly occurred to Remus.

“Oi, James!"

“Mm?”

“One more thing, Regulus doesn’t like to be called ‘Reg’.”

“Oh.” James paused to consider. “Well alright, my bad. See you later then, Regulus.”

Nearly speechless, Regulus sputtered a moment before finally managing a; “Y-You too, Potter.”

Smiling at him, James bobbed his head genially and slipped out. Remus paused, before picking up his guitar case and glancing back at Regulus, who was—if he wasn’t mistaken—blushing.

“See?” He grinned. “It’s that easy, mate.”

Chapter End Notes

A 'kip' is sleep/a nap.

This whole term is going to be 'up-down-back-around', so hope you're ready. Very fun times ahead!
As per the new weekly schedule, next chapter on Sunday x

Chapter 89: Eighteen

Chapter Summary

Haven't we all wanted to date Remus Lupin once or twice?

Chapter Notes

No CW's for this chapter, apart from some general cringe-worthy embarrassment. Edit: There are some intrusive thoughts toward the very end of the chapter that could be read as upsetting.

& btw, THAT scene with Sirius and James (you'll know it when you see it) is 100% inspired by THAT scene from Gilmore Girls, lmfao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hello, I love you, won't you tell me your name?
Hello, I love you, let me jump in your game,
Hello, I love you, won't you tell me your name?
Hello, I love you, let me jump in your game...

- "Hello, I Love You" The Doors, 1968

When it came to rock and roll, chaos was pretty much a given. An occupational hazard, the less creative writers might call it. A de facto dream-state one regrets come morning only to crave desperately at night, so say the more clever ones. And say they did! The people needed answers after all—what car does he drive, which obnoxious radio DJ can't he stand, what was he thinking when he wrote that *one specific line in that one specific song?!* ... It was miracle work, it was. A reputation pieced together until there was enough *he said, she said* to make it worth reading. Rock and roll was life written on the backs of cigarette foils and train tickets, petrol receipts and takeaway menus—anything one happened to have on them when he began talking about *one specific line in that one specific song!* ... And he never made things easy either; for a breed that made their living off of such rhetoric, rock stars sure seemed to hate microphones. Or maybe they just hated reporters.

We know what he's doing now, they'd say; *We wanna know what he did before!*

Easier said than done. The subject in question was locked up tighter than a nun's legs on Sunday, hadn't gone on record in years. Anything before 1980 was a mystery.

“I’ve got a source that says he was seeing some girl named Wendy back then,” one would say.

“Nah, the girl’s name was Cathy,” another would chime in.

"I heard it was Tannice. Tannice Wiggs."

"The one from Wimbledon?"

"No, Bermondsey. Wimbledon was the twin sisters."

“Bleeding Christ, someone call Rita bloody Skeeter already. We need the real scoop!”

Those poor sods, they’d never get it right. It was too messy and there were far too many different accounts. By that time daughters would be discovering their mothers’ old diaries in the attic and wondering why the name ‘Remus Lupin’ sounded so familiar. Eventually they’d connect the dots when an old song came on the radio, or *Pops* showed a throw-back special from the early 80s. He looked better then—shinier and brimming with hope and promise. Handsome even, in a ‘he snogged my mum’ sort of way.

“Mum, you really dated a rock star?” They’d ask.

“For a day,” she’d reply, if she felt like being honest.

* * *

Thursday 9th March 1978

The problem started with an innocent trip to the library. He was just one day shy of turning eighteen, but seemed to be doing a well enough job of dissuading his friends from any and all birthday celebrations. Sirius acquiesced only after Remus threatened to end all mid-morning snogging sessions for the foreseeable future, and James and Peter couldn't very well continue with only two-fourths a marauder. This left the girls, though luckily they were still jaded from their failed attempt the year before and didn't seem all that interested

in forcing Remus into another party he did not want. In fact, since the fiasco on Valentine's, no one seemed to have 'Remus' on the brain at all, and so when he'd agreed to meet Amelia Hodgkins in front of the library that morning, the last thing he'd been expecting was a love confession.

"But I don't understand," Amelia whined, "Mary said you weren't dating anyone."

"I'm not, but... Look, Amelia, I'm really sorry."

The girl looked up at him with glassy eyes, her face flushed with embarrassment. If there was one thing he had to give the Hawkings girls credit for, they were certainly bold. It'd taken him months to pluck up the courage to say anything to Sirius—though that was a slightly more fearsome beast to tackle—and try as he might, Remus couldn't recall how he'd ended up in such a mess. He and Amelia had been paired off in history, and for the last three weeks the two of them had been meeting up during whatever free periods to work on the project. They'd presented it in class the day before and everything had gone off without a hitch. Afterwards Remus had assumed that would be the end of it. *Stupid fool...*

"There *is* someone else, isn't there?" Amelia whimpered, reading him the way a woman only could.

"No, really. I'm just not looking for a relationship right now. And besides, I think you'll find you'd be disappointed with me."

"Oh, Remus… You are so thick!"

She fled back in the direction of the dorms, leaving him to dawdle awkwardly by the front doors of the library. He knew he'd lingered a moment too long when none other than Severus Snape slipped out behind him.

"Lupin. I'd wondered how the school's biggest basket case was doing these days. Now I see you're breaking hearts as well as mirrors."

"Figures *you'd* be eavesdropping," Remus snarled. "Don't you have some seventh year chemistry class to torture?"

"Why would I bother with them when you're so intent on airing your dirty laundry right where anyone could see?"

"Piss off." Remus turned to march away, already intent to drown his

sorrows in leftover gin and whatever Sirius had on the turntable, when Snape skipped to catch up with him.

"Come now, Loony. Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"I'm going to see my friends. Sorry you can't say the same."

"Suppose you'll be filling them in on your little fling with Hodgkins then."

"None of your fucking business."

"Oh, what's wrong? Don't tell me *you're* embarrassed. You're not the one who ran off with tears streaming down their face. Really, I almost feel sorry for the girl."

"A new experience for you, I'm sure."

Snape chuckled, and it struck Remus how cheery it sounded. Too cheery to mean anything good, surely. "I wouldn't worry too much about Hodgkins if I were you," he said. "She'll get over it. As I hear it, the girl's been around the block more times than the local trolley."

"No one asked what you've heard, you slimy git!" Remus bellowed. "Now you'll stop following me if you know what's good for you!"

It was enough to give Snape pause. He flinched when Remus rounded on him, and Remus felt that familiar twinge of satisfaction. He'd just stepped away again when Snape yelled after him; the nail in the coffin.

"Careful, Loony! Spend any more time with those friends of yours and people are gonna start wondering if you're a ponce!"

He could've just given him another detention, slap his wrists with a pink slip and be done with it. But as it was, Remus had never been much inclined to settle things the 'prefectly' way. Before Snape even had time to cackle, Remus had turned round and grabbed him by the front of his school coat. He thrust him against the side of the library, pressing on his chest hard enough to force out a pathetic little wheeze.

"This is your last warning, Snivelly. You leave me and my friends alone, or you're gonna be coughing up teeth for a week. *Capeesh?"*

He didn't nod in understanding, that would be too much satisfaction

for a single interaction, but the look on Snape's face told Remus he'd spooked him well enough. With another sharp shove to the chest, Remus tossed the miserable boy aside and threw himself back down the pavement. This time, Snape knew better than to call after him.

"I can't believe it," Sirius said when he'd arrived on time for their music lesson and told him. "You actually said the word 'capeesh'? Oh god, Moony, that's so lame!"

"Snape didn't seem to think so when he was pissing his pants outside the library."

"I would've paid to see it."

As enthralled as Sirius was with the whole story, Remus remained uneasy. Snape may have just been looking for the easiest way to get under his skin, but if he'd noticed anything going on between them, then...

"You don't think he actually *knows,* do you?"

"That we're shagging under the covers? No, I don't. I think if he did the entire world would know by now. Snape's just being a git, per usual."

"Do you ever think what would happen if it got out?"

Sirius shrugged. "Can't be disowned twice. Might make our plan for world domination a bit harder though. Maybe if we went to a school of nobodies it wouldn't matter as much."

Remus bit his lip, thinking of his list. "A lot more people know about us now. You aren't worried they'll say something on accident?"

"Are you?"

Instantly Remus felt bad. They were his *friends.* And Regulus, though a part of him still held out hope there as well.

"Sorry," Sirius answered first, nudging him softly with his elbow. "Stupid question. We just won't tell anyone else then. Keep it contained, so we know who to put a hit on if it ever gets out."

"What about Peter?"

At that, Sirius looked uneasy. "Pete's never been able to keep a secret. Remember our first year together when he let slip to Snape about my

birthday? He lets slip about this and we'll have a lot more than detention to worry about... 'Sides, doubt he'd appreciate knowing that he lives with a couple 'a poofters anyway."

He wasn't sure it was fair to Peter, but who was he to tell Sirius off for not coming out? He had been acting a bit odd ever since Valentine's, but no... Remus forced the idea away. Best not press their luck, not with Snape breathing down their necks anyway.

"Maybe we should plan a prank," Sirius said.

"What's this I hear about a prank?" James called, arriving just in time to take up the empty chair on Sirius' other side. Peter followed, a single drumstick already in hand. He sat on the stands next to Remus and pulled his bag strap over his shoulder with a giddy smile.

"Hey, Lupin! Look what I finally figured out how to do this morning!" He proceeded to demonstrate an impressive little manoeuvre, twirling the drumstick around multiple fingers like the blades of a propeller. It was a pretty nifty trick for a guy who couldn't tie his own shoes until he was thirteen, and Remus nodded appreciatively.

"Neat trick, Pete. Where's your other stick?"

Peter caught the drumstick out of the air. "Dr. Becker confiscated it. I was practising in maths."

"Ah."

"I'll just get another one from Buchanan. Oh, also I can do this now!"

"If you're quite finished," Sirius interjected, silencing Peter just as he was about to twirl the drumstick in his opposite hand; "I was trying to say, Moony doesn't want a birthday party, but we can't just do nothing. We should celebrate another way—a better way—with a prank."

"Who's getting pranked?" James asked.

"Snivellus. Stupid git deserves it, he tried coming after Moons this morning."

"It was nothing," Remus surmised. "Just a sorry loser talking out his arse."

"Can't have that," James mused, "imagine the stink."

There was no culling it after that. All through the lesson, every time Sheila had her back turned, one of them was whispering some inane idea to get back at the sworn enemy.

“Think he has a diary? Bet he has a diary… We could steal it and make copies to post all over school. Just like Reg did with your poem!”

“I’m not laughing, Sirius.”

“Maybe we should get Lily to ask him on a date,” Peter suggested. James looked at him, utterly appalled, and he blanched. “Not for real, obviously! As a joke.”

“Evans’ll never do it,” Sirius sniggered. "I think a part of her still holds out hope that Snivelly will magically turn out to be a good person."

“Or maybe Lily’s just a good person,” Remus added.

“S’a good idea though… Hm…”

“Boys, since you’re all so intent on gabbing through the lesson, how about we start this week’s listening quiz with you.”

“Aw. C’mon, Sheila…”

After they’d finished and the bell had rung, Sheila pulled him aside. Worried he’d somehow bollixed up his test, Remus followed her into the office only to be presented with a guitar case sitting atop her desk. He recognised it without question; it was the shiny Martin acoustic she’d let him play before Christmas.

“A little birdy told me it was your birthday tomorrow,” Sheila smiled. “Thought you should have something nice to celebrate.”

Remus’ mouth fell open.

“This?”

“I changed the strings yesterday,” Sheila said quickly, popping the case’s lid to reveal the pristine guitar lying within. “Personally, I love the timbre that comes with old strings, but she needed a good clean and I worried about what they would eventually do to the fretboard. I did keep them though, just in case you liked the sound.”

Remus was speechless, as he often was in the face of Sheila’s kindness. He’d felt terrible when Tomny bought the Teisco for him, but this—

this was a work of art.

“I can’t take this,” he babbled. “I-It’s not even my birthday yet.”

“I know, but we don’t have class together tomorrow, and I wanted to make sure I got it to you before I left for the weekend. Call it an advance.”

“Oh.”

She smiled, guilty. “Not what you were expecting?”

He hadn’t been *expecting* anything at all, but saying that would’ve sounded ungrateful, surely.

“Are you sure you’re allowed to give away the school’s instruments?”

“Oh! You don’t have to worry about that, this one doesn’t belong to the school. It was mine actually, when I was your age. My parents gifted it to me for my eighteenth birthday as well. Now giving you a hand-me-down almost feels like a slight faux pas, but no one’s played it in so long. It saddened me to see her just collecting dust.”

A faux pas?! Remus looked down at the guitar again. It was beautiful, probably worth a pretty penny. And she was giving it to *him?*

“Mrs. Buchanan… I really can’t take this.” Couldn’t even touch it.

“Nonsense.” She bent down and pulled the instrument from its case, practically pressing it into his hands herself. Remus’ thumb brushed the strings and a rich sound rang out, perfectly tuned.

“It would make me happy to know you have it,” Sheila said. “A musician should have all the resources available to them, right?”

Remus’ hold tightened around the neck as he bit his lip. He couldn’t bring himself to admit it, but he wanted the guitar—*badly*.

“Do you do this for all of your students?”

The question seemed to catch her off guard. She blinked at him, chuckling once. “You’re not just my student, you’re my…”

“Your dead friend’s kid,” he finished for her.

She frowned, then smiled sadly, which was somehow even worse. “You don’t have to take it, but it’s yours if you want it.”

There was a bad feeling. *Where's the catch? There's always a catch!*

Remus looked down at the guitar. He imagined it were being held by David Gilmour of Pink Floyd and not some scrawny kid from south London and that made things a bit easier.

"Thank you, Mrs. Buchanan."

"You're welcome, Remus."

* * *

"Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to Remus, happy birthday to youuuuu!"

He blew out the candles, all two dozen of them, and Hope and Giles and the entire household staff clapped their hands together in celebration.

"I can't believe it, my little baby's already seven years-old!" Hope squealed, pulling him into an iron-clad hug. Behind them, Giles chuckled as he gripped the back of Remus' chair proudly. His hair was more red than white back then, but he still had the telltale lines on his forehead carved by eyebrows that raised up with every sardonic smile.

"Yes, sir. He'll be a man soon enough."

"No, I simply won't allow it!"

"Muuuuum, gerroff!"

Hope gave a great sigh and pulled back, pushing the hair out of her son's face. "You're growing up too fast. It's like I blink and you're suddenly an entire year older. I can still remember when you were small enough to fit in the palms of my hands."

"I was never that *small," he protested, looking past her and eyeing the tiered cake greedily. Their head chef, Rosel, had made it specially for him, though she'd only let him put one finger in the icing bowl the night before.*

"Of course you were," Hope cried; "ask Giles."

"Your mother's right. When you came home from the hospital you were no bigger than the teddy bear waiting for you."

Remus raised his arm, showing off the stuffed toy with floppy ears.

“Seabiscuit’s a dog.”

Giles ruffled his hair. “Dog, then.”

“Would you like to try your cake, darling?” Hope asked, while Rosel began plating up the dessert on expensive china plates. They set a slice down in front of him and Remus picked up his fork, getting ready to stab into it—then the other side of the table caught his eye. The chair was empty, without a place setting.

“Remus? Don’t you want to try your cake?”

“When’s daddy coming home?”

Hope blinked her pretty blue eyes. “I’m not sure, darling,” then; “Tomorrow.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“Your father had to head up to Manchester this week, son,” Giles said. “He’ll be back soon.”

Remus wasn’t satisfied. He was seven and nature demanded stubbornness. He wanted his father.

“I want him here now.”

“Mummy’s here,” Hope smiled, spreading her red lips. “Didn’t we agree that Mummy was enough?”

“I want Daddy. It’s my birthday.”

There was a passing beat, and Hope drew herself up with a deep breath. “Remus John Lupin, you’re going to hurt your friends’ feelings. They all gathered to celebrate your birthday.”

He looked around. The maid behind him had slapped his fingers that morning for mixing potions in the bathroom with all the nice smelling soaps. And that butler was new. He’d never said a word to Remus before.

“I want Daddy,” Remus said again. “Can I call him on the telephone?”

Hope balled up the napkin in her lap. “If you’re not going to eat the cake Rosel stayed up all night to make you, then you’ll have to go to your room. Ungrateful boys don’t get birthday parties.”

“I don’t want a birthday party. I want daddy.”

“Fine then.” She began pulling the plate away, and Remus grabbed her arm.

“No! I’ll eat it…”

“Apologise to Rosel first.”

“Sorry, Rosel.”

Hope let go and Remus pulled the plate back toward himself, quickly stuffing a bite of cake into his mouth. It was delicious, so sweet it stung his tongue.

His mother smiled again, leaning in close. She kissed his cheek and it ***hurt.*** *She’d burned him with her kiss, and when she drew away again she’d changed. Her blue eyes had gone dark, her teeth had grown long and sharp. Red lipstick dripped from her chin.*

“Shall we open your gifts afterwards, darling?”

“No!” He wailed. “No, stop! I want Daddy!”

“Darling, we agreed.” She raised a clawed hand. Behind her the maid was a devil with a snake’s tongue and the butler was engulfed in flames. He smiled as he set Giles alight, and no one seemed to notice the old man’s screams.

“I want Daddy!”

“MUMMY IS ENOUGH!”

Remus awoke with a start. There were no forked tongues or flame-clad men, just a dorm room with three snoring friends. It was his birthday today, he was eighteen, and yet all he could think was how long it’d been since he’d seen that stuffed dog.

* * *

Friday 10th March 1978

His friends may have relented to no parties, but that did not mean they weren’t going to let the entire world know that it was Remus’ birthday. That morning when they arrived for breakfast, Remus had to endure a full rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’ courtesy of half of

Hawkings' student body. Even Barty joined in, though it was undoubtedly just so he could replace 'Remus' with 'Loony'. Remus was still embarrassed, and spent the remainder of breakfast pelting Sirius with bits of cereal, and when he really deserved it—entire slices of toast.

"Count your lucky stars, Moons!" James cheered. "You *and* Snivellus got out of an entire day of pranking."

"Only 'cause you guys couldn't come up with anything decent in time."

"Oh yeah? That's what you think…"

Remus nearly asked, but just then Sirius started up another round of 'Happy Birthday', this time in Italian. Or at least, he thought it was Italian. He found out later that it was really Pig Latin.

"This isn't even going to be the most embarrassing part of your day!" Sirius cackled, using his school bag as a shield while he made a beeline for the door. "See you in class, Moony!"

"Or before, you never know!" James added, following him out.

He let them go, telling himself he didn't care enough to worry about it. There was only two of them, how clever could they be?

"Pete, are you ready for English?"

Peter nodded, staunchly. He'd said very little apart from singing "Happy Birthday", and now appeared to be going slightly purple in the face.

"Pete?"

"He's not talking to you," Lottie explained from across the table. "Doesn't want to ruin the surprise."

"Christ."

"It isn't a party," Mary insisted. "But you're going to wish it was."

"When I told everyone that I didn't want a fuss, I meant it."

"Mm, yes. Too bad we don't believe you. In fact, I'm starting to wonder if it isn't just a vain attempt to get even more attention."

“I assure you, it’s *not.”*

She shrugged, looking coy. “Happy birthday, Remus.”

“Happy birthday, Remus!”

“Happy birthday, Lupin!”

“Lupin, it’s your birthday ain’t it?”

“Happy birthday, big man!”

They followed him everywhere. Kids he’d never even spoken to strode right up as if they’d been waiting in a queue. Every now and then he spotted what he thought could be a flash of dark hair and glasses, but every one of his well-wishers was adamant; no one had put them up to it at all.

On their way to English, Remus reamed into Peter.

“Do they think it’s funny? Does it look like I’m laughing?!”

Peter kept his lips clamped shut, and just as Remus considered reaching over and wrenching his mouth open himself, a foot appeared in his path and sent him sprawling. Barty and his cronies stood off to the side, laughing at him as he stumbled on the slick tile.

“Happy birthday, Loony!” Each of them chittered, making their escape before Remus could even consider retaliating.

It’s just one day, he told himself, *just get through today.*

“I heard it was your birthday today, Mr. Lupin,” Professor Flitwick said as he handed out that day’s assignment. “Good show!”

Remus languished. He’d never considered himself all that difficult to embarrass, but James and Sirius were turning it into a fool’s errand and it was only ten o’clock. If only he knew what was coming.

As Flitwick lectured, Remus kept his chin propped up on his arms, already zoning out on a crack in the chalkboard hovering just over the stubby professor’s head. Two seats ahead, Peter had spent the entire period with his head down into his lap. He seemed to be worrying about something, but Remus wasn’t close enough to enquire what it was without being overheard.

Halfway through class, Jodie, the girl who sat in front of him, turned

around in her chair.

“Are you alright, Remus? You look as though you just watched a puppy get run over.”

Remus never got to answer. At the same moment the classroom’s door flew open—*WHAM!*—and none other than Sirius Black stood in its doorway. He looked distraught, distinctly un-Sirius-like as he slammed the door shut behind himself and tore into the classroom with frantic urgency.

“Excuse me! I’m sorry, Professor, but I’ll only need a moment.”

Professor Flitwick leaned over his podium, nearly toppling off the stepping stool he used to reach it. “Mr. Black, we are in the middle of a lesson—”

“Yeah, I know, Flitty. But this can’t wait!”

“M–Mr. Black!”

Sirius ignored the spluttering teacher, and instead began strutting straight between the rows of desks. Various kids wrenched their heads around to get a better look as he stopped before Remus’ desk and slammed his hands down on its surface, going as far as to topple Remus’ neat stack of books. Remus might’ve rebuffed him, were Sirius not already clearing his throat.

“Moony, my Moony, in vain I have struggled! These last few months have been a torture, and I can suppress my feelings no longer! I cannot tolerate these foul rumours being spread—I will not share you!”

Ahead of them, Jodie Gagnon’s mouth fell open. Peter looked mortified, but not entirely surprised, and Professor Flitwick had practically climbed across the top of his podium.

“S–Sirius Black, I cannot condone—”

“Doubt truth to be a liar,” Sirius wailed, “but never doubt, I *love!* You must, Moony! You must! I simply cannot take it if you won’t! And so I ask you now, *how?* How could you do this to me?!”

This is the part where I kill Sirius Black, Remus thought blithely. He was doing a stellar job of not breaking character, but whereas Sirius was going for tragic romance, the class was roaring like a comedy. Remus

could see it now—Snape would be spreading his poncy agenda by midday, and then there'd be no use in hiding it.

"Sirius—"

"How could you do that to me?!"

"DO WHAT?!"

The class erupted back into laughter, and a shadow of a smirk fell across Sirius' lips. He recovered quickly though, and launched back into his undoubtedly well-rehearsed monologue.

"After everything we've been through!" He moaned, smacking the desk again. "You tell me all those things—those *sweet,* sweet things, and then you just *leave?* Don't even wait for me to wake up, you just sneak away like a coward out the back door?! Leave me out to dry like I'm some old sock that's finally got too many holes in it—but you're the one who wore the holes in me, Moony—you!"

"I'm going to wear a lot more into you if you don't bugger off!"

"You cold, heartless fiend!"

"That is quite enough, Mr. Black!"

Professor Flitwick had finally come down from his podium. He strode toward Remus' desk with purpose, flapping his stout arms about as though it might subdue the rollicking class.

"You'll have to leave this instant, else it'll be two weeks detention."

"But Professor, would you give in so easily had you'd been so terribly wounded by the object of your deepest affections?"

"Sirius, go!"

Sirius spun round. "I will not! Give me detention, I don't care. None of it's worth anything if you don't love me back! And I love you, you hear me, Moony? Dammit, just talk to me!"

"Mr. Black, OUT! Right now, before I have to call—"

"BLACK!"

It was James. He burst into the room with an even louder bang than Sirius had, and for a single foolish moment, Remus almost thought he

was saved. Surely James, in all his emphatic pandering, would know exactly the sort of disaster this spelt. Surely he would solve all their—

"I told you already, Moony's with me now! All the bleeding poetry in the world won't save your fractured heart!"

A holler went up, mostly from the girls, and Sirius pointed a vicious finger at his best friend.

"You stay out of this, Potter! You've been jealous ever since you found out the truth, but I won't sit back as you try to steal away the only thing that's ever made me happy in this godforsaken world!"

"This is getting pathetic. Let it go, man! "

"I will not let it go!" Sirius rounded on Remus again and bent down until they were nearly nose-to-nose over the desk. "Moony, I can't keep going around pretending like nothing's happening between us, I have to say something! People have got to know that what we have between us is real! As real as this blood as it courses through my flesh!"

He grabbed Remus by the wrist and pressed his hand over his own heart, a move that shocked Remus so badly he wrenched his entire arm back and fell from his chair.

"Mr. Lupin!" Flitwick shrieked.

"Moony!"

"Now you've gone and done it!" James stalked forward, giving Sirius a sharp shove to the shoulder. "Give it up, Black! You knew it was never gonna work. I already told you, damn it—he doesn't want you, Remus is with me now!"

Remus whipped his head up. "Remus is *what?!"*

The laughter was rapturous, as loud and as delighted as the smile Sirius kept forcing from his face. James was no different.

"Hear that, Black? He doesn't love you, he doesn't even know you! You're a joke!"

"You've always been jealous of what we had! Lupin's the moon and I'm his stars—what are you? A bulky, ginger-worshipping arse!"

"Don't get petty just 'cause you know Lupin prefers my arse to yours."

Another kid hooted from across the room; *Ow-ow!* but Sirius remained undeterred.

“Potter! Everything was fine until you came along and started objectifying my Moony with that wanton gaze of yours. You think I’ll hand over Lupin’s heart so easily?”

“Hard to give something you never had in the first place.”

“Oooh! Keep it up, I’ll kill you.”

“I’d like to see you try!”

Sirius squared up instantly and James practically toppled poor Jodie’s desk as he leapt forward to get at him. As the two idiots collided in the middle of the aisle, mostly a rumple of limbs, Remus got to his feet and could only watch. All around them kids were gasping and shouting in glee.

“Pin him, Potter!”

“Go for the eyes, Black!”

“Right hook—right hook!”

“You and I are best mates no longer!” Sirius grunted, rolling James into another desk with a loud clatter. “I hate your guts, Potter!”

“The feeling’s—” James shoved him back; “MUTUAL!”

Boys pumped their arms, girls gathered together to shriek and yelp. A right hook from James, a jab to the jaw from Sirius. Poor Professor Flitwick looked about ready to pass out.

And then Peter stood up from his chair.

“Y–You’re all wrong! R–Remus’ heart is m–mine!”

Remus covered his face with his hands.

“Enough! That is enough!” Professor Flitwick howled. “Stop this nonsense this instant or I’ll have you both in detention for the rest of the year!”

No one listened, and Sirius delivered another spectacular blow to his friend’s abdomen. James retaliated by practically picking him up from the floor and throwing him over some poor girl’s desk in the second

row, pumping his arms in victory until suddenly—a prefect's whistle cut through the air, and Jillian Stewart appeared in the doorway.

"I heard there was a fight going on! Professor McGonagall sent me to break it up!"

Professor Flitwick gestured desperately the boys, who were still rolling around on the ground with two stupid grins on their faces. Huffing, Jillian came forward and grabbed them both by the collars, hauling them to their feet and facing the class. "You great idiots," she sighed. "Now what's this all about?"

"I'm dating Remus Lupin!" Sirius shouted indignantly.

"No, I am!" James replied.

Jillian shook her head as though it were a lost cause. "Remus Lupin," she announced, turning every head in the room back Remus' way; "I *told* you to keep your personal problems in the bedroom."

"Fuck off."

"MR. LUPIN!"

Remus rolled his eyes at the scorned professor, but at least the laughs were his own this time. With a heavy shake of her head, Jillian turned a rather sorry-looking James and Sirius toward the door and marched them out.

"Really, it's pathetic!" She said, loudly enough to be heard from out in the hall. *"You two—best friends—so obsessed with one person that you're fighting. I mean, come on, we all know who Remus is really going out with anyway."*

At the last second, Jillian's face reappeared in the doorway and she blew a kiss and a wink in Remus' direction.

"I'll see you at dinner, darling. Kisses!"

"Stewart!" Sirius' voice wailed. *"Not you too!"*

A few people began to clap, while Remus just pressed his fingers deep into his eye sockets. He helped Jodie right her desk, and in return she gathered a few of his scattered books for him, only to pass them over with a wary look.

"You sure are popular, Remus."

Remus was about to spurn her—*if this is popularity, please take it from me*—when Flitwick appeared in the aisle between them, looking eerily calm despite the hairs that had come askew in his moustache.

“To be quite frank, I’m not entirely sure what just happened,” the Professor said; “but since you seem to be the common denominator, Mr. Lupin…”

Without another word, Flitwick placed a detention slip on the corner of his desk and returned to the front of the classroom. Remus couldn’t even object.

After class, he collected his things and spurned a very guilty-looking Peter before stalking out into the hall. Sniggers followed him the entire way; he figured he had about ten minutes of peace before word of James and Sirius’ passionate confessions made their way into common knowledge and the teasing became incessant, but of course he didn’t even get that. When he emerged Sirius was waiting for him, leaning back against a row of lockers with an unlit cigarette balanced between his lips. Fit bastard.

“Good lesson, Moons?”

With a huff, Remus walked straight up to him and snatched the cigarette from his mouth, tucking it behind his own ear. Then he smacked the detention slip against Sirius’ forehead.

“You got me detention, you git.”

Wincing, Sirius peeled the slip from his forehead and looked it over, completely chuffed. “Er… Happy birthday?”

Remus scoffed and kept on down the hall. Sirius followed, naturally, and got in front of him, so he was walking backwards. “Hey, don’t be mad. We had to do *something* for your birthday. It was either this or publicly ask out McGonagall on your behalf.”

“Why would it be between that and asking out the Headmistress?!”

“For the drama, duh.”

“You’re a cunt.”

“Aw, don’t tell me you’re mad? You’re all the school’s gonna be talking about for weeks!”

“ ‘Cause that’s been my goal from the very beginning.”

Sirius smirked wryly. “We were only trying to show you our love. And now Snape can’t say shit. We owned it. Now it’s our joke, not his.”

Remus laughed incredulously. “You wanted to keep Snape from calling us ponces so you do it for him?”

“Yes, that’s it exactly!” Sirius preened, closing the distance between them and pressing his fingertips against Remus’ chest. “Plain sight, Moony. If we hide out in the open, no one’ll suspect anything. And as a little added bonus… I finally get to tell the truth. *I’m* dating Remus Lupin.”

“Were you dropped on your head as a baby?”

“Probably. But at least I’m good-looking, right?”

Unimpressed, Remus made to go around him and Sirius grabbed him by the tie, pulling him back. “Moony, Moony, Moony… You’re not seeing the full picture here. Do you really think I’d just openly declare myself a poofter without a contingency plan? The day is young, and as far as anyone else is concerned, you’re Hawkings’ most eligible bachelor. Though, not for long I suspect.”

“Oh no—no more of this, I’ve had enough!”

“Don’t be such a wet blanket, love. You think everyone wants to sleep with you now, but if you can’t handle a few school-yard crushes, how are you doing to handle the masses when we’re rich and famous?”

“Sirius, what have you done?”

Instead of answering him, Sirius smirked and came forward, fixing Remus’ tie with long, meticulous fingers. “Figured I should make that incessant lovability of yours work for me for a change. But I should go… From what I’ve heard, you’ve got quite the busy schedule. See you later, birthday boy.”

He should’ve chased him down and beat the truth from him, or at least skived off the rest of the day. Either would’ve saved him from his friends’ carefully curated torture. In his second class, Professor Binns’ stirring lecture on Roman restoration was interrupted at least a dozen times when nearly every member of the Hawkings football team showed up with a rose with his name on it. They made no effort to introduce themselves, simply crashed into the room and threw the

flower onto his desk, escaping with a great hoot. Some of the more bolder lads even opted to try for a cheeky snog, which had everyone in stitches. By the seventh rose, Mary and her other girlfriends were killing themselves in the last row, and Remus was picking petals from his hair.

After class he gave the flowers away to the girls, who were all much more keen on receiving them than he was. Apparently it earned him a few more points, as they started going around telling everyone that he was giving roses away to all of the prettiest girls, though this one got old rather quickly when others started realising that they had not received a rose themselves.

He would've assumed the Marauders' reach had ended with the football team, but he was proved wrong when the tenth year girls' choir met him outside of class and promptly launched into every annoying love song in their arsenal.

"I didn't know just what to do, so I whispered 'I love you'! And he said that he loved me too—and then he kissed meeeeee!"

Torture, actually. The girls followed him all the way to the library like a travelling band, by which time they'd mowed their way through most of Dusty Springfield's discrography as well as several agonising canticles. Thankfully Ms. Pince took one look at them and promptly chased the girls off for disturbing the peace. If he'd had a shred of patience left, Remus might've been impressed; whatever James and Sirius had told them, it'd certainly taken some serious coordination.

The library was supposed to be a safe haven. Remus secluded himself amongst the stacks as he so often did, but he should've known better. Sirius knew all of his hiding spots, and within the hour he'd suffered through no less than seven *very public* marriage proposals, three declarations that he was *in fact* a cheating bastard, and four offers to sneak away for a *rather cheeky* pint at the Three Broomsticks. Even Audriana made an appearance. She was flanked by two of her closest girlfriends, but at least she'd brought a present.

"I hope you like chocolate."

"No eating in the LIBRARY!" Ms. Pince screeched, before promptly ejecting all of them from the building.

By lunch, Remus was sure he'd lost ten years off his life. He took a seat at the table furthest from the dining hall's doors, but he was spotted anyway. First by Peter, then Lily and Lottie, all of whom

didn't seem all that interested in the pranks. Well, almost. The girls couldn't help smirking at him and Peter was still clearly embarrassed in his delayed contribution to James and Sirius' row.

"Sirius told me to say it!" He insisted. "I thought it was rubbish."

"I heard it was hilarious," Lottie assured. "Remus, when you and your many, many, *many* lovers marry, can I be a bridesmaid?"

"Ooh! Ooh! Can I walk you down the aisle?" Lily giggled.

Remus dropped his head down on the table with a groan.

"Poor Remus," Lottie cooed. "Would a kiss make you feel better?"

"Oi, lips to yourself, Lot," Sirius said, arriving at the table with James in tow. "That's my man you're trying to snog."

"I'll fight you for him."

"Alright, but I warn you, I play dirty."

"Oh trust me, I *know."*

James and Sirius shared a matching grin. They sat down and Remus had to resist the urge to stab them both with his fork.

"Now that doesn't look like the face of the man who's just gotten engaged twelve times," James said, as he slid in between Lily and Peter at the table.

"Piss off," Remus grunted, before his curiosity got the better of him; "How'd you do it? How'd you get so many people to go along with this idiotic plan of yours?"

"Pure animal magnetism," Sirius declared, grabbing him by shoulders and rolling his tongue in his ear. Immediately, Remus seized up and shoved him away, grumbling.

"You're not funny."

Sirius stuck his tongue out.

"You should tone it down, Sirius," Peter said. "People are gonna get the wrong idea."

"What wrong idea?" Sirius sneered; "Really, I should be so humbled to

think that anyone would actually believe Moony and I are dating. You hear that world? *I'M DATING REMUS LUPIN!"*

A cheer of camaraderie went up from several other tables. A wolf whistle, and several more declarations of love came rolling in.

"ME TOO!"

"HE'S MINE!"

"GET YOUR OWN!"

Sirius spun around, practically vibrating in his seat. "I'm dating Remus Lupin," he chittered. And for all the embarrassment and torture he'd been put through, Remus couldn't find it in him to be angry.

"I hate you," he mumbled, leaning his chin into his hand to hide his smile. Perfectly pleased, Sirius simply blew him a kiss.

There was a clatter as Mary and Marlene arrived at the table with their lunch trays, completing their group.

"Why are we sitting all the way back here?" Mary frowned, before flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Whatever. Helloooo, Remus, dear."

She slid into the table next to him, sidling up close enough that both their thighs and shoulders were touching. It might've been alright, had she not budged in front of Marlene to snag it. Marlene frowned as Mary shoved her lunch tray aside and replaced it with her own, and Remus looked between them, entirely bewildered. Surely they couldn't be back to fighting already?

"Mary, you took my seat."

"Go sit by Lily," Mary replied dismissively, batting her eyelashes at Remus while he stuffed several bites of sandwich into his mouth.

Marlene crossed her arms. "But I always sit by Remus."

"You don't *always* sit by Remus. What an absurd thing to say."

"What's absurd is your sudden fascination with him. You never cared about getting Remus' attention before. What's changed? Run out of boys with an IQ below eighty?"

"Don't be jealous, Marls," Mary replied. "It gives you wrinkles."

“And what does being a slag get you? Venereal diseases?”

Remus choked on his food. He might’ve thought it was more serious, had Mary not burst into laughter and stood up from the table.

“There!” She said, thrusting a finger toward Marlene’s brow. “I can see one forming right now. The Mariana Trench of foreheads!”

Marlene swatted her hand away. “Get out of my seat.”

“Make me.”

Sirius whistled. “Cat fight!”

It was like lighting a beacon fire. Kids were craning their heads immediately, ready for round two, and Mary was about to deliver.

“You're calling me a slag, Marls, but all I see is a frigid little church girl. Why don’t you go back to saving yourself for Jesus. Remus is a man, he deserves a *woman.”*

“And what you deserve is a good kick up the arse!”

Mary turned and shook her skirt at her. “Only if you kiss it first.”

Marlene raised her hands, clamping them over Mary’s head and shaking her vigorously. Mary screeched—*“Not the hair!”*—and the girls fell backwards, bowling straight into Remus and Sirius and shoving them down to the edge of the bench.

“Jesus Christ!” Remus grunted, crushed beneath Mary’s back. “Can’t you all just give it a rest already?!”

“All’s fair in love and war. Maybe you should just pick one of ‘em,” Sirius sniggered, before taking an elbow to the temple.

“Neither!” Remus wailed. “I pick neither, now get off!”

Mary and Marlene both gasped, shooting upright on the dinner bench.

“Remus, what are you saying?”

“I—”

“Are you breaking up with us?”

“We never dated!”

“Liar!” Mary moaned. “You told me I was your one and only! Right after I let you eat me out on the common room fl—”

Nearly screaming, Remus clamped a hand over Mary’s mouth himself. “Cut it out!” He wailed. “We. Are. In. PUBLIC!”

“I don’t care!” She declared, ripping his hand free. “I’m not afraid of my love. Even if you are a selfish lover. I can change you!”

“Eat yourself, Mary!” Remus hissed, at his utter wit’s end. He might’ve launched himself up from the table altogether had Sirius not pressed in on him from behind, pinning him in place.

“What’s ‘a matter, Moony? Wouldn’t that story only be embarrassing if it were *true?”*

Across from them, James slammed his fist on the tabletop. “Moony, you two-timer!”

“Technically he’s at least a four-timer,” Lottie pointed out, popping a grape into her mouth as though it were popcorn at the cinema.

Mary burst into tears.

“REEEMUS! YOU CHEATING BASTARD!”

There were whistles from at least two tables down, as well as jeering, shouting, and several rounds of *“Lupin, you dog!”* Mary continued to cry, putting on a spectacular show of it while Marlene stomped her foot like a scorned child.

“Mary, stop crying! You’re embarrassing my Remus!”

“*Your* Remus?” Sirius echoed.

“Yes! *My* Remus!”

“Oh look, there’s Moira,” Peter said, taking his tray and leaving the table.

“Peter, wait!” Remus begged, still locked between Mary and Sirius. If Sirius noticed his distress, he didn’t seem to care, instead he only thrust a nasty finger at Marlene.

“You had your shot, McKinnon, now back off! I’ll fight for my man if I

have to!"

"Oh yeah? Square up then, pretty boy! You may be able to go toe-to-toe with Potter, but I think you'll find me a much nastier row."

Releasing hold of Remus, Sirius leapt up from the table and Marlene gave him several weak pops to the jaw with her closed fist, both of them grinning. Taking his opportunity, Remus went to flee, only to have Lily reach across the table and snatch his sleeve.

"Remus, are we still on for that date tomorrow?"

"Date?!" James demanded.

"You're not invited."

James sputtered indignantly.

"Hope everyone's hungry," Lottie observed calmly, " 'cause here comes cake."

Horror-stricken, Remus looked up to see a group of girls carrying a large sheet-cake across the dining hall, candles already lit. Across the middle, he could just make out the words 'We ♡ Remus' written in red icing. The stuff of nightmares.

Wrenching his arm back, Remus grabbed his bag and fled. He would've hopped the window if he could, but instead he ran around the outside of the dining hall to avoid the leering crowds, earning himself a spectacular round of whooping applause. Screw the rest of his lessons, there was only so much embarrassment one fool could take.

Fully prepared to return to his dorm room and never reemerge, Remus passed the first outdoor courtyard, busy with coming and going students, and instead made his way toward one of the dining hall's grassy quadrangles. He was surprised to find it empty save for a single person—even more surprised to find that that person was Regulus Black.

Ever since his return, Barty and the others had been surrounding their friend like a pack of antsy guard dogs, almost never letting Regulus out of their sight. Seeing him alone almost made Remus wonder if maybe something was wrong, but when he approached and asked if he could sit, Regulus squinted at him in distaste.

“No.”

“Would you let me sit if I said it was my birthday?”

Regulus glared at him.

“… If you’re quiet.”

Happily, Remus took up the spot opposite to him at the bench, and they sat in silence for a long while. Regulus didn’t so much as look at him; he had a book open in his lap and his lunch remained untouched on its tray. It made Remus’ stomach rumble a bit—he’d barely had time to touch his own—but there was *no way* he was going back inside. He’d starve first.

“You’re all by yourself today,” Remus said eventually.

“Keenly observed,” Regulus replied, not bothering to raise his head.

“Did you fight with your friends or something?”

“No, I just wanted a bit of peace. Got a bit rowdy inside.”

“Oh… heh… Heard some of that, did you?”

“Depends. Do you mean the part where my brother openly declared his love for you, or the bit where you and that Macdonald girl shagged in public?”

“So you heard all of it,” he snorted. “That’s funny. I didn’t think you knew what the word ‘shagged’ meant.”

“You don’t know a lot of things about me.”

A smile tugged at the corner of Remus’ mouth. “Touché.”

“Don’t think you can hang around and cause trouble. I’m not interested in watching your stupid friends lose their minds over you, and I’m not about to fight valiantly for your heart either so if that’s what you were expecting you can forget it.”

“You mean Regulus Black isn’t in love with me? How will I ever go on.”

Rolling his eyes, Regulus turned back to his book, and Remus mourned the fact that he hadn’t deigned to bring one for himself.

“Nice courtyard…” He murmured. “Not too chilly out today either… Hm… Good place to read, really.”

“Do you know what ‘quiet’ means, Lupin?”

“Yes, but you’re the only one I can count on to always be in a worse mood than I am. Makes me feel a bit better about myself.”

Another eye roll.

“What is it you’re reading?” Remus asked.

“ ‘The History of Jazz’.”

“Oh… Good read?”

“A bit dry actually.”

“So you wouldn’t recommend it?”

“Not to you.”

“Hey, I like jazz,” Remus insisted. “Rock was built on jazz.”

“Something tells me the members of Black Sabbath aren’t that familiar with scalar improvisation.”

Remus thought he must be hearing things.

“… You listen to Black Sabbath?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“You do!” He exclaimed. “My god, what’s your favourite song?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Mine’s ‘N.I.B.’.”

“Mediocre, at best.”

“You did *not* just call their best song mediocre.”

“Everyone likes ‘N.I.B.’, it was their debut. They didn’t care if it was perfect, they just wanted to shock their hippy neighbours. ‘Paranoid’ blows the whole thing out of the water.”

Remus was flabbergasted. “How do you know all of this?”

At the question, Regulus grew flustered. “Sirius… may have misplaced a tape or two over the years.”

“You little thief.”

“I’ll deny it if you say anything. I’ll take your thumbs too.”

“Alright, alright, Mr. Dramatic,” Remus cooed. “It can stay our little secret if that’s what you want. But you should know that Sirius would go insane if he knew.”

“He’s already insane. Thought you would’ve figured it out by now, you’re the one dating him.”

Suddenly a bit shy, Remus glanced down at his lap and smiled to himself. *Yeah. Yeah, I am.*

“Does this mean we can teach the kids ‘War Pigs’ next?”

“Don’t push it.”

“We can censor the words!” Remus urged. “Call it ‘Party Pigs’, imagine them ripping into—oh hey, Trish.”

Regulus jumped, fumbling the heavy book. It landed with a thud next to the table and Trish stopped to pick it up, having arrived while they were having their little back and forth.

“Hello, you two,” she smiled. “Lupin, what’s this—date number seventeen today?”

Regulus’ eyes bulged. “It’s not a date! Just because Lupin’s insatiable doesn’t mean everyone wants to be the apple of his fucking eye.”

“Calm down, Reginald, I was only joking,” Trish sniggered. “But I was looking for you. Your parents called Professor McGonagall’s office. She sent me to fetch ye.”

“Got it. Thanks, MacDuff.”

She nodded and glanced between them expectantly when Regulus made no indication that he was going anywhere. “Did you… forget the way?”

“No, I just thought I’d make them wait a bit longer.”

Trish smiled and passed his book back over. “Well, guess I’ll be seeing

ye then."

"Uh-huh."

Lingering a bit longer, Trish smiled and flashed Remus a quick wave before turning and skipping away with her hands clasped behind her back. Regulus watched her go, probably not even realising he was doing it.

"You're *staaariiiing,"* Remus said, sing-song.

Regulus snapped to attention. "I am not!"

"Did something happen between you two?"

"No. There is absolutely nothing going on between me and MacDuff."

"Oh? Can I call you Reginald too then?"

"Shut it. I already told you, if you can't be quiet, you can't stay."

Throwing up his hands, Remus sat back on his bench and swallowed a smile as Regulus bitterly opened his book once more. He was considering his chances of survival should he try teasing him again when his stomach rumbled loudly and he clasped a hand over it. Regulus glanced up sharply, and Remus gave him a sheepish look.

"Sorry, just my stomach. I'll be quiet now, promise."

And he was, apart from the incessant rumbling in his gut. On the third growl, Regulus scoffed and slid his untouched lunch across the table.

"Just eat it."

"But it's your lunch."

"And your stomach's like listening to a chainsaw. It'll be a relief."

Remus smiled. He picked up the sandwich and ate.

"Mhm… Tea's gone cold."

"Thin ice, Lupin. Thin. Ice."

* * *

Later that day…

'—FINISHED WITH MY WOMAN 'CAUSE SHE COULDN'T HELP ME WITH MY MIND! PEOPLE THINK I'M INSANE BECAUSE I AM FROWNING ALL THE TIME!'

"Moony!"

'ALL DAY LONG I THINK OF THINGS—'

"Moony!"

'—BUT NOTHING SEEMS TO SATISFY! THINK I'LL LOSE MY MIND IF I DON'T FIND SOMETHING TO PACIFY!'

"MOOOOOONY!"

Remus turned the hi-fi down. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"Yeah, I said—"

'—OCCUPY MY BRAIN!'

"Sorry, what was that?"

"I was *saying—"*

'—OH YEAH!'

"Oh, real mature!"

Sirius stomped over, punching the red 'stop' button on the stereo and snatching out the tape to dangle it in front of his face. Remus *tsked,* tucking himself further onto James' bed with Sheila's guitar in his lap.

"I've been looking for you, you know," Sirius grumbled. "We had an entire interpretive dance planned for the middle of Classics but you skived off! We were gonna laugh at that little vein that bulges in Bilshin's forehead whenever he gets slightly irked!"

"Funnily enough, I'm not sorry."

Sirius smirked, and then finally noticed the guitar. "Holy shit, where'd you get that?"

Remus raised the guitar up from his lap meekly. "Birthday present."

“From who? From… From your dad?”

“Yeah, as if. It’s from Sheila actually. She gave it to me yesterday.”

“No shit? Told you she liked you best. Between her and Tomny, you’re on your way to a whole collection.”

“She said it was hers from when she was our age. I tried telling her it was too much.”

“Maybe for someone else, but not for you.” Sirius looked up at him, and leaned in to kiss him over the guitar.

“Nice try,” Remus scoffed, turning his face away. “I’m still mad at you.”

“You sure?” Sirius captured his chin. “What if I do this?” He left a gentle peck on his jaw. “And this?” On his neck. “And this…?”

Sirius kept on going down, leaving longer and longer kisses in each new spot. Remus, as weak as he was, couldn’t help but enjoy it. He let it go on for a little while longer before turning and biting Sirius on the earlobe.

“Ow!” Sirius clapped a hand over his ear. “I’m all for a bit of roughness here and there but you should probably warn a guy first.”

“Stupid.” Remus kissed him on the cheek. “Now gimme my tape back.”

“In a second. I have something for you too. It's a surprise. Was gonna save it for later, but I reckon now’s as good a time as any.”

“If it's another interpretive dance, can you at least save it for when I’m drunk?”

Sirius laughed, and slipped over to his own bedside table to rifle around within it. Figuring that there was no way he could fit an entire ‘We ♡ Remus’ cake in his drawer, Remus set the Martin aside and began sorting through his own pocket. He’d just pulled out a cigarette and set it between his teeth when Sirius turned around, hands hidden behind his back.

“Close your eyes.”

Remus did so.

“Now choose a hand.”

A sigh. “Your… left.”

"Ooh, good guess."

There was a wet feeling—Sirius had licked his finger and shoved it in his ear.

“EUGH!” Remus bat his hand away, eyes flying open. “Have you not had enough?! *I mean, really—!”*

“Happy birthday, Moons!”

Remus’ breath lodged itself in his throat. Sirius was crouched low beside the bed, a single silver ring pinched between two fingers. He bit his lip over a smile, and urged Remus to take it.

“Well…? Don’t you like it?”

A laugh slipped out, and the cigarette dropped into his lap. “Sirius, if you wanted to ask me to marry you, you picked the wrong day. I’ve already had about nine different proposals, and I think the charm’s worn off a bit.”

“This *isn’t* an engagement ring!” Sirius yelped. “It’s a *posey* ring.”

“What the hell is a posey ring?”

“You’d know if you hadn’t spent all Christmas crying into Tomny’s couch.”

Remus scowled, and Sirius shook his head very quickly.

“It was Evans. She dragged us to this museum while you were gone, made us spend hours looking at old dead things, or things that used to belong to old dead things. Apparently lovers used to give each other these rings as a sort of promise, or something. They’d sometimes inscribe words or little messages on them too. I dunno, I guess I just saw it and thought… Well… Anyway, go on. Check it out.”

Sirius held the ring closer, and after tucking the cigarette back into his mouth, Remus slowly reached out to take it. It was thick in the band, not as round as a traditional wedding ring but rather more rough-hewn, like it’d been pulled directly from the fire and set on display. And right there on the inside he could make out the small engraving, clear as day; *RJL*.

Remus John Lupin.

“Moons, you’re not saying anything…”

“Oh!” Remus pulled the cigarette from his mouth again and cleared his throat “Sorry, I was just… Wow. It’s—uhm… It’s… beautiful.”

Sirius frowned. “You don’t like it.”

“No! No, I—I’m just shocked, is all. Ninth proposal, remember…”

“I told you, it’s not a proposal,” Sirius said. “I find those things reeking in heterosexual undertone. This is a promise.”

“A promise of what?”

“That we’ll always have each other. No matter what.”

“… No matter what.”

Sirius nodded. “But if you kiss Tomny again I’ll break your face.”

A warm feeling had suddenly burst across Remus’ chest. Quickly, he slid forward on James’ bed and took the ring from Sirius, slipping it over his fingertip. Tragically, the band never made it over his knuckle.

“Uh… Sirius, I’m sorry, but it doesn’t quite fit.”

Sirius’ face split into an audacious grin. “That’s ‘cause that one’s mine.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t think I’d give you a ring with *your* name on it, do you?”

Cheekily, Sirius pulled the band from his finger and slipped it onto the ring finger of his right hand. A perfect fit. Then he reached into his other pocket and withdrew a second ring, its twin in every way.

“Here, this one’s yours. We don’t have to wear them on our left hands or anything. It’d be enough if you just wore it at all.”

Remus bit his lip. He didn’t have to wonder what inscription he’d find on the inside of his ring. It could only be one thing; *SOB.*

Sirius Orion Black.

“You know your initials spell out ‘son of a bitch’, right?”

“No, tell me again.”

“Tsk… Son of a bitch.”

Sirius slipped the ring onto his finger and kissed his knuckles. “There. Now we match. I’m glad I got silver, the gold seemed a bit tacky.”

Remus looked down at them, and practically melted. He held his own hand up, pressing it to Sirius’ and letting their fingers slip together and intertwine. Somehow the metal of the bands were already warm. It felt so right; so *Sirius.* He wasn’t sure his heart had ever felt so full.

“Dunno what I did to deserve such expensive gifts,” Remus hummed.

“Who gives a shite about that, you’re priceless.”

Oh…

Sirius smirked. “I suppose this means you like the gift then?”

“Yes… Oh, yes.”

“Good. Now take off those trousers—your birthday ain’t over yet, rock star.”

* * *

What a drag it is getting old…

- “Mother’s Little Helper” The Rolling Stones, 1966

Tuesday 21st March 1978

Turns out, it *was* a good birthday. It was a good March, so far. It reminded Remus what they were looking forward to—what life together could be. Plans were being laid, universities applied to, songs written; it was all so good. He nearly forgot what it was to feel bad. Nearly. Apparently all of the professors had come together and decided that their workload that term had been far too light, and as a result, had piled on the assignments just as everyone was about to

depart on holiday.

After an early supper, Remus and his friends congregated on the floor of the girls' bedroom, determined to finish the rest of their assignments, overdue or otherwise. The only ones who weren't drowning in homework were Sirius and Lily; Sirius because he didn't plan on finishing any of it in the first place, and Lily because she already had. While Sirius poured over a battered copy of last week's newspaper—paying special attention to the 'properties for rent' section—Lily had since moved on to one of her many university entrance essays, leaving them all in the dust. She'd may have been "conditional'ed" from Oxford, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to try for any other university that was worth its salt.

"Find anything in there yet?" Mary asked, sneaking over to Sirius and all but ignoring her unfinished essay. "You've been looking for ages."

Sirius rolled over so his head was resting against Remus' thigh. He straightened the paper and hummed lightly. "Dunno… There's this place in Lambeth that seems to have promise, but it's awfully close to the river, and I'm not sure how I'd feel waking up to the smell of rotting sushi every morning."

"The smell isn't that bad," Remus reasoned.

"Yes, but with our luck we'd move in one day and have a second coming of the Great Stink the next." Sirius shook his head, flapping his paper again. "I'm still looking."

"If you're so picky, then maybe you should just go see some of these places in person," Lottie suggested. "At least that way you could scope out the area."

Sirius glanced up at Remus. "You didn't tell them?"

"Tell us what?" Echoed Peter.

"Sirius and I are staying at school for Easter," Remus said, not looking up from his work.

James all but shot up from the floor. "You are?! Why?"

"Why not?" Sirius shot defensively. "Mary's going to Paris, you're both going to your girlfriends' houses. You think Moony and I *like* going home? No, might as well stay and have some peace from you lot."

“Ah, yes, peace from *us,”* Lily sneered.

“It doesn’t matter, he’s just gonna be catching up on the homework he’s refused to do before now,” Remus said.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

Sirius made a displeased noise.

“I see, so it’ll just be the two of you?” Marlene pondered innocently.

Remus gave her a small smirk. “Leave it, Cherry.”

She appeared much less innocent after that.

“Right, I’ve had enough.” Sirius tossed the newspaper aside and sat up.

“You haven’t even done anything,” Lily blagged.

“I meant I’ve had enough of waiting on you people,” he huffed, before turning on James. “C’mon, you said we’d practise tonight. I want to show you that new riff.”

James frowned, looking down at all of his unfinished work. “Sorry, mate, don’t think I can swing it today. Got two days to finish this or Loughty’ll have my head.”

“Wormy?”

Peter sighed. “Can’t… got maths.”

“I’ll go with you, Pads,” Remus said, before Sirius could start pouting. They got up together and whilst they were slipping out the girls’ window, Mary whistled.

“Have fun, you two.”

“But not too much fun!” Marlene added.

“Bugger off,” Remus said, before noticing an odd look on Peter’s face; like he knew he was out on the joke but couldn’t quite figure out what it was. He nudged Lottie, and the two of them had one of their silent twin-telepathy moments. In the end all Lottie did was shake her head and feign indifference, but it was enough to make Remus regretful. He

supposed that 'two of his best mates buggering each other' wasn't high on Peter's list of possibilities, but still, should probably say something.

Maybe after Easter…

Bidding Rowena House adieu, he and Sirius stopped by their own dorm to drop off and collect their things before heading on to the Bellchant building. It was dark, so Remus took Sirius' hand in a brief bout of boldness. Sirius squeezed back, and he felt their twin rings click together. Sometimes, on the days he was feeling most daring, Remus wore the ring on his left.

"Everyone's going home Thursday," Sirius said as they strolled. "Only two days until we've got this whole place to ourselves."

It was true. And Regulus was back, which meant there was no need to consider a cross-country trip or grand theft auto.

"There'll still be a few others around," Remus pointed out. "Lots are staying for exam prep."

"That's nothing. Those swots are gonna be locked up tight in the library. We'll be able to go wherever we want."

"Hm."

"We should fuck in the common room."

"Don't even think about it."

"Why not? Where's your sense of adventure?"

"It's up yours, actually."

"Was that meant to be a dirty euphemism?"

"Just walk on, idiot."

The music hall was still lit up by the time they reached it, and a group of students were piling out its front doors, all bundled up in their scarves and coats. Remus recognised them as several of the girls that'd followed him around singing choir songs on his birthday and was instantly embarrassed. Luckily the girls didn't do much more than giggle as they passed, and a single warning glance in Sirius' direction kept his mouth shut.

“The choir was actually James’ idea,” he sniggered, as they walked through the doors.

“Sure.”

“It was! … Bloody brilliant too.”

Remus knocked him in the legs with his guitar case. “What do you think, room two?”

“As if we ever go anywhere else,” Sirius drawled; “Here, gonna pop over to the loo first. Meet you there.”

He passed Remus his guitar before breaking off down another hallway. Music room #2 wasn’t much further, and when he reached it he found Sheila stacking chairs in the corner.

“Remus! You’re here late.”

“You too,” Remus said, setting the two guitars down on the stands.

“Yes, choir practice ran a bit long today. Are you wanting the room? I’ll step into my office and be out of your hair in just a tick.”

“It’s okay, Sirius and I just thought we’d mess around a bit.” He flipped the clips on his case, opening it up to reveal the Martin guitar sitting amongst its velvet lining.

“Having fun with her, are you?”

Sheila appeared at his shoulder, looking keen.

“I love it,” he said, honestly. “Practise on it every day.”

She smiled broadly and Remus suddenly felt stupid for boasting. He began thumbing the velvet lining, some of which was peeling along the edges.

“Will you humour me?” Sheila asked suddenly. “I’d love to hear you play something. Then I’ll go, promise.”

She held a finger to her lips like it were a secret, and Remus felt a giddy feeling rise in his chest. So far all he’d done was sit next to the stereo and attempt the chords to a few of his favourite songs, but Sirius had been helping a bit, and now he knew the entire intro section of “Going to California”. Steeling his nerves, he sat down on one of the music stands while Sheila drew a chair up to watch. It went

well enough, until he fumbled the pick.

“Uh… sounds better with just fingers anyway… Still a bit new…”

“May I?” She held out her hands and took the guitar, laying it over her lap. “Try keeping your thumb on the top three strings. It’s called Travis picking, it’s what gives you that bluesy sort of sound. You let your thumb do all the work while your index finger just glides along.”

She demonstrated for him, and played the notes perfectly on her very first try. Remus felt positively envious.

“See? Now your turn.”

He played it as she had, and though it felt a bit wonky at first and he kept hitting the A string on accident, she praised him anyway.

“Wonderful! I should see if I can’t find you a thumb pick. Might make things a bit easier.”

Remus smiled, glancing back down at the strings. His second attempt was better, but it was interrupted when a phone rang out, spooking them both.

“Darn office line,” Sheila sighed. “Sorry, Remus, you keep working on that, I’ll be right back.”

She hurried away to catch it, and Remus could just hear her speaking over the sound of the chords.

“Oh… Maggie, yes… No, sorry, I haven’t been home yet tonight… What? What do you mean… I-I thought the surgery went well?”

She went quiet, and then a sagging noise like something had collapsed. Remus looked back to find Sheila slumped over in her office chair, a hand to her eyes. She was white-knuckling the phone, and after a staggered breath, raised it back to her ear.

“Yes… Yes, I’m here… Will you tell me, was he… No, course not... But was he in any pain?”

Remus felt his stomach drop. He whipped back around so she wouldn’t realise he’d overheard and began fumbling with the loose bits of lining inside the guitar case again. It was soft under his fingertips, worn and loved.

“Oh, Colin…”

He should leave. Every nerve in his body was screaming at him to make a mad dash for it, but it was as though he was frozen in place. He couldn't move—what if she saw him leaving? He wished Sirius were there—where the hell was Sirius?!

She's crying. He could hear her now, his teacher, struggling to breathe as she choked on her own despair. A clatter, and the phone had fallen from her hand.

"Colin…"

Remus shoved the Martin back into its case. He was no good with stuff like this, he didn't know how to comfort her, but in his hurry to escape, the guitar caught on the lining's edge and ripped away the last of the glue. He grunted, annoyed by the blunder, and went to pull the velvet back into place—only something jumped out and bit him.

It was a paper-cut, a clean slice up the side of his thumb. It'd come from a tiny sliver of paper, slipped secretly beneath the purple velvet. At first he thought it was a card, but then he pulled it out and realised that it was only a photograph. In it was a younger Sheila, captured beautifully on the front steps of a church. She was beaming, and in her arms she held a baby clad in long while lace. It was a christening photo, he realised, but what was it doing inside his guitar case?

He turned the photo over.

Remus John Lupin, christened April 25th 1960. Godparents Sheila Anne Buchanan

For a moment there was nothing. He could only stare, wondering if perhaps his mind were playing tricks on him. This wasn't… under the lining, it… the baby couldn't be… no…

I don't want this.

A roaring started in his ears.

Take it away.

All the sound came back at once. Crying. Buzzing radiator.

I don't want this!

Before he knew what was happening, he was standing outside her office door. *Take it away, take it away, take it away!*

Sheila's head snapped up. "Remus!"

You.

She began wiping beneath her eyes, desperately clearing her throat as though she could've hid it all. *Hid,* like the photograph she'd hid beneath the lining of the guitar *she'd* given him.

You knew.

"I'm sorry, Remus, but something's come up… Colin, he—"

"Are you my godmother?"

The words hit like a gong, and her eyes widened. Whatever she'd planned, whatever she'd wanted, it wasn't this.

"Remus... Oh, Remus… I am so sorry."

I don't want this. I don't want this.

"You're a liar."

"No."

He raised his fist, showing her the crumpled photograph. "You put this there to lie to me!"

"No, Remus."

"Then why did you do that? … WHY?!"

For a moment, neither of them breathed. Remus' ears actually popped, as though he'd changed elevations.

Whoosh! Then down, down, down, the voice taunted, *but where's bottom, 'Remus, oh, Remus'?*

Fuzz. Static. Greyness. Sheila was calling his name—pleading. For what, forgiveness? Remus heard nothing. He was suddenly very tired. He hadn't slept well the night before. He could remember thinking he'd have slept better if he just got up and snuck over to Sirius' bed, but he hadn't wanted to disturb him. A regret, now.

Sirius. Sirius. Sirius. Sirius. Sirius.

"Remus, please," Sheila begged. "I meant to tell you, but it wasn't that

easy. I thought that maybe… but then you wouldn't—"

Your fault, your fault, your fault!

"I'm just… I'm so sorry, Remus!"

Sirius. Where was Sirius?

Remus turned around. And there he was. Standing by the music stands with his hands at his sides, his perfect mouth open in a perfect 'o'. He'd heard everything... All of it.

"Oh, Moons..."

There. There's bottom.

Chapter End Notes

Songs referenced are "And Then He Kissed Me" by the Crystals, 1963, and "Paranoid" by Black Sabbath, 1970.

I was getting the sense a few of you forgot about your Sheila suspicions. Oops, lol.

Note: I will be releasing another chapter this coming week on Sunday July 31st but after that I'll be taking a short hiatus as I'm going on holiday. Just a heads up :)

Chapter 90: Easter, 1978

Chapter Summary

Remus is still reeling from the news that he has a godmother, good thing Sirius Black was made to be his perfect distraction.

Chapter Notes

CW: For a tough father/son memory at the beginning. Some [semi-public] sexual content (blow job) so pay attention to the '> > >;' if you wish to skip over it. Also, I wouldn't consider it a trigger, but Mary briefly touches on her realisation that she may be aromantic. Like Remus' experiences, she doesn't have an exact word for it, but I do my best to maintain that sense of "she knows" but it's "indescribable". Hope this translates correctly.

One more note since some people were confused about it last chapter: The opening scene with the reporters and the girls was meant to link back to the prank James and Sirius plan for Remus' birthday. The girls are writing his name in their diaries to document that SPECIFIC day (March 10, 1078) NOT to document that they actually slept with/had children with Remus Lupin the ACTUAL ROCK STAR. (Pay attention to the line 'anything before 1980 was a mystery'.) Perhaps reread it with the prank in mind if you were confused. I know some people would've understood this but I've been seeing some wild things on twitter and tiktok.

And please for the love of god, stop sending me messages about Remus being a cheater/a possible cheater in the future. Frankly, it's biphobic and I delete them anyway. "Cadence" is a fan fic, please don't impress your own morals on characters that don't actually exist. Thank you.

***See end notes for update on posting schedule.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well maybe it is just the time of year,
Or maybe it's the time of man;
I don't know who I am,
But you know life is for learning;

We are stardust,
We are golden,

And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden…

- "Woodstock" Joni Mitchell, 1970

"I want to see her," he whined in his squeaky voice, as he clung to the back of his father's dark suit. He tried pulling him back, but it was impossible; Lyall was huge, and Remus was small. He reached down to pry his son's skinny fingers from his belt and there was nothing Remus could do to stop it.

"No, just stay in your room. Giles will come get you after the ceremony."

"She's my mum!" He screeched, his clinging fingers turning into tiny fists as he began pummelling his father's back. "She's my mum! She's my mum! SHE'S MY MUM!"

This is why he wasn't allowed at the funeral, he knew. Because he couldn't be trusted not to throw a fit. Giles had tried to explain it to him, about the open casket. Would it be strange to see her with a red flush to her cheeks? She'd been grey for so long.

"You won't like it. She's already gone, Remus."

"No! You're a bastard, you give her back! She's my mum!"

"Remus—"

"It's your fault! Your fault, your fault, your fault!"

"Enough!" Lyall roared. "Don't you understand, your mother is ***gone!"***

The shouting had been enough to startle him into letting go. He staggered back, losing his footing and landing on his bum on his bedroom floor. He gaped up at his father, whose shoulders were heaving with his own grief.

"I hate you! I hate you and I hope I never see you again! I hope someone comes and takes me away!"

"You do, do you? And what a sad thing you would be, all alone."

"I don't need you!"

"Then tell me, who is it that's coming for you, Remus?"

His eyes burned. He didn't like crying, but he couldn't help it. He was

eleven and heartbroken. And he wanted his mother.

Lyall knelt down, until he was nearly at his son's level. "You and me, we're all the other has left. I suggest you learn to live with it."

"It should've been you."

There was a long silence, punctuated only by their breathing. Finally Lyall stood again.

"Stay in your room."

* * *

Wednesday 22nd March 1978

Remus' friends watched him nervously all through breakfast the next day, as though he were a bomb just waiting to go off. He didn't have the energy to tell them that he didn't feel all that much like exploding, but rather felt more hollow, like he'd been cracked open and scooped out from the inside. He pushed his food around his plate with such little enthusiasm that even the girls began to catch on, though none of them attempted to pry. They'd all heard the whispers already anyway. Not about him, but about Sheila.

"Did you hear? Her husband died."

"Oh fuck."

"I heard he was terminally ill or something. A genetic thing, like a mutant. It's probably why Mrs. Buchanan never had any kids of her own."

"So that's where she was always going?"

"Yeah! McGonagall gave her leave to visit him in the hospital. Can you imagine the drive—every weekend? Blimey."

"But she's coming back right?"

"Who knows. When my grandpa died, my nan was a wreck. She had to come live with us full time. Rather annoying, actually. She's always snapping at me for putting my elbows on the table."

Remus tried to block it out, but the chittering only got louder as the

day went by. After news of Colin's passing had come to light, Sheila had left school ahead of everyone else. It was too short notice to call a teacher in to cover her classes, and as a result other secondary professors took turns supervising. Unfortunately for them it was mere days until everyone was set to return home for the holidays, making for a rather disruptive forms classroom, so much so that Professor Bilshin had just about stuffed Barty into a tuba within the first twenty minutes of the day. Remus just minded his own.

After lessons got out things were still stiff. Peter waited until they were all back at the dorm to suggest a round of cards, but none of them jumped on the offer and he quickly let the subject drop. Eventually a knock came on their bedroom door. It was James who answered.

"Moony," he said softly, "phone's for you."

Trying his best not to look put out, Remus got up from his bed and drifted out into the hall. It took longer than normal to make his way to the bottom floor, and along the way he imagined how he was going to hide his foul mood from Tomny. Even the four hundred miles between them didn't feel like enough. He supposed it could be Giles, but Remus had already called days ago to tell him of their plans to remain at school.

When he reached the phones it was already late, and other boys were shuffling out of the common room and heading up to bed. He waited until no one was around before picking up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Remus."

"… Dad?"

"I apologise for the late hour," Lyall said coolly. "How are you getting on at school?"

"Holy shit," Remus swore, already on the verge of unbridled laughter; "Now you call? Fuck, the nerve of your timing. I mean really, man."

There was some silence, as though Lyall Lupin were choosing his next words carefully. "Giles told me of your plans to remain at school over the holiday."

"What of it?"

“I’d like you to reconsider. Sandra has expressed a desire to see you, and since Christmas was spent apart it feels only right that you come home now.”

Silently, Remus raged. His father kept talking, going on about ‘rightness’, and yet it only fell upon deaf ears.

“You’re a fucking liar."

“… Excuse me?”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me I had a godmother?”

“Godm—” Lyall stopped short, as though he’d only just remembered himself. “Remus, you don't have a godmother. You've clearly misunderstood—”

“Oh, I've misunderstood, have I? Misunderstand this then, you great arse—*You. Are. A. Liar!”*

“Come home. Come home so we might actually speak about this civilly.”

“Fuck you,” Remus breathed—*whined.* “You don’t get to act like the proper parent after being remade by some good woman... I had family! I had someone *other* than you, and you kept it from me! I know you knew, don’t deny it!”

“That woman isn’t—”

“She had my baby photo! Good people don’t lie about these things, but you do! You! The great Lyall-*fucking*-Lupin... You know, I *wanted* you to be my dad. I really did. And you did everything you could to push me away. Now all of sudden you have a good wife and you—what? Want the perfect family? We're not family, never have been.”

“Remus.”

“No. You can go fuck yourself, mate. I’m staying at school, and if you have a problem with it then I’ll tell Sandra who my real dad is. I’ll tell her mum was crazy and that *you* made her way! … See if that shatters her rose-tinted glasses.”

He slammed the phone down and wiped his forehead on his sleeve, having broken out into a cold sweat the moment Lyall first said his name. He was thankful the hallway was still empty so no one could

see him tremble, but when he looked back toward the staircase, he caught the tail-end of three pairs of feet scrambling back up and out of sight.

Sighing, Remus covered his face with his hands.

“Fuck.”

When he finally dragged his sorry arse back upstairs, he found his friends going about their nightly routines, completely casual. None of them said anything, except to offer him the shower first. Remus was grateful. He didn’t think he could handle any more of their sympathy.

A half hour later, they’d all showered and readied themselves for bed. Remus had successfully secluded himself on his four-poster, curtains drawn and a book open in his lap. He wasn’t really reading, but rather using the dim light to study the photograph of Sheila and his parents as teenagers. Using the photo as a bookmark had been the only excuse he could come up with to keep them close, but now, as he gazed down at their youthful faces, he began to regret it. If Sheila was really his godmother and he hadn’t just screamed at his father for no reason, he supposed that made them related. It meant the photo was the only evidence of the most family he’d ever had in one place. He was eighteen now; older than they were when the photo was taken. Did they know then how they’d all disappoint him one day?

It was a horrible thought, so to avoid it, Remus jammed the photo back into the book and threw back his curtains to put it away. He just about jumped when he came face-to-face with Sirius, who was standing on the rug between his and Peter’s beds, looking nervous. He was wearing only his pyjama bottoms and a Sex Pistols t-shirt, which belonged to Remus; a gift from Marlene for his birthday.

“Sorry… Didn’t mean to frighten you.”

Remus set his book down. “I’m fine, you know. I’m not gonna fall to pieces.”

“I know,” Sirius reassured him. “And we don’t have to talk. Just… Can I stay with you?”

Another moment passed, and Remus glanced at James and Peter’s beds, but their curtains were already drawn as well. Wordlessly, he drew back the covers and Sirius climbed inside. It was dark, but as he laid down next to him, Remus could still smell the familiar scent of Sirius’ shampoo. It soothed him, though he wasn’t likely to sleep

anytime soon.

A godmother. He had a godmother. And not just any godmother. He had Sheila. Beyond the disbelief—the shattered state of his heart—the part of him that was still twelve years-old wanted to jump for joy. Except he wasn't twelve anymore. He was eighteen, with a nasty smoking habit and a nastier attitude. No aspirations other than wanting to follow his friends into a master plan that had a one in a million chance of actually working out. There was also the queer thing, and though Remus loved Sirius more than he'd thought possible, he could hardly blame Sheila for that. If it were him, he wouldn't have been so quick to take responsibility either.

In the darkness of his bed, crowded with Sirius sleeping soundly beside him, Remus lifted his hands and pressed his palms into his eye sockets. He'd been so excited for the holiday; to spend a week with just the two of them. It was supposed to be like last summer, only better, but now Sirius was going to be walking on eggshells, treating him like a skittish cat. It was because he cared, he knew, but the idea still made his stomach turn.

So, as he glared up at the roof of his four-poster, Remus decided he would lock it away. He'd done it before, when his mother brought his world crashing down and then promptly bit the bullet. If he could do it then, he could do it now.

He turned over, so his forehead was just hovering over Sirius' on the pillow.

Sleep, he told himself. *Just for once, you messed up lunatic. Go to fucking sleep.*

And against all odds, he did.

* * *

Thursday 23rd March 1978 – First Day of Easter Holiday

"You're sure you're alright?"

"I told you, I'm fine, Sirius."

"It's okay if you aren't, you know."

“I know,” Remus said firmly. “I just want to enjoy the next week with you.”

Sirius’ brow furrowed, then relaxed all at once. *An entire week alone,* it was hard not to look forward to it.

All around them, kids and teachers had gathered, saying heartfelt goodbyes and acting just as eager for holidays of their own. Most had trunks and were rushing about the buses in a hurry to claim their seat, while others like Sirius and Remus had decided to remain in favour of studying and the like. Of their friends, James and Lily had already left on an earlier bus bound for Liverpool, and Peter had gone not long after them, off to visit with Moira and her family in Scarborough. All that was left were those heading to London and further south; Remus had never been so grateful to not be included among them.

“Oi, you there, Sirius Black!" Filch flapped his arms at them from his place at the end of the bus line. “This is still part of your detention, get over here and help me load these bags!”

“Detention, hah. Call it what it is, man. Slave labour."

Clicking his tongue in distaste, Sirius nudged Remus goodbye and began sauntering toward the buses. Remus was left alone, but only for a moment. As Sirius left, his place was taken by none other than his own brother.

“What’s he done now?” Regulus asked, jutting his head toward Sirius and Filch.

“Nothing much, just the usual lip in class,” He glanced at Regulus' empty hands. “No bags?”

“If you must know, I’m staying at school this holiday.”

“… Really?”

“Yes, I've managed to convince my parents that staying at school while everyone else has gone would be good for my studies.” Regulus eyed him. “And sanity.”

“We’re staying too, you know. Sirius and I.”

“Oh joy. There goes the sanity.”

“You could join us. It'll be fun."

Regulus shook his head. “I’m not a complete idiot, Lupin. I do intend to study.”

“Alright, fine. Catch you at breakfast though?”

“Maybe.”

“Hey, you two!” A voice called from behind. They both turned around to find Trish struggling along the path with her duffle bag. “Can I get a little help? It’s been murder dragging this thing all the way from the dorms and my da's waiting.”

Remus glanced at Regulus, who was merely staring at her with big eyes, and gently nudged him with his shoulder. Regulus stumbled forward and shot him a glare, before reluctantly trudging up the path to Trish. He grabbed the duffle’s handle and pulled, before dropping it again in shock.

“What do you have in here—rocks?”

“Yes!” She grinned. “... How'd you know?”

Remus smiled, just as an arm slid in around his shoulders. Marlene leaned against him fondly. “You know, I think I’m gonna really miss you this year. Our last Easter supper was so fun.”

“Bring it up again and I’ll vomit on your shoes."

She pat his arm affectionately. “You should know, Mary's decided to stay too."

“You mean at school? Thought she was going to Paris."

"Go easy on her, but I think she backed out last second when she heard the two of you were staying. They were supposed to go to visit Kara-Ann’s family over Easter, but she was getting really nervous. I don’t think they’re very kind to her.”

“Not kind how?”

Marlene frowned. “Mary’s never outrightly said it, but I think they have a problem with her being half black. They’ve made some comments.”

“What about her dad? Doesn't he say anything?”

“Her dad’s the half they don't have a problem with. Plus he's got a

pretty young wife and a new baby. He pretends."

Remus turned his gaze across the berm, where Mary was standing next to the busses, hugging Lottie goodbye. She had her hair in twists that she'd done herself and her dark skin shone in the sun. She looked beautiful.

"Dad's are useless, rich or poor," he grumbled, remembering Tomny's words from last Christmas.

"Sorry if this ruins your and Sirius' romantic week alone."

"Sirius'll get over it," he shrugged. "I'll blow him when we get back to the dorm or something."

"Eugh... Too much information."

They shared a chuckle, and Marlene finally stepped away, picking up her bag. "Mary's pretty oblivious sometimes, but she means well. Take care of her for me?"

"Sure. Though… you're sure there's nothing going on between you two?"

"Mary's straight, Remus."

Ah. Marlene's expression was all he needed to know that he'd really stepped in it then.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

Marlene shook her head, and rather than showing him a sad face, she smiled. Like the sun.

"Don't be sorry. I love Mary—I'll probably always love her—but I'm not gonna torture myself. It's enough to have her with me as my best friend. You understand, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. And hey, take care of yourself too, okay?"

"Okay, Cherry."

She kissed him on the cheek, and because that was too soppy, punched him in the arm too. He didn't get the chance to retaliate before she was off again, skipping to join her girlfriends by the front

of the buses. Mary hugged her goodbye, playing at a good cry, and Marlene rolled her eyes—fondly.

I'll probably always love her.

Was it sad? Possibly—Remus couldn't decide. But maybe it wasn't his place either way.

“Remind me to send Filch some more brownies,” Sirius huffed, returning to his side as the buses gave their final honks of warning. “This time with rat poison in ‘em.”

“You can bake them tonight. Mary'll help you. I'm sure between the two of you, you'll be able to come up with something deadly."

Sirius gave him a funny look, and Remus shrugged haplessly.

"She's staying too."

“You mean at school? ... With us?”

“Yeah. Marlene's just told me."

“Well, why didn’t you tell her no?”

“ 'No'? What, you think I tell those girls to do anything? As if."

"You could've tried. We were supposed to have a week alone."

"And what was I supposed to say—‘no, Mary, you have to go home to your family so Sirius and I can have hot animalistic sex across the common room floor’?”

“That’s *exactly* what you should’ve said.”

Remus sighed. "Mary's avoiding her family, same as us. Think we can make an exception?"

Sirius raised an eyebrow, before catching himself and quickly morphing into a pout. “Whatever,” he grumbled. “Guess the girl can stay. We can form a club.”

“Knew you weren’t entirely heartless. Bet she grows bored of us after a day.”

“Well, now that you’ve said it, it ain’t gonna come true.”

Remus chuckled and Sirius crowded in close, fingers tucked into his armpits to ward off the morning's chill. Across the berm, Mary had already started toward them, walking backward to blow Marlene's bus several kisses goodbye.

"Hey, Macdonald!" Sirius called. “Heard you’re staying."

“Oh, yes," Mary replied. "Someone had to stay behind to make sure you two didn't get too lonely."

Sirius kindly raised an arm, and she raced to him, letting herself be gathered into a hug as they turned for the dorms.

“So, boys, what shall we do first? Manicures?”

“Actually, Moony and I were gonna—”

“I’ll paint yours first, Sirius.”

“Well, in that case…”

By early evening, they'd found themselves camped out in Godric’s common room with the turntable playing quietly behind them. The dining hall was shut up save for drop ins, and so they'd brought their dinners back with them as well. They were even allowed telly privileges at all hours, but nothing good had been on and so the three of them had resorted to the usual sort of fun; cracking open a few bottles and getting well and truly smashed.

It was almost therapeutic, belonging to the small few that had remained at school. It made Remus think of Simeon, and all the chattering he and his friends had done about the future in their last year of school. Simeon was off at Oxford now. Was he still dating that girlfriend of his, Phaedra? Remus wasn't sure. He hoped he was happy though, and hadn’t already resigned himself to a life of the nine-to-five grind and fucking the mailman behind his wife’s back. If only Simeon could play an instrument, his ability to pull girls would have certainly been an asset.

“I dunno…” Remus mused thoughtfully. "Are we sure red's my colour?”

He turned his nails toward Sirius, who was busy getting a set of hot rollers applied to his hair—courtesy of Mary, of course. Sirius made a face, and Remus sniggered as he reached for the flask of whisky he'd left on the table beside him.

“Careful,” Mary warned, pointing a comb at him. “They’re probably still wet.”

“Right…” Remus reached for the whisky *carefully*.

Sirius tipped his head back to look at her, rollers and all. "Remind me why we agreed to this in the first place?"

“Don’t pretend you don’t love it. I’ve been waiting this entire time for your hair to grow out, you know.”

“I should be so honoured." Sirius began picking at his fresh manicure and Mary smacked his fingers automatically, making him grumble. “C’mon, they look cooler when they’re a little chipped.”

“You’re impossible.” She sighed and returned to rhythmically combing and curling his hair around another roller. “I suppose you’re both glad Regulus decided to stay at school.”

“Why do you sound so smug about it?” Asked Remus.

“Well, Sirius is his brother, and you’re his keeper so naturally—”

“I am not Regulus’ keeper!”

“But you kinda are, Moons,” Sirius agreed.

“See?” Mary tucked a clip between her teeth and began mumbling around it; “We shoo' get ‘im out wiff us one ‘uv these days. 'oo know, invite 'im over.”

“Five quid to the first one that can convince him,” Sirius snorted. “Ten to whoever can get a stiff joint between his boney fingers.”

“I’d take that bet.” Mary tucked the clip around the curler, just as Sirius whipped his head back a second time, ruining it.

“You think you could get Regulus—*my* brother, king of stingy farts—to hang out with you?”

“Well, he’s not blind, is he?” She smirked, smacking him atop the head. “He'd come, if I asked nicely."

"Don't you sound bold."

"Oh, let’s be honest, Sirius. Out of all of us you’re the one who’d have the most trouble.”

“She’s got a point,” Remus mocked.

Sirius spun back on him. “And you? You honestly think you could get Reg to agree to an actual smoke sesh?”

"Depends. Is this a real bet?"

"Oh-ho-ho," Sirius taunted. "I get it. You’re just interested because you’re still nursing your loss."

"No, I'm not."

"Then you’re afraid I’ll win again.”

“If you’re so sure, Padfoot, then take the bet.”

“Fine. Whoever can get Reg—”

“Regulus."

“—Whoever can get *my brother* to agree to hang out with us first, gets to give the other two a penalty game. Whatever they want.”

Remus almost hesitated then. The last time he’d lost to Sirius in an ‘anything goes’ bet, he’d been heavily coerced into some *literal* arse-kissing. Not that he’d really minded that much; Sirius had made sure it was fun for both of them, right after they’d run into Mary and Marlene on the stairs. At least now with Mary actually involved, the punishment was hopefully going to remain safe for all audiences. Hopefully...

“Whatever we want?” Mary echoed.

“Whatever you want."

“Within reason,” Remus added quickly.

“Alright then boys, let’s drink on it.” She raised her glass along with Sirius, and Remus leaned forward, knocking his flask against theirs with a clink. Sirius immediately downed his own, tossing the bottle aside with a smug flourish.

“You two are so going down."

“That’s what you think, Black."

Remus lifted the whisky to his mouth, then paused. “Ah. Fucked up a

nail.”

An hour later, with plenty of shit-talk behind them and even more booze within them, the common room’s fire had died down to ashes and they were left to lounge, flattened over one another on the floor. Mary had already passed out on one of the sofas, but Sirius had been kind enough to throw a blanket over her so she wouldn't freeze. She snored softly—then *LOUDLY* all at once as though she were trying to start a lawnmower in her sleep. Sirius giggled every time it happened, his head wobbling where it lay against the curve of Remus' stomach.

"I'm just saying... if you crash a car on purpose, you can't really call it a 'car accident', can ya?"

Remus pulled the joint from his lips. "I mean... I *guess* not..."

"Yeah, it'd be more like a purposeful accident... A—*heh*... a calculated collision."

"A deliberate derailment."

"An intended incident!"

"Methodical misadventure."

"A—A... shite. You took all the good ones, Moons."

Remus smiled, passing the joint to Sirius as he curled up against him on the rug. The fire was still warm enough, but it was nothing compared to the soothing feeling of running his fingers through Sirius’ now severely-curly tresses. Sirius kept his other hand securely intertwined with his own, and as they listened to the music play they kept toying with each other, fingers knotting and unknotting over and over again.

“How d’ya do anythin’ with these?” Remus murmured, capturing Sirius’ hand in a single fist. “They’re like hands for a mouse. Mouse hands.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did someone over the national average height say something just now? Why don’t ya come down ‘ere so the rest of us can hear you, ya giant.”

“Did you jus’ call yourself ‘average’? Now I’ve heard it all.”

Sirius rolled over, shimmying up the carpet to grab Remus’ by the

collar. “Shut it, you,” he muttered, before pulling him in for a kiss.

They snogged for a while, until the common room fell quiet again and Sirius kindly pointed out that the Doors album they'd been playing had finished. Remus broke away immediately, flashing Sirius a cheeky look as he scooted over to the turntable to change the record. Sirius took a swipe at his arse for good measure, but only grazed his pockets.

“Wha’ d’ya think, Pads? Stones or Zeppelin next?”

“Stones? Nah, play me something romantic!”

“Romantic, huh?"

He knew just the thing.

After a quick search to find it amongst their messy pile, Remus pulled the vinyl from its sleeve and set it up. One strategic needle drop later, and the music was back. Behind them, Mary gave a little grunt but did not wake, which was a shame considering he was pretty sure they were listening to one of the most ardent love songs ever written.

'Love of my life, you've hurt me,
You've broken my heart;
And now you leave me,
Love of my life, can't you see?

'Bring it back, bring it back,
Don't take it away from me;
Because you don't know,
What it means to me...'

"Oh..."

Sirius appeared behind him with a little sigh, snaking his arms around Remus’ waist and tilting his head against his back. "I love this one," he murmured. "Mercury, you great sop."

"You said you wanted romantic."

"Oh, *I know..."* Sirius began to leave short, gentle kisses along the tip of Remus' spine, slowly making his way higher with each brush of the lip. He was humming too, following the graceful piano with every key. At first Remus allowed it, but then lips brushed his jaw, then his ear;

the vibration alone was enough to leave him shivering, any more and he'd simply cease to exist.

“Sirius, cut it out. Mary’s right there.”

“Mmm… We were just snoggin’ anyway…”

“And is snogging the *only* thing you want to do?”

A little bite, right on the ear lobe. Remus clenched his jaw. *Mercy—*

'You will remember when this is blown over,
And everything's all by the way...'

"Sirius..."

'When I grow older,
I will be there at your side,
To remind you—'

"Yes, Moons?"

'How I still love you—
I still love you...'

More kissing. More humming. Sirius was—*oh,* he was done for.

"Uh... Never mind..."

Sirius chuckled knowingly. "Go on, Mary's a heavy sleeper," he purred, kissing it all better. Again. *Again.* "See for yourself."

Sceptical, Remus glanced over and watched as Mary gave a spectacular snort and turned over, one arm flattened across her forehead.

“I think she’s drooling.”

“Quick, Moons! We should take a photo...”

The song's piano jumped, soaring high on the back of the electric

guitar. A perfect pair. Driven by it, Remus spun around and caught Sirius by the face, planting several clumsy kisses along his jaw.

“Oh, Padfoot, so easily distracted…”

Sirius chased his lips with his own. He failed only the last time and grinned up at him instead. "Shall I escort you upstairs, my love?"

“You sure you want to risk that many steps? Might be a bit daunting in your state."

“For you? *Anything."*

That morning Remus had woken up feeling like a part of himself had been ripped away all over again. Now he just felt silly, because how? How could he feel anything less than whole when his other half was standing right in front of him?

Just like that they were off. Remus caught up with him at the base of the stairs, snatching Sirius' wrist so he might pull him back in for another kiss—*another!*—and they laughed again. Their teeth knocked into one another. Sirius' eyes were grey-blue and his skin was hot and Remus loved, loved, *loved* him.

"Love you."

"You too. Always."

Back, hurry back,
Please bring it back home to me,
Because you don't know,
What it means to me...

Love of my life,
Love of my life...

* * *

Good Friday 1978

So far, Remus' ‘lock it away—don’t think about it’ plan seemed to be working swimmingly. The headache he woken up with on their second

day of holiday made it impossible to consider anything other than his hangover, and by the time he and Sirius had managed to drag their butts downstairs, Mary was already long gone. They found her in the dining hall, calmly sipping her morning tea with a rather unimpressed expression on her face.

“You left me in the common room, you insufferable sods."

“I think you mean ‘insatiable’,” Sirius corrected.

“I at least hope it was worth it.”

"Oh, I assure you, it was." He began to roll his tongue, but Mary simply reached over and stuffed her napkin into his mouth, silencing all gloating.

“No hangover?” Remus grunted, stirring even more sugar into his tea than normal.

Suddenly Mary looked very smug. She looked at Sirius, who was busy picking bits of paper napkin from his tongue and drummed her nails on the tabletop.

“No, in fact I feel great. You should know though, that while you two were off *making moves,* I was here, making a few of my own.”

They both peered at her curiously, but their wonderment was answered automatically when Regulus appeared at the table and took a seat on Mary’s side.

“Finally woke up, did you?” He asked them, passing Mary a fresh cup of tea like it was the most ordinary thing in the world. Mary accepted it graciously, swirling the spoon and tapping it on the cup’s rim.

“Regulus has agreed to join us tonight,” she announced proudly.

“Just one night."

Remus and Sirius’ jaws dropped.

“So fast!” Sirius gasped. “What’d you promise him, Macdonald? A cheeky wank behind the football stands or something?”

“No,” Mary scoffed casually, at the same time as Regulus barked; *“NO!”*

"Then what?"

“She told me about your dumb bet,” Regulus growled.

Sirius slammed a fist down. “Snatchy, that’s cheating!”

“You never said we couldn’t tell him about the bet, shit-toes! This is what you get for ditching me to shag each other upstairs.”

Regulus clamped his hands over his ears. *“I’m not listening. I’m not listening.”*

“Have you already decided our punishments then?” Remus asked, suddenly not all that shocked that Regulus had agreed to throw in his lot with their scheming friend after all.

“As a matter of fact, I have."

Sirius clapped both hands over his eyebrows. "I'm not shaving anything!"

"What? No, no, no... You, Sirius, are to spend this entire week learning a choreographed dance to a song of *my* choosing.”

Regulus looked away to hide a smile, while Sirius continued to gape.

"You’re having me on."

“Don’t look so worried,” said Mary, “you won’t be alone in this endeavour—in fact, it’s a duet. But you should know, I always lead.”

"Who picks the song?"

"Me of course."

"Please tell me it isn't—"

"It's ABBA."

"NO!"

"It wouldn't be a punishment otherwise!"

Sirius dropped his head against the table with a great moan. “This isn't a punishment, this is torture! It's cruel and unusual and I—*hold on.”* He whipped his head back up. “What’s Moony’s penalty then?”

Mary grinned, looking as sly as a fox. “I think you’ll quite like it actually.”

They both looked at Remus then, who shook his head. “Just so you know, if you force me to dance, I’ll break your toes on accident.”

“No, Remus, it’s nothing of the sort.” She cupped a hand to the corner of her mouth, leaning in toward Sirius; “You can thank me later.”

Suddenly Remus' headache had returned.

“Right, well this was fun," Regulus said, getting up from the table. "Call me when Sirius starts to cut a rug or whatever.”

Before he could escape, Sirius’ hand shot across the table, latching onto his brother’s sleeve with an iron grip.

“Oh, no you don’t! As far as I’m concerned, if I’ve lost, you have too. You’re ours for a day, baby brother. And it just so happens that today’s band practice, and we need a drummer.”

“But we have Easter mass."

“Oh well. Best say your prayers now, little bro."

Regulus hung his head. If he didn’t already regret helping Mary, he sure did now.

Within the hour, Remus had the Fender’s strap around his shoulders and was squeezing tiny music notes into hastily scribbled staves while Mary sauntered up and down the orchestra risers, twirling a microphone around as though she were Diana Ross. With her on vocals it meant Sirius could work on James’ portion of the song, and he eagerly began tuning his guitar, strumming each string until he was satisfied with the sound. Remus just watched, trying to take his mind off of other things; like being back in the music room.

Don’t think, he silently pleaded. *Don’t think. Don’t think. Don't think.*

Luckily, there was plenty around to distract him. Remus wasn’t entirely sure how he did it, but somehow Sirius had managed to plant his brother down behind Peter’s set of drums with little kicking and screaming. Regulus still did his best to object—holding the drumsticks away from himself as though they were a pair of dead fish and not a means to music.

“Sirius, I can’t do this!” He complained, while Sirius went about plugging in his amp.

“Sure, you can! Macdonald’s gonna sing, and you’re gonna play. I know you can read the sheet music.”

“So I can read the bloody music—doesn’t mean I can actually play the drums!”

“C’mon bro, haven’t you always wanted to play more than just your violin? Just pretend you’re some jazz drummer, like Krupa or Buddy Rich. What's that they say—fake it 'til you make it?”

“I can’t. I don't know how to bullshit my way into this crap. I’m not as *delusional* as you are.”

“We’ll go slow,” Sirius offered, looking more amused than offended. “Just play the rhythm section and you’ll be fine. It’s basically just a one-two on snare.”

“Don’t forget the triple on bass,” Remus added.

“Sod off, Lupin.”

“Oooh, he's feisty,” Mary sniggered. “I vote we keep him.”

Chuckling, Remus set the Fender aside and strolled behind the drum set. “May I?” He asked, before reaching over Regulus and grabbing his hands by the wrists. Regulus sputtered, but the fight was mostly for show anyway and Remus ignored it, using his hands to show Regulus the motions of each beat.

“And-one-and-two, and-one-and-two. There, you got it! Then you add in that triple with your bass pedal.”

“Yeah, I bloody got it... Just let go of me.”

Remus did so, and spun away to pick up his bass. As he did, Sirius glanced between them. “Watch it, Reg, that's my man you were feeling up just now.”

“Oh, fuck oooooff!”

With a smug chuckle, Sirius set his fingers along the guitar’s strings and let loose an impressive riff. He kept on, sliding his hands up and down the fretboard until he had Regulus rolling his eyes and when he was finished showing off, turned to Mary.

“Macdonald, you got them lyrics down then?”

“ ‘It’s hard to be a teen, hooked up on downers and cheap nicotine’,” Mary quoted. “I've got it. Now when are you gonna start playing, backing band?”

“You hear that, Moons? Now we’re *her* backing band.”

“I’d call that a step up,” Remus said. “Let’s start by taking it from the bridge.”

Sirius counted them in, and just like that they were off to the races. Mary came in a bit early, and Regulus fumbled his sticks, but his impeccable sense of timing helped him hold things together. By their third go *he* was telling the rest of them off for missing their cues.

“It’s four-four time, not five-four. That means four quarter beats to a measure. Just four. Not five, not six—four.”

“I *know*,” Sirius blagged. "Christ, you're not a bloody human metronome."

“If you know it then why are you playing like someone’s lit a fire under your arse?”

“It’s practice! You’re supposed to mix things up… Figure out your groove.”

“Even when it sounds worse?”

“You can’t bully me in my own band!”

“I wouldn’t have to if you knew how to keep time.”

Remus couldn’t help but laugh, Mary too, but they kept at it and things eventually seemed to just fall into place. Remus forgot they were in the music room—forgot they weren't the only four people in the world. He simply played and played, letting Mary’s whisky-timber voice lulled him into a sense of security.

“I’ve been trying to figure out what your voice reminds me of, Macdonald,” Sirius said, while they took a break to pour over their music sheets. Mary lit up instantly, readying herself for a compliment.

“Well, I've been told I sound like if Whitney Houston and an angel had a baby."

Sirius thought for a moment, before shaking his head. “Nah, you just sound like Mary.”

“Mary… who?”

“Mary *you.* You don’t sound like anybody, Macdonald. Or I should say, no one sounds like you. It’s a good thing, of course.”

“Awe.” She pressed a hand to her heart and glanced at Regulus. “He can be romantic after all.”

Regulus made a face. “Eugh.”

"Maybe you should join a band of your own, Reg," Sirius said. "You'd whip a few nobodies into shape fast enough."

"Piss off."

"I'm being serious! Bet you'd do great in music if you transferred in. Just give it some thought, okay?"

Regulus said nothing at that, and Sirius turned on the music stands and meandered back over to Remus. “Was that good?" He asked. "Did I do good?”

“Yeah, that was nice.”

“Champ. I was channeling you. Thinking, 'what sappy shit would Moony say just now'?”

Remus scoffed. “Alright, you wanna know what *you* sound like then? If you were to put Mrs. Norris and a toaster in the bathtub together.”

“The bullying is rampant today, I see,” Sirius mused, before pointing at the sheet music in front of them. “I think we should change this bit here. Have the drums follow the guitar, not the bass. It’ll tighten up the sound.”

“We’re gonna have to wait until Pete gets back. See if he’ll be able to do it.”

“Oh, he will,” Sirius said firmly. “If Reg can do it, so can Pete.”

“Regulus, Sirius. *Regulus.”*

“Right.” He spun around to face the drum kit. “Sorry, Reg.”

Regulus flashed him the bird.

“Okay!” Sirius clapped his hands together. “I think we’ve got it sorted.

Shall we take it from the top again?”

“No way, I think my wrists are broken,” Regulus complained.

“Aw, afraid you won’t be able to whack one out tonight?”

“I’ll whack you.” Regulus raised the drumstick threateningly, but luckily, Mary got between them first.

“The kid-drummer’s right,” she said. “I’m starving and we’ve been at this for hours.”

Sirius sighed but lifted the Rickenbacker’s strap from his shoulder. “Yeah okay, it’s Easter dinner anyway. We can always come back tomorrow morning.”

"We're studying tomorrow," Remus said.

"Tomorrow night then, stingy."

“Ohhh no,” Mary objected quickly; “Did you forget about our bet? Tomorrow you two are all mine. And I do hope you remembered to bring your dancing shoes to school, Black, because I’m going to waltz you for all you’re worth.”

“What about Moony?” Sirius griped. “You still haven’t told us what his punishment is.”

“Why give us the best surprise? But I wouldn't worry none, Black, something tells me you'll like it even more than he will."

“Why does that sound so suspicious?” Remus grumbled.

“Because it is.”

Ba-dum-tss!

They all looked back, just as Regulus silenced the cymbal’s crash.

“What? That was the punchline, right?”

“Oh!” Sirius cried. “So *now* he can play the drums!?”

* * *

"Ow… *ow!* Fuck, no way, I can't do this. Mary, just choose something else."

"We've already cleaned the area! Don't be such a baby."

"Yeah, Moony, don't be such a wuss. Don't you want to match?"

"I want the two of you to get off of me—OW, MARY!"

"That was just my finger, honestly."

"You pinched me!"

"I have to feel you up before I just head straight in with it, don't I? God, I iced it already, it should be numb."

"Well, it isn't!"

"Yeah, I think I'm just gonna go…"

"Not a chance! I told you—you're ours for the day, little bro."

"That was yesterday!"

"Would you two shut up already? I have to concentrate… Now quick, one of you hand me that cloth in case he bleeds everywhere."

"BLEEDS?!"

"Go on, Macdonald, just stick it in already."

"Ow... OW—*FUCK!* This was such a bad idea!"

"Hold still... bit more... Okay, it's in. Sirius, pass me that little metal bit there."

"I think I'm gonna pass out…"

"Just take a deep breath, Moons. In and out, *hee-hee-hoo."*

"Sirius, I'm gonna kill you—*augh!* FUCK! What the hell, Mary?!"

"Did you miss the hole or something, Macdonald?"

"No! It'd be in already if he'd stop squirming. Hold his head down."

“Now don’t bite me, Moons.”

“Fucking christ!”

“Hold on, almost got it… There!”

Mary’s body weight left him all at once and Remus sat up on the common room sofa, his face flushed and sweating. “Oh my god,” he panted. “Am I bleeding?”

“Only a little,” Sirius said, leaning in to admire him. Remus flinched, and reached up to feel it.

“Don’t touch it!” Regulus winced, standing behind the sofa and looking distinctly out of place. "This is against school rules, you know. Lupin's a prefect."

"He was a rock star first," Sirius said, looking a bit too giddy. "And he's got a tattoo already, this is child's play in comparison."

"A *tattoo?"*

"Shut up, Sirius," Remus groaned, giving each of them a dirty look just as Mary held up a small mirror.

"So?" She preened. "What do you think?"

Leaning forward, Remus turned his head to the side to see the single golden hoop that now anointed his left ear. It looked cool, but his ear ached and he only felt like complaining.

“This is ridiculous. I look ridiculous!”

“Stop whining,” Mary scoffed, setting the mirror aside. “You were only ever in good hands. I did Sirius’ in eighth year and he barely flinched.”

Remus began to glower even harder, but stopped when Sirius reached over and grasped his chin, twisting his head so he could get a look at him. “You look hot,” he hummed happily.

"I look like you."

"Same difference." Smirking, Sirius leaned in for a kiss and Remus all but melted, momentarily forgetting any and all pain and discomfort. When they pulled apart they found the other two staring. Regulus blushed and looked away, but Mary only wiped her hands on a cloth

with a self-satisfied look and jumped up from the ottoman she was sitting on.

“Told you, you’d be thanking me,” she said, before pushing the ottoman into the middle of the room, which she’d already cleared to make space for their dance number.

“I’m still not saying thank you,” Remus answered stubbornly. Turning back around, Mary shook her head as though he were hopeless, before pointing at Sirius instead.

“You,” she purred, beckoning him with one finger. “Now it’s *your* turn.”

“Lucky me,” Sirius sighed.

“Regulus, would you mind playing DJ? It’s the album just on top of the stereo there—side two, track three.”

Eager for the distraction that wasn’t his brother snogging his own best friend, Regulus hopped to it, and Sirius slumped languidly against the back of the couch. “C’mon Macdonald, you made Moony look *hotter*. You’re gonna make me look *lame.”*

“If you don’t get up there right now, you’re sleeping in the hallway tonight,” Remus threatened, the throbbing in his earlobe having since returned.

Taking a moment to stretch out her legs, Mary offered her hand. “You’re gonna love it. Lottie and I choreographed the whole thing ages ago. Oh, and don’t worry about tripping up, like I said yesterday, I *always* lead.”

Sirius moaned again, but obediently held out his hand and let Mary pull him from the couch to the ottoman.

“Alright, so it starts like this—you’re sitting, and I come in from behind and grab your shoulders like this and you lean away—yes! Just like that! And okay, I’m going to circle you next and you—no, no. You look constipated, I want bedroom eyes.”

“Can you at least play the damn song first?!”

Mary giggled and looked up. “Handsomest Black brother—music if you’ll please.”

“Coming right up,” Regulus said, dropping the needle. A second later, the song was playing. It only took about four seconds for Sirius to drop his head back in defeat.

“Oh no…”

“Oh yes!”

Mary launched herself up onto the ottoman. "Now don't forget, it's a duet, darling," she called, leaning her hands against Sirius' shoulders as she began to sing along. It was quite the show already, her giving everything while Sirius gave nothing at all.

'When you were lonely, you needed a man,
Someone to lean on, well I understand!
It’s only natural, but why did it have to be me?’

“Hold on,” Sirius interrupted; “Aren’t *I* singing the bloke’s parts?”

“I told you, *I'm* leading. Now sit there and look pretty until it’s your verse. I expect you to have this memorised by tonight!”

“She’s gonna kill me, Moons. I swear she is.”

"Nah, you'll be f—"

Mary collapsed spectacularly, draping herself across Sirius' lap with a sharp kick like a Rockette on Broadway. *"You've got to point your toes!"* She was shouting. "Sirius, point your—*BUT BABY, BELIEVE ME! IT'S BETTER TO FORGET MEEEE!"*

"My toes?!" Sirius turned to Remus, desperate, but Remus only shrugged. They were going to need more booze, it seemed. Lots and lots of booze.

* * *

Sunday 26th March 1978

“Do we *haaaaave* to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"But we were in the library just yesterday!"

“Going to the library two days in a row won’t kill you, Padfoot.”

"It could! It might literally *bore* me to death."

Remus huffed sharply, unimpressed. He was standing in the middle of the common room’s threshold, doing up his coat. Mary had already returned to her room earlier that morning, complaining about the state of her hair after falling asleep without her bonnet for the second night in a row, while his boyfriend remained obstinate, still lazily rolling around the floor-bound couch cushions in his pyjamas. They'd slept there last night, under a hastily-built blanket fort of Sirius' making.

“C'mon, Moony,” he whined. “Macdonald kept me up for hours with that stupid dance of hers, and I was good, so don't I deserve a little lie-in? Come back to bed, Moons... I’ll even let you be the little spoon.”

Remus, who had already moved on to his boots, was not swayed. “We have A-Levels in a few months.”

“Hmph. Who needs A-Levels when you’re gonna be—”

“Fine, whatever, skive off if you want, you snot. But if you're staying then it's on you to clean up in here... there's rubbish everywhere.”

"Deal!" With a victorious, albeit sleepy smile, Sirius turned over, disappearing back under his covers on the common room floor. “See you at lunch. Love you!"

On his own then, Remus made his way across campus to the empty library. Inside, only a few tables were occupied, almost all of them by other year 13 students pouring over their texts. You could’ve heard a pin drop, but Remus had always had keen eyes. He spotted Regulus Black at one of the tables near the far back of the room, set up facing the rows of massive crystalline windows the library was famous for. The windows overlooked the southern half of Lake Dubh, and the stunning view nearly distracted him as he made his way toward the table.

“I hope you’re here to study,” Regulus said, without looking up from

his textbook.

“Of course."

“Good. Because you if you can’t be quiet then you—”

“Can’t stay,” Remus finished. Really, those Black brothers were so predictable.

Regulus rolled his eyes but indicated to the chair opposite to him and Remus took it, silently thankful. Most of his homework for the week was mere busy work, which he didn’t mind so much, but when he went to pull out his copy of *Brave New World* to begin working on the paper he had due for Flitwick, it came with one of Mr. Pettigrew's newspapers. The paper must've ended up in his bag by mistake; already he could see evidence that Sirius had had his hands on it. There were several addresses for rent already circled in red pen as well as a few accidental cigarette burns and devil horns drawn onto the Queen's portrait in the upper right hand corner. The first address he'd circled was a tiny three-bedroom in Chiswick, but it boasted a ‘third floor private entrance’ which most likely meant a three-floor walk-up on some rickety fire escape. The next was advertised as a ‘spacious flat in West Brompton’, but the rent was suspiciously low. Either the nearest tube station was thirty kilometres away, or someone had died in it recently and the owners were looking for a quick lease. He'd circled more, though when Remus compared the addresses he found all of them to be rather suburban and quiet.

It was almost surprising. When he’d first pictured Sirius living in London, Remus had imagined a flat overlooking the bustling streets of Soho and Carnaby—somewhere the city never slept. All Sirius talked about was living the high life, making noise and not caring what anyone thought of them. Perhaps he was pulling back a bit then, considering how it might feel to try sleeping with the background noise of a city when all one was used to was the serene emptiness of the Scottish Highlands.

Or maybe he just needed a map.

When he came across the job classifieds and found even more red circles, Remus was surprised again. Most of the listings were of bars or restaurants advertising for day staff, but unsurprisingly Sirius had left several scooping circles around the single one of them that offered exactly what he was looking for.

LOCAL PUB SEEKS HOUSE BAND, it read; ***INSTRUMENTS REQUIRED. RATES NEGOTIABLE.***

Underneath Sirius had written the words; *"we pay in exposure",* which at least made Remus chuckle.

“What are you laughing at?”

Remus jumped. He'd nearly forgotten Regulus was there. “Nothing, sorry," he murmured, folding the paper up and stuffing it back into his bag. “I won't interrupt anymore.”

Regulus didn't say anything, merely returned to his homework with the same indifferent expression he always wore, and Remus broke open his books to get started on his own. Studying had never been particularly hard when he'd applied himself, it was one of the reasons Lily was always going on about what a shame it was that he had no plans to go on to university. Remus didn’t mind; if those newspaper classifieds were anything to go by, he would be plenty busy anyway.

After several hours of revision, Remus’ back was starting to ache. He stood up from his chair, admiring the early afternoon sun as it glinted off the Dubh’s inky surface. After muttering that he was off to use the loo (Regulus ignored him) he took a walk and ended up on the library’s back steps. Feeling the wind’s bite without his coat, he eventually ground the cigarette he'd been smoking out on the stone steps and tottered back inside. He’d just passed the antiquities section when a hand reached out the doorway and grabbed him. Before he knew it, Remus found himself pinned up against a shelf of books, Sirius Black peering up at him with half-lidded eyes.

“I was looking for you,” Sirius whispered, before stretching upwards and kissing him deeply.

“Afternoon to…mmm… you too,” Remus said around his lips. "Thought we were meeting for lunch."

"It *is* lunch."

"Oh."

Remus went to grab his face—a kiss or two as sorry—but Sirius was faster. He snatched Remus' wrists and pinned them down by his sides while simultaneously bringing his mouth down and trailing hot kisses along the base of Remus' jaw and neck. Remus bit his lip and let his

head drop back against the books, breathing heavily as his eyes inevitably slid shut. This week was supposed to be the one chance for them to be all over each other without worry of prying eyes, and yet he hadn't felt Sirius' desperate fingers since that first night. It made him irrational, but as Sirius' mouth dipped lower into his collar, Remus remembered where they were.

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"Wait," he said, pulling his hands away and bringing them up to clamp on either side of Sirius' face. "We're literally in public. At *school."*

"This place is huge," Sirius said. "No one's gonna notice if we just..." Then he turned his head ever so slightly and fit one of Remus' thumbs between his lips. Remus' mouth went uncomfortably dry as Sirius sucked, then released it with a soft pop. *Dear Christ.*

"You are such a..."

"Giving lover, I know," Sirius finished, then he dropped to his knees and began working at Remus' belt.

Heart hammering a mile a minute, Remus whipped his head around to make sure no one else had suddenly appeared. The antiquities section was one of the only parts of the library with its own enclosed space, its door meant to protect the delicate texts and tiny artifacts stored behind their glass cases, but that didn't mean they were entirely alone. With the door open wide as it was, anyone walking the same path to the lavatory would surely see them. He reached for the door handle, desperate to shut it—but then Sirius was already moving his underwear aside, pushing his shirt up so he could trace that cursed line beneath his navel. He went slow at first, enough to make Remus clamp a hand over his mouth. *Wicked tongue, wicked tongue.*

"Fuck..."

Sirius chuckled darkly. "I like your ambition, Moony, but let's start with a blow job." Then his mouth closed around him and Remus moaned into his palm, trying not to come apart completely. *The door!* the sane portion of his brain was screaming; *Lock the door!*

As Sirius' *wicked* tongue curled around him, Remus stifled another groan and reached desperately for the tiny lock set in the middle of the door handle. The shift in his hips had Sirius pushing him back tighter to the shelves and so Remus bent at the waist, stretching every

tendon—every muscle—until his fingertip was just brushing the tip of the lock. But then Sirius squeezed and Remus missed—*completely*.

As his hand fell on open air, he scrambled with the other for the edge of the book shelf and only found purchase after he'd knocked a heavy tomb from the shelf behind his head. The book fell to the floor with an echoing thud and Remus' heart immediately seized in fear—but Sirius didn't miss a beat. He clung to his boyfriend's hips with one hand, rocking himself back and forth all on his own. With the other he worked him, up and down until the rhythm was enough to have Remus pushing back against his tight lips.

If only there was a tracker for Sirius' sexual mood swings so that Remus might better prepare himself, but knowing the both of them, hearing it ding at all hours of the day would be more of an annoyance than a relief. Unable to help himself, he dared make only one single glance downward and what he found was his lover's shirt open to the third button, his perfect jaw arched upwards as he pressed deep enough to leave Remus whining. At that moment it wouldn't have mattered if they were in the middle of St. James Square; Remus teetered on the edge for several mindless seconds, sparing the chance to reach down and brush some of that long hair away from that handsome face. When he did, Sirius looked up at him, and that was it. He was *well and truly* done for.

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"Don't tell me," Sirius said, when he came up panting ever so slightly. "Did I forget to lock the door?"

Remus' head dropped back against the shelf. "You're... so fucking insane."

"That mean you're not gonna do me?"

Suddenly feeling rather bold, Remus bent down and cupped Sirius by the back of his neck. "I'll do you alright," he murmured, before kissing him deeply. They broke apart when Sirius began pushing for tongue; "But not here, you animal."

"Best not leave me waiting then," Sirius warned. "Might get bored... Could go looking for fresh meat."

"As if."

With a final kiss, he pushed Sirius lightly and stood, double-checking

that his fly was up before he made his way back to where he'd left his things. Only remembering halfway that Regulus would be waiting for him, Remus quickly smoothed down his hair and rounded the corner. He found Regulus exactly where he'd left him, only now with his nose in Sirius' newspaper, peering at the addresses circled in red.

“Find anything good in there?” Remus asked, coming round the table to gather his things. Regulus jumped when he spoke, and quickly set the paper aside.

“I did not,” he mumbled sharply. “Though I had no idea you could advertise a potential marriage partner in the paper.”

“Oh yeah, it’s how all our parents met, isn't it?”

“No? My parents’ marriage was arranged by my grandparents.”

“It was a joke, Regulus.”

“Oh.” He avoided eye contact. “Finished studying then?”

“Yeah…” Remus said, pulling his coat on. “Gonna… go for a run. See you at dinner?”

Regulus didn’t seem to catch the lie. He shrugged indifferently and glanced at the paper. “Are you really going to move to London with my brother?”

Slowly, Remus slung his bag strap over his head. “Well, I’m from London, so… yeah, probably.... Have, er—Have the two of you talked about it at all?”

“It's all he talks about."

"Oh."

"So you're really going." Regulus drew his hands into his lap. "I suppose you'll be taking Potter and the other one with you.”

“That seems to be the plan.”

“And you’re just gonna, what—play music forever?”

“For as long as it makes us happy, yeah.”

Regulus bit his lip. “Don’t forget this then.” And he picked up the paper, offering it to him. Remus looked at it, before pushing it back.

“You’ll always be welcome on our stoop, Regulus. If you’d rather not go home this summer, you’re more than welcome to tag along. I know it would make Sirius happy.”

“You think I'd just follow you to London? Do you hear yourself?”

“It’s an option. As long as you can put up with us, that is.”

Regulus looked at the paper then, and dropped his arm. Then he sighed—and Remus told himself it was a good sign.

“Don’t you know, Lupin? There’s no putting up with the likes of you.”

* * *

Monday 27th March 1978

Now, Mary had always understood Sirius in a way no one else had. They weren't each other's first kiss, but they were certainly a few first *somethings.* Remus could’ve accepted it, and gotten over it too... if not for the fact that they were always speaking to one another in fucking French.

"GOD!" He yelled, after two days of listening to them yammer. "Speak English, please! I know you're talking about me!"

"Aw, Sirius, ton petit ami est jaloux."

"Oui, j'sais. Ne t'inquiète pas, ça rend les choses plus excitantes quand on est seul."

"Oh. Très coquin."

Remus slumped back against the sofa, tossing away the cards they'd been using to play whist and returning to his task of sorting through the records they'd brought down from their room. Mary didn't seem to notice, and kept fanning herself with her cards while Sirius gave her sly looks. Of course the two of them had started doing it only after realising how much it irked him to be the only one out of the loop, but if Remus had to listen to them chitter about his ‘beau cul’ one more time, he was going to lose it.

“Mais y avez-vous déjà pensé?”

“Pensé à quoi?”

“Une ménage à trois."

“Tu es défoncé? Évidemment oui. Mais il faudrait que le mec be stupid fit.”

“Et si c’était une fille?”

“Une fille?”

“Ouais, une fille. Remus est bi. Et s’il voulait une meuf?”

“Ben… Il faudrait que ce soit toi!”

Mary burst into laughter.

“If you two don’t stop purposely speaking another language *right in front of me,* I’m going to find an English to French dictionary and beat you with it!” Remus fumed.

“Il est si mignon quand il est en colère,” Mary sighed wistfully.

Sirius looked up from his spot on the middle of the floor. *“J'sais. Je suis tellement chanceux.”*

“UGH!”

They laughed at him, and Remus played the next song that much louder. It was easy to be pissed off at them, but at least they were doing one thing;

Remus hadn't thought of family or godmothers in days.

Sirius was the best good distraction, as always, but when combined with Mary, they were the ultimate duo. It was around day five of their mutual isolation when Remus realised that he hadn’t had a rough time sleeping since the holiday had begun. Being in the music room didn't bother him anymore either, though he hadn’t touched the Martin since Sheila had left. Even if it really did belong to him now, it just didn't feel right.

So far Regulus had refused to join in on any more practices, but did concede to meals together and the occasional game of cards. The rest of them were content with this, and together with Mary, they continued their camp-out in the common room. At first it felt like overkill, but when it really began to dawn on them that they were the

only ones around, it was easy to settle in. They made the space their own, scattering blankets and pillows everywhere and leaving empty bottles and unfinished meal trays scattered about until they felt inclined to return to them. The stereo was always going, and in the rare moment that it wasn't, they all bundled up in front of the telly, throwing popcorn at the screen until they'd passed out from exhaustion.

Remus learned a lot about Mary during moments like these—things he hadn't even considered in the almost-three years he'd already known her. Like him, her mother had passed away when she was young, and then to top it off, her father had waited less than a year before he remarried. After that, all traces of Céline Macdonald had seemed to vanish one by one, until her sweet little girl with the twisted braids had begun to feel like a stranger in her own home.

"He doesn't talk about her anymore," Mary said softly one evening. They were lying on the common room floor, heads tucked together in a circle. They were all liberally intoxicated by the time Sirius offered her the last sip from his bottle. She accepted, finishing it and cradling the glass to her chest afterwards. "I used to think he stopped because he'd fallen out of love with her. That he blamed her for dying, but I've seen him cry over her photographs... I suppose he took them down because it was too painful, and I was only ever back for the summers, after all..."

"He should've left them up," Remus said quietly. "He should've."

Mary smiled and reached for his hand. Remus held it, and she gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Do you think the two of you will ever get married?"

"Me?" Sirius echoed. "Married to Moony? Well, not that I wouldn't enjoy an entire day where I'm the centre of attention, but Moony doesn't really seem like the marrying type, do he?"

"Buzz off," Remus scoffed. "Men can't marry other men anyway. It's illegal."

"How about in a perfect world?" Mary reaffirmed. "Just think, if there was nothing stopping you—nothing holding you back, would you?"

Remus tilted his head, so he and Sirius could share a glance. He was waiting for him, Remus knew. And so he took Sirius' hand as well, and kissed the silver ring on his right hand.

"Maybe... in a perfect world."

Sirius smiled.

"I don't think I would," Mary said.

It surprised both of them.

"No?" Sirius echoed. "And why not? I'll bet men would line up around the block to marry you."

"I'm sure they would too. And I'm sure I'd love to see them try." She giggled, but it filtered off in the end. "But that's just it, isn't it? I used to think I wanted it, but now I'm not so sure... I've had it, however childish, and it never feels like enough. Somehow something always feels missing... I guess I should want it though, shouldn't I?"

Remus shook his head. "You don't have to... to *want* to get married, Mary."

"Not married... loved."

"Oh."

She wiped her eyes, though neither of them could see if she were crying or not. "It's stupid. I mean, I think about it all the time, yeah? And when I was younger, I used to think it'd just come, like this big moment when you realise—oh! That's how it's supposed to feel! … But now I'm thinking that maybe it just doesn't happen that way. Not for everyone, anyway."

"Mary..."

"Marlene told me that she *loved* me. She was so honest and I—god... I have no idea what that feels like. All this time I've listened to Kara-Ann talk about how much she loves my father, and every time I *hated* her for it because I thought that's what daughters do. They hate their step-mothers! But now I think maybe... Maybe I was just jealous. Because I've never loved anyone. Ever."

"You have lots of time to love people," Sirius said. "Literally the rest of your life. Maybe you just have to find the right one."

She nodded. "Yeah... Yeah, maybe."

"Either way." And Remus kissed her hand too. "We'll love you. As our Mary."

"Oh, *chérie."*

She went to sip from the bottle, only to remember it was empty and they laughed.

“Forget marriage," Sirius said, tossing a pillow up in the air to catch. “Marriage only exists to make parents of people, and who wants that? Parents are shite all around.”

Remus silently agreed. He supposed there were some exceptions, like the Potters, but how was it that ninety percent of the people he cared for were so hurt by those who were *supposed* to love them back? He’d never thought life was fair, but sometimes he just wished it made sense.

“I’ll never be like them,” Mary swore; “I’m going to treasure my family, should I have one. I’m going to cultivate myself too—my talent and my mind, not just my looks. And then I’m going to make everyone regret underestimating me.”

Remus didn’t doubt it for a second.

* * *

Tuesday 28th March 1978

“Padfoot?”

“Mhmmm…?”

“I think I’m getting better at this.”

Sirius groaned, turning over in his sleep. “Better at what?”

“At this," Remus said, raising his arms. "At the ‘waking up with no hangovers’ thing. I feel great.”

As if to punish him, Sirius rolled on top of him very quickly, stabbing Remus in the ribs with his chin. “Good for you, twat,” he moaned.

Smiling to himself, Remus took a moment to look around while he massaged his chest. They’d somehow made it up to their dorm the night before, though with everything still strung out in the common room, they were without any pillows and squeezed into Sirius’ bed

with only a thin blanket covering them. Sirius was burrowed down into it, his hair peeking out and catching the sunlight that was spilling through the open window, turning it a raven-blue. Everything about him made Remus want to tease him.

“Paaadfooot,” he sang softly, the way Sirius did whenever he wanted something. “Are you awake?"

A groan.

"Are you still tired?”

Another groan, this one more stubborn, and Sirius had pushed Remus’ fingers aside on his chest. He started by massaging his ribs for him and then ever-so-slowly sliding upwards, until he was pinching and prodding in the cheekiest places.

“Yes, I'm still tired,” he said despite all of it.

Remus leaned down, so his lips were just grazing Sirius’ ear.

“Liar.”

A beat passed, and then in one deft move, Sirius burst up from the blanket and swung himself over Remus into a straddle. He pinned Remus to the bed by his shoulders and gave him a cute glower. “I’m hungover,” he grunted. “My back feels like shit from sleeping on the floor all week, and I'm positive my breath could kill a small mammal. So tell me, why do you insist on disturbing my beauty sleep?”

“Because you don’t need it. You’re beautiful enough as it is,” Remus said, reaching up to tuck a piece of hair behind Sirius' ear. He finished by grabbing him round the arse, and was rewarded when Sirius cracked an inevitable smile.

“Fine, cheeky. Where’s my good morning kiss then?”

Remus grinned and leaned up, covering Sirius’ soft lips with his own. He could still feel the piqued curves of his smile beneath it, and the simple gesture unlocked that voracious part of him that could never get enough. Cupping the back of Sirius’ neck, Remus pulled him in tighter, until they were flush against one another and his tongue was tracing the deepest reaches of his lover’s mouth. Sirius’ eyelashes were a flutter against his cheekbone as his hands raced across the ridges of his chest. Invigorated, Remus’ tightened his hold until his mouth shifted and he was pressing kisses down over Sirius’ chin to his

exposed throat.

“You sure about this, Lupin?” Sirius breathed huskily, his face turned toward the sky. “You’re the one who promised the others we’d meet them for breakfast. And then I’m to meet Mary for—*mhmm*—dance practice.”

“She's still forcing you to do that?” Remus asked between kisses. He slipped both hands past the waistband of Sirius' pants and pressed deeper, a move that earned him a short moan from those perfect lips.

“It’s torture, really," Sirius moaned, knotting his fingers through Remus’ hair. "Yesterday she was—*ah!*—talking about doing the tango.”

Breaking away with a short sigh, Remus peaked at the clock on Sirius’ bedside. It was already past ten, which meant they’d slept in anyway.

“Guess we’ll just have to apologise at lunch.”

At his answer, Sirius looked back down at him. He used his thumbs to trace the softness of Remus’ under-eyes, before placing a kiss on each one, humming in contentment as he began to slowly rock his hips against Remus’ pelvis.

“You... You’re so taking the blame for this one.”

* * *

Wednesday 29th March 1978

They spent that whole day together, sadly disassembling their nest of pillows and restoring the common room to its usual order. Afterwards they set an album on the turntable, and took their dinner on the floor, settled down on the rug in a perfect table setting of paper napkins and plastic forks. They even had ice cream for afters, which they kept frozen in the kitchenette’s small refrigerator. As far as Remus was concerned, it was a perfect final day.

"So, Reggie?" Sirius called. "Does this mean you've gotten over your aversion to our common room?"

“No," Regulus answered, sipping cranberry juice out of a styrofoam

cup. Mary had managed to talk him into letting her add a little vodka. But just a little. "Starting tomorrow I'm going to have to ask all of you to forget any of this ever happened. Can't let my reputation suffer."

"What reputation?"

"My reputation as the smartest Black brother, duh."

"Don't forget 'handsomest'," Mary cooed.

"I'd be offended if I didn't already know that was a load of bollocks," Sirius scoffed.

"What part? The part where I'm smarter than you or more handsome?"

"Both—neither! ... Ugh!" Sirius groaned. "I meant the forgetting it all happened part! You liked those drums, baby brother, just admit it. All you need now is a nickname."

"Ooh, how 'bout 'Scrappy'?" Mary suggested.

Remus lowered his ice cream bowl and licked his lips. It was his second—apparently Regulus didn't like chocolate. Heresy, actually. "I like 'Jazzy'," he teased. "We could call you the 'Jazzster'."

"That's funny coming from the guy who mooned the entire school," Regulus mocked.

"I didn't—fine, you wanna be the 'human metronome'?"

"That's not even clever, you're just copying what Sirius said—"

"No, no, no," Sirius interrupted, "you're all wrong, I've already got it. S'gotta be 'Edge'."

" 'Edge'?" All three of them echoed.

"Yeah! 'Cause he don't like 'Reg'. And because he's so 'edgy'. Therefore, 'Edge'."

Remus laughed while Mary clapped her hands together in delight. "It's horrid," she cackled, "but still not as bad as mine."

"I knew you liked yours," Sirius preened. "But 'Edge'! Yes, I like it! It's mysterious—leaves people wanting more. What else could you expect from *my* brother?"

“It’s dumb,” Regulus muttered, hiding a smile behind the rim of his cup.

“You know what isn't dumb?” Mary asked as she balled up her napkin and tossed it onto her empty plate. "Playing a game together on our final night alone."

“What’d you have in mind, Snatchy?”

“Two words—truth or dare!”

“Mary… that’s three words.”

“No, it’s not. Truth *or* dare. Duh.”

“Right, I’m out.” Regulus set his plate aside and made to stand, but Mary grabbed his arm with a pout.

“You can’t,” she moaned.

“I only came because you said I’d get to see this one—” he pointed at Sirius, “make a fool out of himself in a choreographed dance routine.”

Sirius stuck out his tongue. “Jokes on you, Edgy, because I’m an *excellent* dancer. Ask Macdonald.”

"He is a pretty good partner."

Huffing, Regulus let Mary pull him back down to the floor and gestured lazily with his hand. “Go on then…”

Grinning ear to ear, Mary rubbed her hands together in anticipation. “Okay… Remus! Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Bah! Boring,” Sirius honked.

“Shut it you.” Remus hit him lightly with a throw pillow before looking back to Mary, who had leaned in with big eyes.

“Remus, have you… *everkilledsomeone?!”*

“... No.”

“Oh… Boo.” She straightened up. “I was hoping for something more juicy with your gangster background, *mais c’est la vie.* Your turn.”

He glanced at Sirius, who looked far too eager, and then Regulus, who looked like he'd just smelt one of James' football boots. "Okay, Edge, truth or dare?"

As if the question was a matter of pride, Regulus turned his nose up.

"D-Dare."

"Yes!" Sirius cried. "I knew we were related!"

Now this was the hard part. There were plenty of things he could've thought up for the rest of the Marauders, but Regulus was different. There were more boundaries, he shied away from the faintest touch—but if Remus knew anything, it was that he didn't have to touch Regulus to make him uncomfortable.

"Alright. I dare you to stare into Mary's eyes for one entire, *uninterrupted* minute."

"That's it?!" Sirius demanded. The reaction apparently gave Regulus the confidence to scoff as though it were too easy, but the moment he looked at Mary and spotted her eager expression, his face fell.

"C'mon then, love," she said, scooting toward Regulus until their knees were practically touching. Sirius keenly appeared behind his brother, pushing him in further.

"Go on, Edgy, get in close! Snatchy don't bite—most of the time!"

"You'll say when the minute's up?" Regulus chittered nervously. Remus pointed at the grandfather clock on the far wall.

"Try not to blink," he smirked, just as Sirius began the count down.

"Three… two… one—look!"

On 'look', Regulus turned toward Mary with such a focused expression that she was instantly giggling and he had to snap at her to cut it out.

"Whoo, okay, okay," she tittered. "Serious business, I got it."

All of them were very quiet for several long seconds.

"You two do know that you're allowed to blink, right?" Sirius snorted, making Regulus smack him without breaking eye contact.

"Mind your own dare."

Mary's smile deepened at the corners. "My, your eyelashes are *so* long. I'm jealous. They're like a little girl's!"

"Huh!?"

"Seriously, it's not fair."

"Lupin, how much time left?"

"About thirty seconds."

Regulus puckered, and Mary leaned in even closer. "Ooh, I think he's gonna cry—"

"I'm not crying!"

"You're blushing."

"… I'm *not."*

"You and Sirius have such similar eyes. Like little pebbles plucked from the stream, it just makes me wanna—"

"Is she supposed to talk this much?"

"Ten seconds," Remus smiled. "Five… four… three… two—one!"

With a great sigh, Regulus slumped backward, quickly rubbing his cheeks. He *was* blushing.

"Is looking at me for one whole minute really so hard?" Mary snubbed. "Honestly, the dramatics. Must run in your blood."

"Don't take it personally, Macdonald, he just gets nervous around the ladies," Sirius said, nudging Regulus with his shoulder. "Go on, Edgy. S'your turn."

"You then," Regulus snapped. "Truth or dare?"

Sirius thought for a long moment, then; "Truth."

"I thought you were supposed to be the king of dares?"

"I like to keep things fresh. Now hit me."

"Fine." Regulus arched a single black brow. "Now tell the truth—it was you who defaced all of the portraits in the salon last summer, wasn't

it?”

“Yeah,” Sirius sniggered. “What can I say, Great Aunt Belvina looks better with a stash.”

“And you were the one who hit those golf balls through the dining room windows, weren't you?”

“Those were good shots, I’ll have you know.”

“And you put itching powder in all of my pants.”

“Well, actually! Er… no, yeah that was me too. Sorry, my bad.”

They all laughed, and then miraculously, Regulus shoved Sirius back. It was fond, and after Sirius shyly looked in Remus’ direction. “So, Moony? What d’ya say—truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Kiss me on the mouth.”

Remus squinted at him, before immediately throwing all caution to the wind and surging forward to catch Sirius’ mouth in a deep kiss.

“But he picked truth!” Regulus wailed, while Mary just howled some more. They only broke apart again when she started battering them with her hands.

“Remus,” she laughed, “you have to ask somebody!”

“You then Mary! Truth or dare?”

“Dare me!”

“Alright, you think you can bench-press Sirius?”

Mary looked Sirius up and down. “What, like lift him?”

“He’s scrawny enough,” Regulus added.

“Har-har,” Sirius started. “If I’m scrawny then you’re skeletal. But have at ‘er, Macdonald. If you can, that is.”

Looking indignant, Mary stood up and ordered Sirius to his feet. “If I can dip you in choreography, I can bench-whatever you,” she said, before grabbing Sirius arm and slinging it over her back. She wobbled

a bit as she caught his weight against her, and Remus momentarily regretted suggesting the dare in the first place, but with one great heave Mary surprised them all. With a little squeal on his part, Sirius was lifted off of his feet into a fireman's carry, which Mary held until her face darkened with exertion and she all but threw him back down.

"Damn, Macdonald!" Sirius cried, pushing the hair from his face. "Who knew you had it in you?!"

Mary dusted her hands. "I did, all along. That'll teach you to underestimate a lady. Now it's your turn. Sirius—I dare you to give Remus a lap dance!"

Remus' mouth dropped open. Shooting up from the rug, Sirius only appeared ecstatic. "Okay!"

"What's a lap dance?" Regulus asked.

"Oh, you poor sheltered thing."

Ignoring his brother's plight, Sirius jumped to his feet and pulled Remus up with him. "C'mon, Moons. Time for the show," he grinned, practically shoving Remus backward on the sofa.

"This is insane," Remus stammered. "A lap dance, really?"

No one was listening.

"Oi, Macdonald, can I at least get some music?"

"Coming right up!"

A second later the turntable was going, and more ABBA began filtering them through the speakers. Obviously hoping for something better, Sirius groaned and covered his face while Remus pinched him.

"Ow!"

"You did ask her to choose the music."

Sirius shook his head; "This is fucking cruel," and promptly straddled Remus' waist on the sofa. Mary squealed, but the moment Regulus realised what was happening, his hands flew to his eyes.

"Dear god!"

“Get it, Black!”

Sirius rolled his hips seductively, grinding them with enough rhythm and drive that even Remus had to cover his face. He peeked out between his fingers though, and Sirius mouthed along to the words of the song that on regular circumstances, he would never have admitted to knowing.

‘I’m jealous and I’m proud,
If you hurt my feelings I’ll cry out loud;
I’m Carrie not-the-kind-of-girl-you’d-marry,
That’s me!’

“C’mon Moons, you know you love it,” Sirius purred, twisting around until they were back to chest. He kept rolling his hips, much too slow for the song’s upbeat nonsense, and when he reached back to stroke his fingers along the side of Remus’ face, Remus felt his breath leave his chest with a shudder.

“Yeah, that’s it! Open your legs a bit more,” Mary instructed from the sidelines, shouting over the music while Regulus just buried his face further into his hands.

“How long do I have to do this for?” Sirius called, while he grabbed Remus’ hand and slipped it up under his shirt himself to press against the toned planes of his stomach.

“The whole song, of course!”

Sirius sighed, and glanced back at Remus. “You heard her, Moons.”

“You’ve had too much to drink."

“On the contrary, I think I’ve had just the right amount.” Grinning like a cat, Sirius slipped down to the floor, where he turned around once more, connecting with every inch of Remus as he slid back up his body and seated himself back into a straddle. Remus didn’t even wait this time. He popped the bottom buttons of Sirius’ shirt, sneakily sliding his hands up his stomach and feeling the tightened muscles beneath his finger tips. He’d never had a lap dance before, but surely nothing would ever top Sirius’. He swayed his hips perfectly, and when he extended his back to lean away from him, in a great circle, Remus could see the faint outline of kiss marks he’d left scattered about his collar bone. It was mouthwatering.

“Oh my god, they’re still going?!” He heard Regulus scream from somewhere else in the room.

“Gotta be honest, I didn’t think he had this much in him,” Mary cheered. In answer, Sirius flipped her off, before grabbing a fistful of the front of Remus’ shirt and crashing his mouth down onto him. Distantly Remus was aware that the song was coming to end, but he couldn’t care less. Sirius was cupping his jaw as he pressed his tongue inside, tasting every inch of him. Remus wanted to bottle the feeling, but instead all he could do was grip the tops of his jeans and pull him closer.

“Oi! Oi! Okay, break it up!” Mary called gleefully. “The song’s over, and *guess* what’s next?”

The song change dawned on them both at the same time, but it was Sirius who ripped his mouth free and leapt up. “Oh!” He cried, leaving Remus out to dry while he and Mary fled to the centre of the room. They met up just as Sirius’ chorus began, and together started trotting around the common room, perfectly in sync.

“ ‘I was so lonesome, I was blue’,” Sirius sang, *“ ‘I couldn’t help it, it had to be you and I—always thought you knew the reason why…”*

Mary shrieked in happiness, and they spun each other around, toe-tapping on the carpet.

“ ‘I only wanted a little love affair! Now I can see you are beginning to care—but baby, believe me! It’s betterrrrr—to forget meeeee!”

Together they leapt up onto one of the far sofas, did a twirl, and then Mary dipped Sirius as promised. She dropped him once by accident, but they both had the biggest smiles on their faces, and Remus slumped back against the sofa in bliss.

“He loves it,” Regulus said, appearing behind the sofa with his arms crossed. “He’s such a whiner, and then he loves it.”

“You’re right, Edge. Reckon we should try it out? I’m sure I could lift you.”

“I’ll break your kneecaps first.”

Remus laughed.

It was positively the best Easter he’d ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Songs in this chapter: "Love of my Life" by Queen, 1975, and "Why Did It Have to Be Me?" and "That's Me" by ABBA, 1976.

Also you heard it here first, folks. Motswolo is a “R-edge” defender. “R-egg”??? Don’t know her

Starting tomorrow I'm going away on holiday myself and won't have the time to keep up with updates. So sorry, but my next update won't be until Sunday August 21st. Though, if you're good, I maaay be inclined to give you a little treat, though you'd have to be subscribed to my profile (not just 'Cadence') for the notif.
As always you can catch me on tumblr @motswolo.

Much love - mot.

Chapter 91: The Flour of Youth

Chapter Summary

Ya'll been waiting patiently for this one, but honestly, how is one expected to pass Parenting 101 with such poor role models...?

Chapter Notes

I foolishly left the editing of one of this chapter's main scenes to the day-of, which ended up changing the flow of the entire chapter. I've been here for six hours, so please, have mercy, lol.

I don't believe there's any specific TW for this chapter, though Sirius is a bit of a dick in it. We all have our days, won't be like it forever!

And as a note, this chapter is for Dasha, who keeps ME inspired xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

But life goes on, you know it ain't easy,
You've just gotta be strong, if you're one of the six teens;
And life goes on, you know, you know it ain't easy,
You know you'll never go wrong 'cause you're all part of the six teens…

- "The Six Teens" Sweet, 1974

Thursday 30th March 1978

As fond as Remus had become of their shared time alone at school, he was excited to welcome his friends back. Mary did so with the most vigour, throwing herself over Marlene and crying as though she'd been tortured all week without her presence. Remus, feeling distinctly as though it was the other way around, tried not to take it personally, and Sirius, who had been missing James just as much, crowded in among the chattering group of returning students and slung an arm around his best friend's shoulders out of glee.

"So, Prongs, how was it meeting the in-laws?"

“Great!” Said James. “Lily’s dad is champ. He’s got this whole collection of records. He could actually talk about music for hours, and get this—in the garage? A 1949 Vincent motorbike in *pristine* condition. Said he was just housing it for a friend, but still.”

Sirius’ mouth practically began to water. “I swear—first purchase after the flat!”

“Good luck navigating London on a motorbike,” Remus scoffed. It made Sirius smirk, before he reached up and pinched Remus on the earlobe. Pain instantly shot through him, and Remus quickly batted him away with a sharp smack.

“Don’t, bloody dickhead... Still hurts.”

“Oh? What’s this?” James raised both brows. "You put an extra hole in your head too, Moony?”

“Blame Mary,” he grumbled. “I still can’t sleep on my left side.”

James leaned in to admire it. “Well, I like it. Very rock and roll. Maybe I’ll get mine done when we finish school.”

“I’ll do it!” Sirius declared. “This wimp wouldn’t let me do his.”

Pushing Sirius away by the cheek, Remus turned back to James. “How was the rest of Lily’s family then? Did her sister bite your head off like you thought she would?”

“Let’s just say that if I had to choose between charming a king cobra and Petunia Evans, I’d pick the snake.”

They broke apart snickering, as Peter wordlessly passed behind. He had his trunk in one hand and there was a distinctly solemn look on his face, but he didn’t spare his best friends a second glance.

“Hey, Wormy,” Sirius called anyway; “How was the old bird’s place?”

“Don’t wanna talk about it, Black,” Peter grumbled, nearly fumbling his trunk. Undeterred by the cold shoulder, Sirius reached for Peter’s actual shoulder and gave it a tight squeeze.

“Aw, don’t tell me there’s trouble in paradise?”

“Just fuck off, alright!” Peter lashed, shoving Sirius hand off before carrying on in the direction of the dorms on his own. Sirius turned back around after he’d gone, looking disgruntled.

“What crawled up his arse and died?”

“I think he and Moira broke up,” James answered reproachfully.

“They did?” Sirius gasped. “Fucking finally!”

“Wow. Maybe try for *some* decorum, Padfoot?”

“Go on, what happened?” Sirius asked giddily, ignoring him. In answer, James rubbed the back of his neck, using the gesture as an excuse to glance around and make sure no one was listening.

“He told her about our plans to go to London after school. And the band. And the no-university-thing. I guess she wasn’t very impressed…”

“Well, it’s the truth, ain’t it?” Sirius said. “We all agreed! And I dunno about you two, but I don’t want to be bothered with looking for a new drummer fresh out the gate. Showbiz waits for no one, least of all squares like Moira Thurnberg.”

“Do us a favour and keep that one to yourself,” James advised. “Pete’s in a foul enough mood as it is.”

Sirius shrugged, as if it couldn’t be helped, and picked up James’ trunk as they started back toward the dorms. Up ahead, Remus could still see Peter’s blonde mop bobbing along the street. He wondered if his bad mood was going to last.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sirius told them both on the way; “The two of them have fought like this before, right? Either they’ll make up, or we’ll be off to London with one less girlfriend in tow.”

“You’re pushing it, Sirius,” James warned.

“What? … Alright, fine. I’m happy to be the arsehole this time around. Just you wait, one day when women are throwing themselves at his feet, he’s gonna look back on this and smile. Then you’ll know I was right.”

So, Sirius was playing the bad guy. A common enough role for him when it came to Peter. The two of them had always occupied different spaces, especially when it came to James; Peter the childhood friend, Sirius the *best* friend. It'd been that way for years, long before Remus had ever come along, but if they were ever going to—as Sirius had so eloquently put it— *actually* make it as a band, then they were

probably going to have to tell Peter the truth sometime.

"Have you told him?" James asked, bridging the topic himself when they were nearly back at the dorms. "About the two of you, I mean."

"Not yet," Sirius said sheepishly. "Just not been a lot of chances, right."

James appeared sceptical, but relented without a fight. "Suppose it wouldn't make him feel any better, finding out two of his best mates are bunking up right when he's gotten dumped."

"Exactly. Let him mope a bit, do his thing. My love for Moony's boney arse ain't going anywhere."

Sirius glanced at him, and Remus shook his head—pleased nonetheless. The look was not missed by James, who stretched his arms up behind his head casually.

"At least someone's in a good mood. Here I was, half afraid we'd come back to find that Moony was secretly related to Margaret Thatcher. Just life's little victories, I suppose."

* * *

It'd been clear from that very first week that although term had recommenced and everyone had settled back into routine, they were still lacking a crucial piece to their regular cast. Sheila Buchanan had yet to return to her post as Hawkings' most beloved music teacher, and all of them were feeling the burn of it.

Remus tried not to think about it. It'd been easier during the holiday, when he'd had Sirius and Mary's insanity to distract him and Regulus' snark to put him at ease, but Sheila's absence left a colourless hole that was getting harder and harder to ignore. She wasn't just his music teacher anymore, she was his godmother. His family. And he didn't know whether to miss her or hate her for it. Wasn't sure he'd ever know. Knowledge of her truancy felt like a sad song played on repeat, one that only he could hear. He tried fitting lyrics to it, but they never came. No word seemed like enough. Though if he had to pick, 'mourning' came the closest.

It was an ongoing problem—one McGonagall saw fit to fix herself.

To cover Sheila's absence, their forms class was merged into another, a decision that left poor Professor Bilshin in charge of not only his own students, but Sheila's usual group of cheeky laze-abouts as well. Sirius was ecstatic; it was the first time he and James had ever shared a forms class, and the two of them spent the block attempting to lock Barty in a broom cupboard for pulling on May Donahue's bra straps. While Mr. Bilshin grumbled over who to give the detention slip to (in the end he decided on all of them) Remus took his book and sat down next to Lily, equally as pleased to see her.

"You're looking good," she told him, as he flipped through his assigned reading text. "Heard you guys had a lot of fun over the holiday."

"We did."

"Mary said that you and Sirius were inseparable."

"Well... I like him."

"You mean you *love* him."

"Not so loud, Evans, he might hear you."

She giggled. "Does this mean you and Black are fully ready to move in together then? Big commitment, that."

Remus peered back across the room, where James and Sirius were making paper aeroplanes out of their pink slips. Sirius let his go and had watched it soar over the heads of several classmates before he finally caught Remus staring and gave him a little wink.

"Yeah, well... Can't really live without him, can I?"

Lily smiled at him again, her green eyes almost sparkling in the morning light.

"You don't know how wonderful it is to hear that, Remus."

Maybe he didn't, but for anyone that *really* knew them, it was probably very predictable. But that was the future, and it wasn't until the following present day, in sixth-form music, when things took an even more surprising turn.

Each of them had shown up in the music room as per usual and were sitting around in wait, curious to see who might walk through the door. So far, no one had, and Remus was starting to get suspicious.

While they waited a betting pool had broken out, with most people placing their money on another teacher stepping in to supervise, or no one at all. Sirius had bet on Filch just for the shock value, but Remus had abstained. He couldn't stop thinking about what he might do if Sheila actually came—showed up, flying through the doorway just in time for the bell. What would he say to her?

I hate you.

I'm glad you're back?

In the end it was Professor McGonagall who strolled through the doorway, much to the disappointment of several gamblers.

"I understand this is a music classroom," called the headmistress, "but if you could be so kind as to humour me, and put all your instruments to the side for today, thank you."

No one objected, though most looked rather bewildered. As Peter came out from behind his drum kit and everything from brass to strings was stowed away, the four marauders scooted their chairs closer together.

"What are the odds that she lets us off for the rest of the week?" Sirius asked.

"Not good," James winced. "Look."

With the undignified sound of four squeaky wheels, Filch appeared in the classroom doorway, wheeling a telly cart ahead of him. Before Sirius could start arguing that the gnarly care-taker's appearance meant he'd won the pot, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat.

"As you may have already guessed it, due to your teacher's absence I will be personally supplementing your music blocks. Now I could've simply given you this time for self-study..." She paused, long enough for the anticipation to build up amongst them; "But as you well know, we teachers place a great value on instructional time. And I am, at my core, a teacher."

There was a round of impish groans, not that Professor McGonagall seemed bothered.

"I have elected to come up with an alternative of sorts," she said. "And although I promise that you will have ample time for practice, you may find it beneficial to lean on one another until your regular lessons

resume. Until then, I have designed a five-week course for you in home economics."

The groans turned to rabid chatter as everyone perked up in their chairs. *Five weeks?!* Said one girl. *Home economics?!* Chittered another. No one seemed to know what to think of it; usually home economics was treated as a dullard's subject, meant only for those who couldn't hack a tougher elective. It wasn't even offered to sixth-form students or those studying for their O-Levels. After all, what use was there in learning how to poach an egg when everyone had a cook at home to do it for them?

"Professor McGonagall, does this mean Mrs. Buchanan won't be returning for five weeks?" Asked one of the boys in the front row.

"Mrs. Buchanan is taking a personal leave," the headmistress said calmly; "Five weeks is merely a precaution, all we can do is hope for her swift return. But in the meantime, I'm sure she expects all of her students to remain dedicated to their work. Mr. Filch, the other cart, if you'll please."

As Filch shambled back out into the hall and all the other kids craned their necks out of curiosity, Remus sunk further into his chair. He didn't know whether to be relieved or angry. What about *his* personal time— *his* questions? She'd lost her husband, but he'd lost everything. Wasn't he owed some of it back, even if he was afraid of the answers?

While he brooded, Filch returned with a flatbed trolley piled in small sacks of flour. It appeared rather out of place in the music room, and judging by the looks on his classmates' faces, no one had the slightest idea what they were for. One of the girls asked what they could possibly be baking with so much flour, but McGonagall only smirked at her.

"Thank you, Mr. Filch," said the professor, as he set a bag on top of Sheila's podium for her. "Now, please partner up, and have one person come and grab a bag for the both of you."

"I call James," Peter said, grabbing him by the sleeve.

"As if that's any surprise," Sirius said, looking keen enough to be partnered with Remus anyway.

As the class paired themselves up, Professor McGonagall clapped her hands together urgently. "Come, come! Gather your flour and your seats, I've not finished my instructions."

Pensively, several of them stood and returned to their chairs with the heavy sacks. Remus had only just sat down when Sirius took the flour from him and pulled out a pen to begin scribbling on its surface.

“Mum hates bleached flour,” James said, inspecting his and Peter's bag. “Says it causes cancer.”

“Doesn’t sound like we’re going to be eating it,” said Remus.

"What else would you use it for?"

"Lottie swears by it for zits," Peter observed. "And Mum uses it to polish the silver at home."

"Not much silver 'round here..."

“Oi, psst!" Sirius whispered. "Anyone wanna see my knob?”

They all looked, only to find that Sirius had drawn a rather crude-looking phallus on the side of the flour bag. He grinned, and it earned him a short snigger from James and Peter anyway.

“Hm.” Remus considered. "Bit small, don't you think?"

“You would know, wouldn’t you?”

Across the room, Professor McGonagall clapped again to gather their attention.

“Now you've probably guessed it, but these—” She smacked the bag sitting upright on the podium, sending a cloud of flour up into the air; “are not meant to be just any old sacks of flour.”

“What are they for then?” Someone called. In answer, Sirius covered one nostril and bent his head down, snorted up an invisible line up off the bag. While half the class began to crack up, Professor McGonagall maintained her composure and merely shook her head.

“Be wary, Mr. Black, it's not *that* either. As of this very moment, these bags of flour are no longer flour at all. Rather, they are your children.”

Peter turned to Remus. “Did she just say what I think she said?”

The room was quiet for a second, while each of them shared their baffled glances. *“Children?”* Several voices whispered. *“Like kids?”*

"Oh my god." James raised his bag into the air. “It’s a *flour* child.”

"Damn, Minnie," Sirius groaned, "now I know you're joking."

“I assure you, I am not,” McGonagall smirked. “For the next two weeks, these bags of flour are to be your entire world. You will care for them, protect them, and love them as though they were your very own. You and every other music class."

“But it weighs a ton!” Someone complained.

“It’s merely ten pounds of flour. Human babies weigh around that much at just a month and a half. Be grateful I did not hand you a two year-old.”

“And we’re supposed to carry this thing around with us… everywhere?”

“Would you leave a real baby on its own? Just think of what could happen.”

“But it’s just a bag of flour!”

“Not anymore."

Professor McGonagall came around the podium, her hands clasped tightly ahead of herself. Remus was positive he'd never seen her looking so happy.

"As of this moment forward, these bags are your new little bundles of joy. You will be responsible for all manner of their care, and next week we shall evaluate the diaries you’ll be expected to keep as well as the state of the child. Welcome to parenthood, class, and good luck. Now Mr. Filch, would you mind terribly to set up the parenting instructional video? I have a feeling a few in here will require it...”

* * *

Wednesday 5th April 1978

Initially the bags of flour had seemed like one big joke. McGonagall had assigned the same project to every one of Sheila’s music and choir classes, and kids seemed to get a kick out of parading the fake-babies around campus, drawing faces on them and letting their friends graffiti their backsides. But as the days went by, the flour children

grew to be more and more inconvenient. The bags were nearly four and a half kilos each, and leaked everywhere. On day three, Remus had been written up by Professor Bilshin for poor uniform. He'd tried desperately to explain that the white dust coating the front of his jumper was merely flour, but the professor had given him detention anyway just to be a cad.

To no one's surprise, the parenting gene came most naturally to James, who'd taken to carrying the lump—which he'd affectionately named 'Prongs Junior'—on his front in a make-shift baby carrier. He'd tried to convince his classmates that it was the most efficient way to keep an eye on the assignment, but at the risk of looking completely moronic, most had abstained.

"You look insane," Sirius complained, as he watched James wrap the shredded bits of old bed sheet around himself. "My mum never held me, and look how I turned out? Perfectly fine."

"It's just to keep things in place," James surmised, trying to prove his point by jogging on the spot in the middle of their dorm room. "Really, it's more of a wearable weight than anything. Pro athletes use them all the time when trying to bulk up."

"I'm not *trying* to bulk up, I'm trying to keep our reputations intact. You've already gone and named it—next thing we know you're gonna be carrying a bag full of spare nappies and pureed carrots."

"Don't be silly, Junior hates carrots."

"It's. Not. Real!"

James shrugged, already turning for the door. "Best be off now, it's breakfast time. And we mustn't keep Mummy waiting. Now Junior, say goodbye to Uncle Moony and Uncle Padfoot." With his back turned, James began talking in a high voice; *"Bye, Uncle Moony. Bye, Shit-toes!"*

At least Remus got a kick out of it. While he snickered, Sirius turned around and aimed a sharp punch at their own flour bag.

"Ugh. Who's 'Mummy' anyway? If it's Wormtail then I'm going to shoot myself."

"Actually, I think he was talking about Lily."

"Somehow that's even worse!" Sirius flopped back against the floor,

using the flour as a pillow. “You’re not gonna start talking to it too, are you? Because I might need to reevaluate our entire relationship if that’s the case.”

“Too late,” Remus said, raising his hand bashfully. “You already put a ring on it.”

The look Sirius gave him was certainly worth any embarrassment, but they were still stuck with the flour. And so the week progressed, and apart from their missing music lessons, things almost felt normal. The girls laughed whenever they saw the flour-babies but they were managing well enough, save the occasional near miss, until halfway through the week, when some dick started a rumour that McGonagall had hidden a ‘get out of detention free’ card inside one of the bags.

(Remus strongly suspected Sirius.)

News of the assignment had already stretched all across campus, which meant a hunt was promptly launched. By lunchtime, Hawkings was a baked good’s worst nightmare. Boys teamed up to see who could mangle the most flour bags, competing until the shredded sacks had appeared in almost every hallway—with the only evidence of the perpetrators’ crimes being the white dust that inevitably got stuck on their uniforms. Remus had already bore-witness to at least half a dozen girls’ tears, after someone had invariably come along and spilled their children’s guts right in front of them. So far he and his friends had managed to keep theirs in one piece, despite the high-risk environment that was the mish-mashed forms class. Barty had already taken it upon himself to ensure that Remus and Sirius failed ‘Parenting 101’, and took every chance to get his hands on the thing. And every forms he ended up locked back in Bilshin’s cupboard.

That was probably the most fun Sirius had with the assignment. He gave no thought whatsoever to the journal they were supposed to be keeping, and instead made of various entries such as;

Took The Sack to his first gentlemen’s club. He preferred the Vodka Tonic to the Tom Collins. I haven’t bothered fretting, he still has time to become a man of taste. We kept the tab open and he complimented Naughty Robin’s top. But don’t worry, won’t be letting him head backstage until he’s grown a bit more hair on his pits.

It was funny, until Remus realised they were most certainly being graded. Bollocks.

“At least you have it easy,” Remus said, nudging Peter over lunch

hour. “Potter’s doing all the work.”

“Guess so,” Peter mumbled, poking at his food. James sat across from them, Prongs Jr. still strapped to the front of his chest.

“We can’t all be the perfect parent,” he boasted, reaching over to pick up Remus’ flour. “C’mere, Knobby, Uncle Prongs will—oh my god! *Knobby!* Moony, what hell have you done to him?”

Fork paused halfway to his mouth, Remus watched as James turned the sack over to reveal a thick strip of gaffer tape across its middle.

“Oh. Blame Crouch. Took a pencil to him this morning.”

“And what were you doing when your child was getting run through with a bloody pencil?!”

“I patched him up, didn’t I? He’s just flour, Prongs.”

Frowning deeply, James set Knobby down on the table and rubbed its back comfortingly. “Poor thing, to live with two such unsympathetic fathers.”

As if on cue, Sirius arrived at the table with his own tray, pushing aside little Knobby with little care. If it weren’t for James, the fake-baby would’ve toppled straight off the table.

“Careful, Padfoot! You almost killed poor Knobby.”

“Oh shut up,” Sirius grunted. “I never gave you permission to name it.”

“Everyone needs a name. Even baking constituents.”

“Hmph. If anything, it should be called ‘Lunch’. Or a twelve pack of scones.”

Grinning, James held the flour up beside Sirius’ head. “What do you think, Pete? Does Knobby look more like daddy number one or daddy number two?”

Peter regarded the faded, drawn-on knob. “Sirius, for sure.”

“You guys are just hilarious,” Sirius drawled. “Let’s see how funny you are after this.”

Scooping up his fork, Sirius made an attempt at stabbing James’ chest,

nearly impaling Prongs Jr. right in front of them. James knocked the first attempt away, but took a second in the back of his hand.

"Ouch! Jesus, Padfoot, you really aren't taking this well at all. It's just a fake baby. It doesn't even cry or shit or anything."

"It's stupid," Sirius said stubbornly, before turning to Peter. "Wormy agrees with me, don't you, Wormy?"

Silence sounded, and it became clear that Peter wasn't paying attention anymore. As Sirius snapped his fingers in front of his friend's face, Peter kept his eyes trained across the room, where Moira sat with her best friends, Hannah and Rachelle. Soon they were all staring, which was enough for one of the girls to take notice. One quick whisper later and Moira had spotted them; but the look she gave Peter was not exactly pleased.

"Chin up, Pete, my boy," James said, when Peter had sorely turned back to his lunch. "Stings now, but it'll fade I'm sure."

"I dunno… I was pretty sure she was the one for me."

"To hell with that," Sirius scoffed. "You're only seventeen, how can you—"

Remus kicked him under the table, making Sirius' mouth clamp shut as he reached for his shin. "Alright," he grunted. "Wager this then, we'll talk to her."

Peter looked immediately distraught. "What? No!"

"Why not?"

"I'm pretty sure you're the last person she wants to talk to, Black."

"Au contraire, you still hold that title, my dear Wormy."

If Sirius' goal was to make Peter feel better, Remus didn't think he was doing a very good job. Peter scowled, but it didn't stop Sirius from reaching over and snatching James' sack flour from his sling.

"Come on, Prongs. Let's go see if we can get Prongs Jr. a step-mum."

"Sirius, be careful! You're jostling him!"

But Sirius was already striding off, James close on his heels. With a bad feeling, Remus turned to Peter for judgement.

“You want them to stop? Just say the word.”

“I dunno,” Peter shrugged. “Don’t suppose he can make it any worse…”

Really Peter should’ve known better.

Never underestimate a Black.

Remus caught up to James and Sirius just as Moira’s friends had begun to ream them out for having the gall to approach in the first place. Sirius took the heckling in stride, waiting his turn like the good little boy he wasn’t. And when Moira had finally tired enough to glance his way, he pounced.

“Think of the children, Thurnberg!” He moaned, holding Prongs Jr. out ahead of himself. “Alright look, you’ve made your point. The lad’s distraught. You’ve shattered his heart—*and* the rest of his manly pride. I know you don’t exactly approve of the company he keeps, and I’m flattered, really, but don’t you think enough’s enough? If you don’t take him back we’ll never see get to have our drummer in top shape again. And we need him in top shape if we’re to avoid failing miserably at life.”

“That’s just the problem, don’t you see?” Moira said. “You only view Peter as a means to an end—a member of your shitty band! And he doesn't even realise it. You’ve got him so brainwashed into thinking that this stupid plan of yours will work, that he’s incapable of thinking for himself anymore.”

“For himself?” Sirius echoed. “Or for you?”

Moira fumed. “Piss off.”

“Ooh, do you talk to your mother with that mouth?”

“Sirius—!”

“You’re the worst of them, Sirius Black,” Moira lashed, getting up from the table. “You tread over Peter like he’s not even there, always have!”

“Now that ain’t true,” James pressed. “Pete’s as much of a Marauder as the rest—”

“No one asked you, Potter! You’d follow this idiot off a bridge if he

marched you there, so you tell me, why should I support my boyfriend when he's so insistent on acting like he walks on water just because you three have put this silly fantasy in his head?!"

"Because he will walk on water some day," Sirius said. "At least to some people. Pete's an artist, and pretty soon he's gonna have those around who see that. Who *appreciate* him for it. And all you're gonna be is the whiney girl he dated in sixth form that was too blind to see what was right in front of her."

The girls gasped, and Remus instantly regretted not stepping in sooner. Before he could, Moira screwed her face up very tight. She looked like she might actually kill Sirius, but instead she merely snatched Prongs Jr. from his hands and slammed the darling baby down on the floor of the dining hall with a great plume of floury dust.

"Junior, no!"

As James threw himself to his knees and began scooping handfuls of Prongs Jr. back into its tattered bag, Moira pointed a finger beneath the tip of Sirius' nose.

"You can tell Peter that until he's ready to wake up and see what an arsehole you are, I am *not* interested in anything he has to say."

While the rest of the dining hall stared, Moira and her friends gathered their lunch trays and marched off. Remus was mortified, though not as mortified as Peter when he appeared beside them.

"What the fuck did you say to her?!"

Remus glared at Sirius, who only shook his head.

"Personally, Wormy, I think you dodged a bullet. Not a shred of maternal instinct in that one at all…"

* * *

For three days Peter hardly spoke to them, which was no less than they deserved really. He was slightly more lenient with James, as they still had McGonagall's home-ec project to complete, but even that never went past apathetic chit-chat. It left James in a mopey mood, which meant Sirius was in a worse one. In forms the three of them sat

around, hardly even caring when Barty threatened to use the flour bags as target practice for all the office supplies he'd nicked from other people's desks.

"Go away, Crouch," Lily ordered. "Unless you'd like Remus to give you your fourth detention this week."

He didn't listen, and so Lily got Professor Bilshin to give them permission to use the classroom next door. When they sat down, she reached over to brush a patch of flour from the front of James' jumper.

"I don't understand why you guys don't just leave them behind at the dorms," she said, eyeing the half-deflated bag of flour in his lap. "They aren't even real."

"Can't," said James, flipping open his law text. "McGonagall's has all the teachers in on it. She gets them to take attendance for the flour in every lesson."

"That is insane."

They all grunted in agreement. Clearly their headmistress was just having a laugh.

"It's worse for him," Sirius said, pointing at James while chuckling lightly. "He's practically a single mother now."

"Yeah, no thanks to you."

Sirius' smile vanished, and Lily scooted her chair forward.

"Yes, you're all miserable, we've covered that. But have any of you tried fixing it? Apologising, maybe?"

" 'Course we have," Remus answered. "Pete won't—"

"I meant to *Moira."*

"No way," Sirius replied. "I'd rather cut my own ear off than apologise to that snooty bint."

"At this rate you might have to, that is if you ever want Peter to speak to you again."

He scoffed, but it seemed James was not entirely opposed.

“Daisy’s right. You should apologise to her, Padfoot.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the one who called her a whiney nobody!”

Lily turned on him. “Sirius! You did not.”

“Okay, so maybe I did!” Sirius snapped. “But we were all thinking it! She’s hated us since ninth year, and you know all she does is bad-mouth us to Pete when no one’s around. Sorry that I’m the only one with the balls to say something…”

“It’s not worth it if it hurts Peter too,” said Lily. “You can’t treat him differently *and* get down on him for who he dates.”

“Now hold on, we may not be the socialist utopia everyone wants, but we treat Pete the same as anyone!”

“No, not the same as me,” James said. “Not the same as Moony.”

Remus felt his shoulders grow tight, while Sirius slumped in his chair and scoffed.

“Oh, come on. That’s different.”

“Different how?”

“You really gonna make me spell it out, Potter?”

James shut his textbook with a smack. “Fine, maybe it is different! But Moira could still be right. You’re my best friend, Sirius, and Moony, well he’s your…”

“My boyfriend,” Sirius answered curtly. “You can say it, Prongs. He’s my *boyfriend.”*

“No one’s not saying it, Sirius,” Lily sighed, “but Peter doesn’t even know.”

“Christ, where’s McKinnon when we need her? Moony and I don’t owe an explanation to any of you. Potter’s just upset ‘cause Thurnberg called him a sheep, but it’s our relationship! A secret one, I might add. And Peter Pettigrew couldn’t keep a secret if all our lives depended on it!”

“That’s not fair,” Lily scolded. “Not when you haven’t even given him

a chance."

Sirius gaped at both of them, and then whirled on Remus.

"What about you? Don't try telling me *you* don't have an opinion?"

Remus winced. "Call me a hypocrite—"

"You're a hypocrite."

"—But … I think maybe Lily's right. We should at least try to tell him."

"You really want Peter to know? ... *You?"*

"I just think we owe it to him to be honest, like we have with the others. And if we want the band to work then…"

Sirius looked back to James, who had started picking at a hole in Prongs Jr.'s head rather than make eye contact. Finally he groaned.

"Fine! We'll tell him… But after the Craigtyre trip! … Don't need any shitty rumours messing up what could be our last good day."

They all agreed on that at least, and Remus tried to not give in to the black hole that was slowly eating him from inside out. It'd been there ever since Sheila left, and got bigger each and every time he thought about that photo from his baptism.

It was another hitch; another hitch in the tragic pattern that was his life. Realising it made Remus feel like a stoppered bottle shaken to its bursting point. He wanted to scream and yell, to beat them with his fists, but everyone he felt the need to punish was long gone.

Where are you? Came the anger, often. *Why are you all such cowards?*

He put it away.

On Saturday, all upper-sixth students met their buses outside Castle Hall as usual. It was their final weekend with the flour children, and luckily for them Professor McGonagall had been kind enough to let all of the would-be parents off for the evening. Uninterested in toting the heavy bags around off campus, nearly everyone had left them back at the dorms—but not James Potter. He still had his flour bag in a sling across his front, though Prongs Jr. had been looking worse for wear ever since Moira exploded him across the dining room floor.

“I have a gift for you,” Lily said, before unceremoniously pulling out a blue baby cap. James took one look at it and lit up from top to bottom.

“Oh, Daisy! It’s great!”

“Thought you might like it,” she said, as he kissed her hair and fit the cap over Prongs Jr.’s head. “One of the girls in Rowena is like a knitting machine.”

“That is so embarrassing,” Sirius grimaced. “At least you know he’ll be loyal.”

“Look, Potter,” Lottie cooed, “now Junior and Francois are matching.”

She showed off her own sack of flour, which had a pink bonnet fitted over its top. Remus had forgotten that Lottie was in Sheila’s choir class until she’d appeared with baby Francois the next day. Though he tended to avoid looking at it; the extra lipstick and fake eyelashes were a bit unsettling.

“Petey, will you help me with my bag? It’s got Francois’ dummy in it.”

“Now you’re just taking the piss,” Peter grumbled, fetching his sister’s bag for her anyway. Remus watched, but when Peter caught him staring, he was not impressed.

“What? Do I have something on my face?”

“Er—no…?”

Peter spun away, and Remus tried not to let it bother him. As they moved up the line, nearly ready to board, he spotted Trish with her clipboard and got an idea.

“Oi, where’re you going?” Sirius called, as Remus stepped out of line.

“Just to talk to Trish! Be two seconds!”

“You’ll miss the bus!”

The crowd of kids was already thinning by the time he reached her, most having sorted themselves onto their allotted buses. A few honked, ready to pull away from the pavement, and Remus could hear his friends calling out to him from behind.

“Best get a shift on, Remington, else ye’ll miss yer bus.”

“I know, Trish, I’ll be quick—nice hair by the way.”

She reached up, touching the wisps of hair that had been shorn short like Liza Minnelli's.

“Whach'ye want then?”

“Can you tell me what bus Moira Thurnberg is on?”

She glanced down at the list. “Uh… Bus three.”

“Cool, thanks. Say hi to Regulus for me.”

Her cheeks reddened, though that could’ve been the cold, and she smacked him—*“Say hi to him yerself, lavvy head!”*—but Remus had already legged it. By the time he made it back down the grass to his bus, Sirius was hollering at him out the window.

“Hurry up, Evans asked the driver to wait!”

“Actually I’ll meet you in town!”

“What?!”

“Just gotta do something first!”

“You nutter!”

Flashing Sirius a thumbs up, Remus watched as his boyfriend ducked back into the window and slammed it closed. A second later the bus honked twice and began pulling away from the curb. Luckily for him, when he made his way aboard bus three, it was Stan sitting in the driver’s seat.

“Sorry, Stan. Missed my bus.”

“Just get on, Lupin,” the man yawned, pulling the door shut after him.

He found Moira sitting near the middle with her friends, and only began to regret every decision he’d ever made when he started down the aisle and was met with three piercing glares. He stopped beside Moira’s seat, only slightly intimidated by the look her best friend Rachelle was giving him.

“Uh… Hey, guys."

The girls merely glared.

"Uh... so, Rachelle, would you mind switching seats for a moment? I just would really like to talk to Moira…”

Rachelle crossed her arms. “Yeah, right. You’re thicker than I thought if you think I’m moving, Lupin.”

“You can sit here, Remus,” Hannah said, adjusting her glasses. Both Moira and Rachelle spun around in their bus seat to accost her for it, and she shrugged shyly. “What? Everywhere else is full…”

He sat, and though Moira tried her best to ignore him, he was tall enough to see over the back of her seat.

“Moira, what Sirius said was—”

“Save it,” Rachelle hissed. “She isn’t taking Pettigrew back.”

“But Peter—”

“Really should be here himself if he meant it,” Hannah finished.

Remus sighed. He wasn’t going to get anywhere unless he changed tactics.

As the bus started up and set itself down the cobble path leading out the school gates, Remus raised his voice and addressed the best friends instead. Appeal to the masses, and all that.

“I get it, you guys have full rights to be pissed off. I would be too. Sirius was a total dick, and James and I—”

“Said nothing—”

“Did nothing.”

“Yeah… But look, I can’t say anything for whatever happened between the two of them over Easter, but you guys should know that Pete is *really* torn up about it. Regrets it and everything. His—uhm… His *brother*… Yeah, he told him to… to give Moira space! That’s the only reason he hasn’t said anything before now. But he’s really, *really* sorry. And we are too, if it counts for anything…”

The girls shared a glance, and then deferred to Moira, who’d kept her

arms crossed and was still glaring out the bus window.

Hannah nudged him, nodding urgently; *Keep going!*

“You wanna know what Pete said? He said that… That Moira was the only one for him. No one better, and no one who knows him better… Not even us.”

The bus kept on rumbling, banging off the rough dirt road as it headed into the valley. For a while it seemed as though Remus’ efforts were all for naught.

Then Moira turned around.

“Did Sirius put you up to this?”

“What? No… I mean, he’s sorry too, if that’s what you meant.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re going to regret it if you get stuck cleaning up his messes forever.”

“Yeah, but sometimes he cleans up mine too.”

She didn’t look impressed, or like she believed a word he’d said, but neither did she spin away in a huff. Remus told himself it was something.

“Fine, Lupin. You win. I’ll talk to Peter, but Sirius can stick his apology up his arse.”

It was more than something then—it was a win.

"Fair enough."

Sirius wasn’t impressed when they got off the bus in the village, but he understood when Moira approached Peter and asked if the two of them could go off together.

“You sneaky bastard, you really are the best-worst matchmaker there is.”

“Trust me, it’s not for a lack of trying,” Remus moaned.

Because everyone wanted their alone time—and because Sirius couldn’t bear to be seen in public with Francois and Prongs Jr.—they arranged to meet back at the broomsticks as a group later in the day.

“It’s just so dumb,” Sirius was ranting. “Baby-this, father-that. I don’t get it.”

“You’ve been in a bad mood since McGonagall set the assignment,” Remus said, the two of them walking shoulder-to-shoulder as they started up the village’s high street. "Wanna tell me what that's about?"

“What, like you’re actually enjoying yourself? Don't tell me that you want to be a parent all of a sudden?”

“No, but it’s only two weeks. And it’s just a bit, anyway. James is only making fun.”

“Yeah it's a bit—it’s a *bit* annoying. And it’s insensitive.”

“Insensitive how?”

“Insensitive like—you! You just found out about Sheila! That you had a whole godparent out there who knew everything and still didn’t tell you! And then Pete goes off the rails, and you’re also dealing with your bloody dad—or *dads*—I mean, parents are just shite all around, who would ever *want* to be one? All they do is let you down...”

He could sense Sirius’ own hurt leaking out around his words. Perhaps he’d gotten a bit too comfortable when it was them, Regulus, and Mary. Their friends’ arrivals, the assignments, the jokes—maybe it was a bit much. But hating James and lashing out at Peter wasn’t fair either.

Purposely slowing their walk, Remus looked up at the grey-blue sky. It’d rained that morning, and puddles were still collecting around the roadside. A small lorry drove past, scattering their surfaces and rumbling all the way up the street. He finally stopped on a corner, and had Sirius do a turnabout to face him.

“Do you think Sheila loves me?”

“Huh?”

“Do you think she could love me, even after all this time?”

“Well... Who wouldn’t love you?”

It was such a Sirius answer. So lovely and simple.

“I care about you so much, nothing else should matter. It *doesn't* matter. So if you’re feeling bad, Sirius, you can talk to me. You know

that, right?"

Sirius wiped beneath his nose, a bit like a child. “You hypocrite. You never tell us your problems.”

Remus laughed and fit his hands into his coat pockets. “Yeah, guess I deserve that.”

“Does that mean you forgive them then? Sheila and—and your parents…?”

“Dunno,” Remus shrugged. “Might never forgive ‘em. But I’m not going to let them take the things I want away from me anymore.”

Sirius’ lips parted in further surprise. He thought for a moment, and then he smiled. The sort of smile that creased every inch of his face and had made Remus fall in love with him that very first day.

“You know, just this morning Mary was ragging on me," he said. "She said I had the emotional range of a teaspoon. Do you know what I told her?”

“That it’s closer to two teaspoons?”

“I said, ‘that’s okay, Moony’s deep enough for the both of us’."

Oh.

"And you are. I could drown in you. Couldn’t imagine a better way to go, actually.”

Now that’s *a song,* Remus thought.

Swelling with happiness, he surged forward, hugging Sirius first and then dropping an arm around his shoulder as they walked. To anyone else it might’ve looked casual, but to the two of them, it meant so much more.

After a quick pit-stop for whisky and cigarettes, they stopped in at the record shop, where Sirius badgered Graeme to put on some T. Rex and Remus sorted four crates of stock just to leave with a slightly-battered copy of *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan.*

“Not that I’m questioning your taste,” Sirius said, as they left the shop and started toward the pub; “but… Nah, I’m questioning your taste.”

“It’s got a certain song on it,” Remus said, peering down at the back of

the album sleeve. “Haven’t heard it for a while. I’d know what all the fuss is about.”

“It’s that good?”

“No. Pretty sure it’s shit, actually.”

They shared a smile.

When they arrived at the Three Broomsticks, they found their friends already waiting for them. Remus had to duck to avoid cracking his forehead against the drooping sign hanging above the pub’s doorway, but the inside was as warm and inviting as always. Near the back, James, Lily, and Marlene were set up at their usual table, a small forest of glasses already spread out in front of them.

“Oi, Padfoot!” James cried when he spotted them. “Come over here! I think I’ve finally figured out what’s got you so cross lately.”

“Oh yeah?” Sirius asked, sliding in next to James, Remus right behind.

“Yeah, completely my fault—I forgot how much the title meant to you! So here, say hello to your first godchild!” James gestured to Prongs Jr., still wrapped up in his lap. Next to him, Lily shook her head hopelessly.

“I told you it wasn’t a funny joke.”

“No?” James frowned. “Padfoot? … *Dadfoot…?”*

Sirius slumped back against the booth, and finally groaned. “I hate ya, Prongs. I love ya, but I hate ya.”

This made everyone laugh, and just like that, things were alright again. They ordered more drinks and the Broomstick’s landlady, Rosie, came over to prattle them about being nearly finished with school. Marlene told them that Lottie was visiting with some girlfriends a few tables down, and so far Peter was still missing in action after going off with Moira earlier on. Remus hoped it was a good sign, and not because she’d drowned him in the lake.

Eventually Mary made an appearance, shrugging off her winter coat while grinning ear to ear. She shoved in next to Marlene with news that she’d just refused a date with Jason Barnes, arguably one of the fittest boys in their year.

“Why’d you say no?” Marlene asked her. “You told me he’s been making eyes at you for weeks.”

Mary smiled coyly, popping a few pub peanuts into her mouth for good measure. “I almost did, but then I thought to myself, in less than two months we’ll all be going off—doing new things, in new places! And I just sorta thought that it would be nice to spend the rest of my time at school with my friends.”

Remus and Sirius shared a glance. Not even the dim lighting could hide the rosy twinge in Marlene’s cheeks after that.

Remus was relieved when Peter and Moira finally showed up. Peter stood awkwardly at the end of the table, but Moira didn’t seem interested in backing down. While James quickly cleared space for them, she regarded Sirius coolly.

“Thurnberg.”

“Black.”

This time, Sirius did not need a swift kick beneath the table. He straightened up in the booth, and raised a nod to her. “I respect anyone who can speak their mind like you did, Thurnberg—no holding back. And for what it's worth, I’m… sorry, for what I said.”

Moira glanced at Peter, softly, and nodded. “I accept your apology.”

“Moira and I are dating again,” Peter smiled.

The girls all congratulated them, and when the two were sitting, Lily leaned over and pat the girl fondly.

“Don’t ever pay any attention to what Sirius says. He’s a sour thing, especially when his friends like anyone more than him.”

“Only ‘cause it must mean they’ve gone mad! There aren’t many people more likeable than I am.”

“I can name a few,” Marlene said, counting off her fingers; “Charles Manson, Ivan the Terrible, Filch…”

It made everyone laugh, and Sirius raised his glass with a scoff. “Alright, everyone yack it up. See if you’re laughing when it’s this face that’s paying your mortgages, then you’ll all be desperate to have me __”

“Lily?”

It surprised Sirius, enough that he almost fumbled his pint. When he looked up to see what it was, he let out a heavy sigh.

“Christ, I can’t believe no one’s put a bell on you yet. What do you want, Snivellus?”

Snape miraculously held his tongue, though he did look a lot like he’d swallowed a lemon.

“Lily, I just came to offer my congrats.”

Looking surprised to be called upon, Lily raised her head and nodded cordially. “Erm, thank you, Severus… but for what?”

“I spoke with my mother this morning, and she told me the good news. She said she was chatting with your parents this morning when they mentioned that you’d gotten into Oxford.”

A round of gasps went up.

“Oxford, Lils?” Marlene demanded. “You mean you heard back from them already?”

“I–I… uh…”

“Daisy, that’s amazing!” James said. “For real? Blimey, why didn't you say anything?”

Lily was still stammering. “I—I only found out the other day. They moved me from ‘conditional’ to ‘accepted’ after Professor McGonagall wrote to them on my behalf. I was going to tell all of you tonight, I just… couldn’t find the right moment, really.”

“Yeah, it’s proper brilliant, except Snivellus, here, ruined the surprise,” said Sirius.

“It’s fine, Sirius, really—”

“Because it’s still amazing,” James said.

“It’s more than amazing,” Snape interjected haughtily; “it’s remarkable. To get into Oxford is a top achievement. In fact I was accepted as well for chemistry—”

Mary interrupted, raising her glass. "To Lily!" She cried, and they all

matched it, cheersing while Lily turned red in her booth.

“Thank you, everyone. And you too, Severus. It still doesn’t quite feel real, but... I’m afraid I’m not going to Oxford.”

“What?” They all echoed.

“Why not?” Asked James.

“Because… I’ve already accepted a different seat. At the University College of London.”

For a moment everyone was silent, until James connected the dots.

“So you’ll be in London...?”

“Starting in September, yeah!”

James nearly leapt up from his chair—only Prongs Jr., still sitting in his lap, kept him seated. “Oh, bloody hell—yes!” He cried, taking Lily and kissing her several times on either cheek. Their friends had just begun to celebrate when the good news was unfortunately interrupted once more.

“You can’t be serious,” Snape fumed. “You mean you’d actually give up a spot at the most prestigious university in the country just to chase after—after *these* bastards?!”

“If you wanna get technical then only Moony’s a bastard,” Sirius said, making Remus punch him in the arm.

“It’s my choice, Severus,” Lily said calmly. “Please tell your mother I said thank you. But I’m only going back home to Liverpool to gather my things, then I’ll be moving to London.”

Snape began to sputter; “What—? *Why?!* I… I cannot believe you!”

“She didn’t ask for your opinion, Snape,” James snarled, leaning over his bag of flour threateningly.

“And just what exactly are you possibly going to learn in London? How to fare-dodge and avoid the puddles of piss on the pavement?”

“Oh yes, some of life’s greatest lessons, naturally,” Sirius cackled. “Add in a little debauchery and hedonism and you’ve got our entire summer itinerary.” As if to prove his point, Sirius untucked a cigarette carton from his pocket and lit one up right there, blowing the smoke

in Snape's direction.

Nostrils flared, Snape remained at the end of their table, practically vibrating with rage. "This is pathetic," he snarled. "You're throwing so much away and for what?"

"It's her choice, Snape," Marlene hissed.

"It's a stupid choice!"

"Alright, I think we've all heard enough," James said firmly. "You didn't get what you wanted, but we're not interested in the fight you so badly want to pick, so just shove off."

"You'll drag her down, Potter. She's only going because you—"

"Enough!" Lily shrieked, surprising all of them. "I won't do this anymore, Severus! No more name-calling or bickering or fighting. This is *my* choice, and I'll not have you belittling me or those I care about! Now please, leave!"

"But Lily, you're making a mistake!"

"You're not hearing her!" James lashed. "You have nothing to do with this, Snape. Now get lost before I have to—" In a beat of protective anger, James had made to stand—except the argument had distracted him, and as he got up, Prongs Jr.'s sensitive paper wrapping got caught on the table edge and tore straight down the middle.

They all yelped as flour flooded the table top, dousing drinks and spilling into laps. Desperately, James went to grab for the bag, but there was no helping it; Prongs Jr.'s powdery insides slipped out between his fingers in vain.

"Oh—*not again!"* He wailed, as the rest of his friends were caught between moans and crazed laughter.

"Now you've gone and done it, Snivelly!" Sirius howled, holding his cig aloft and flicking flour at him. "You've killed a child! Lily's adoptive son, no less! I hope you're happy with yourself."

Looking repulsed, Snape shot one final glance at Lily before storming off.

"It's not in my hair, is it?" Mary fretted, desperately trying to wipe the dust from her shirt-front.

“No,” Marlene giggled, “but it is right there—!” She finished by poking her friend on the tip of the nose, leaving a white outline behind as Mary scoffed.

As other patrons turned to watch them scoop handfuls of flour out of their laps, Rosie reappeared at the table-side, a rag in both hands and disbelief written across her face. “Jesus Mary and Joseph—what happened?!”

“I killed my child,” James sobbed, leaving white handprints across his face.

“It’s just flour,” Remus clarified. “School assignment. The bag ripped.”

“Yes, well it’s going everywhere,” the landlady grimaced.

“We’ll clean it,” Lily assured her, wiping flour from her chin with one hand and comforting James with the other.

“Sorta sad, isn’t it?” Sirius said to Remus. “I was barely a god-dad for an entire hour. If you ask me, the whole thing was completely half-baked.”

“Was that supposed to be a pun, Padfoot?”

“Did’ya like it? I got more. You really *bread* my mind, Moony. Now I’m on a *roll*. Or how ‘bout—” He dipped his pinky finger into the flour and licked it; “the kid was a real *raw* talent.*”*

“You’re terrible.”

Sirius began to snigger, and then stubbed his cigarette out in one of the tiny white mountains on the table. “Maybe. Call the whole thing a *recipe* for disaster.”

“Oi.” Reaching over Remus, James clapped Sirius in the back of the head, sending flour everywhere. “Where’s your compassion, Padfoot? That was your godson, it was.”

With his dark hair sprinkled white, Sirius just shrugged. “I’m already numb. Forgot to tell ya, but Knobby might have taken a tumble out of a third floor window this morning.”

Remus gaped at him; *“Might have?”*

In answer, Sirius dug a hand into his pocket and pulled out a single baggie of flour. “Reckon half a cup will be enough to earn us decent

marks with McGonagall, Moons?"

* * *

They ended up staying late, scrubbing flour from the cracks in the Broomsticks' floorboards for so long that they had to make a run for it just to make the final bus. James had to carry what was left of Prongs Jr. out in a shopping bag, and when Lottie saw them all covered head to toe in white, she laughed so hard she nearly dropped Francois.

"At least one good thing came of today," James said wistfully, indicating toward the back of the bus, where Peter and Moira were stowed away, grinning and smiling and positively made-up.

"You know what this means, right?" Sirius asked. "We're gonna be stuck with Thurnberg 'til we die."

"Little victories, Padfoot, little victories."

Back at the dorms, James didn't even bother showering. Instead he made straight for the kitchenette to perform what he was calling 'emergency surgery' on what was left of his son. Too tired to make fun of him and too weirded out to help, Remus and Sirius made their way upstairs before anyone else could catch an eyeful of their ghostly get-up.

"How the fuck did it get into my belly-button?" Sirius mused, looking down at his bare chest as Remus emerged from the toilet, freshly showered.

"It was behind my ears too," said Remus, rubbing a towel over his head. Sirius glanced at him, moving to prop himself up on his bed with his elbows.

"Are you sure you don't want to hear the story of how Knobby ended up falling from the Priori Block's third floor?"

"Save it for McGonagall, we're gonna need a decent sob story if we don't want to fail," Remus said. He pulled the towel from his head and came forward, bending down so he could lock Sirius' lips with a kiss.

Suddenly the door flew open and Peter raced inside, making the two of them jump apart as though they'd just been given an electric shock.

“Hey lads!” Peter cried, barely glancing their way as he beelined for his own bed.

“H–Hey Wormtail,” Sirius started. “Said goodnight to Thurnberg already?”

“Not quite!”

“Things are going well then?” Asked Remus.

“Yeah, brill!” Peter threw open the hutch at the end of his bed and began digging through it. “I told Moira I was sorry for the way I acted over Easter—I was a proper dick. But I think she’s even coming around to the idea of the band! You think we could still get into the campus gardens at this time? I wanna take her out and explain everything properly. ”

“Probably, if you’re quick about it.”

“Sorry for freezing you guys out earlier,” Peter said, tugging on his spare trainers. “I was just upset about Moira.”

“We get it, mate,” said Remus. “We’re just glad you’ve made up.”

“Thanks. You two done with the shower then? I gotta piss but I don’t want to keep Moira waiting too long.”

“S’all yours,” Sirius called, and Peter nodded at him before disappearing inside.

“Well, glad that’s over with.” Reaching for the ashtray on his bedside, Sirius picked up one of his unlit cigarettes while Remus sagged against the floor next to him.

“Sirius… we gotta tell him.”

“What—like right *now?”*

Remus pulled the cigarette from Sirius' lips, leaning in until they were nose to nose. “Sirius, it’s *time.”*

“Okay,” he sighed, snatching back the cigarette. “How d’ya wanna go about it then? ‘Hey, Pete, just so you know Moony and I are dating and while you were fighting with your girlfriend, we spent all of Easter shagging on the common room floor. But don’t worry, we never touched your bed’.”

“Very funny.”

“Should be, I got the rug burns to prove it.”

Remus shook his head. “There’s gotta be an easier way. How’d we do it with James and Lily? I can hardly remember…”

“That’s ‘cause you were too busy having a fit,” Sirius snorted; “We could always tell him about Sim. About how he tried to kiss you on their front drive.”

“Not a chance.”

“You’re right, imagine the fallout.”

“It’d be catastrophic.”

“More like cataclysmic.”

“I think you mean calamitous.”

“Mm… God, I love that big brain of yours, Lupin.” Then Sirius leaned in and kissed him.

“Hey, Sirius, I think I found your—” Peter stopped dead outside the bathroom doorway. “What are you doing?”

Remus pulled back, turning to look at Peter with eyes like saucers. “Pete! We were just—uhm—!”

“Snogging,” Sirius said, very boldly. “We were snogging.”

“… Why?”

Sirius glanced at Remus, then back at Peter, and shrugged. “Because we… love each other?”

A look of floundering confusion crossed Peter’s face, then what could’ve been realisation. For a second Remus almost thought he’d gotten it—before his mouth split into a dismissive smile.

“Right, sure. Very funny, you daft tarts,” Peter said, crossing the room toward them. “Here’s your ring, Black. You should keep better hold of it, I just about knocked it down the drain.”

“Oh shit, that’s mine actually.” Remus reached out and took the ring, slipping it back onto his own finger as Sirius gaped at him.

“You took it off?!”

“Only ‘cause my hands were still covered in flour! Must’ve forgotten it on the side of the sink… Cheers, Pete.”

At the thanks, Peter gave Remus a funny look. “You sure? It’s got Sirius’ initials inside.”

A beat passed between them, and Remus looked at Sirius again, who carefully sat up on his bed. “Yeah... and it’s Moony’s ring."

“Why would Remus be wearing a ring with your initials in it?”

Both of them leaned forward pointedly, and Sirius beckoned Peter on with his hand. “Because we’re…”

It was as though the gears began turning behind Peter’s eyes. “You’re —”

“Buggering each other, yeah.”

“Sirius! I’m going to push *you* out of a third floor window.”

“What? You said you wanted to tell him!”

“I did, but—shit…”

Peter continued staring at them with disapproving eyes. “You mean the two of you are actually…?”

“We meant to tell you with the others,” Remus urged. “But then things got complicated and we were worried that… well…”

“Others? You mean James knows?”

Maybe it would’ve been better to lie, but it would’ve done nothing in the end. And so they nodded.

“Since January.”

“January?!” Peter half-shouted. “You guys have been doing th—*this?!* —since *January?!”*

“A bit longer than that…” Remus confessed. “But yeah.”

“So the two of you… In our room?!”

“Yeah, *our* room,” Sirius shot defensively. “As if you haven’t done god knows what with Thurnberg in here.”

“That’s different! Moira’s a girl, and Moony, he’s a—he’s a—!”

“A guy?”

“Yes!”

“Blimey!” Sirius cried. “Moony you never told me that!”

“Sirius, *don’t.”*

“Why not? Macdonald didn't have such a reaction, and she found out the same way.”

“You told Mary?” Peter demanded. “Who else knows then?!”

“Evans,” Sirius answered. “And McKinnon, though she sorta figured it out on her own.”

“No, I told her,” Remus rebuffed.

“You did? I thought she called it.”

“No, Lottie was the one who figured it out on her—” Remus covered his mouth quickly, but the damage was already done.

“You gotta be fucking joking,” Peter said. “Does *everyone* know but me?!”

“It wasn’t intentional.”

“Bollocks!”

“We figured you wouldn’t want to know,” Sirius said. “That you’d rather be blissfully unaware.”

“Not when everyone else knows! Not when you guys are having a great laugh behind my back!”

“We weren’t laughing, Pete. We were—”

"Screw you!"

Before Remus could even finish, Peter had gone from the room. Just marched straight out, without another word. Dread welling up inside

of him, Remus jumped to his feet and made to go after him, but faltered before he'd even made it halfway to the door.

"Well, now he knows," Sirius said, solemnly flipping the cigarette around in his hands.

"Do you think he'll tell anyone?" Remus murmured, still staring at the door.

"No. But that doesn't mean he'll ever talk to us again. Maybe Marauders will be looking for a new drummer after all."

"He didn't seem offended," Remus tried meekly. "That we were both blokes, that is. Just that we didn't say anything."

"A poison dart frog doesn't *seem* poisonous, either."

And with that, Sirius turned over on his bed.

Neither of them ventured out, and Peter didn't return. Remus wanted to stay close to Sirius—to let them comfort and reassure one another—but he was too wound up. In the end they stayed on their own beds, not talking. Near curfew, James finally returned with a half-sellotaped Prongs Jr. under one arm and his shirt and trousers still covered in flour. He seemed breathless, like he'd taken each set of stairs at a run.

"Hey," he panted; "Have either of you seen Pete? I saw him walking out and he seemed kind of off."

"We told him, Prongs," Sirius said, completely blasé. "He knows about Moony and me."

"Oh… Oh shit."

"Yeah."

"O–Okay. And I'm assuming it went…?"

"Swell," Remus answered from his own bed, nose tucked into a book.

No one said anything for several seconds, and James simply stood in front of the door, chewing his bottom lip nervously.

"Well hey, i–it's okay, right? I'll talk to him. He'll come around, I know it."

"Glad you're so confident," Sirius said, popping up to set a record on

the turntable.

Still appearing antsy, James started across the room and set Prongs Jr. down on his bedside. “There’s, erm… There’s something else too.”

“Oh no, has the Queen died?” Sirius asked sarcastically. “Or no, wait —it’s not John Lennon is it?”

“No.”

“Paul McCartney? He always was the most insufferable Beatle.”

“No!” James turned around, and looked straight at Remus. “It’s Buchanan. She’s back.”

Chapter End Notes

As far as I’m aware, bleached flour wasn't banned in Europe until the 90s.
'Delia Smith' was/is a famous British baker. She actually baked the cake that was on the front cover of the Rolling Stones’ “Let It Bleed” album.
'Gaffer tape' is just duct tape.
A 'dummie' is another name for a pacifier.
The Bob Dylan song Remus is talking about on the 'Freewheelin' Bob Dylan' album is "A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall" -- the song that was playing in Hope's hospital room the last time he spoke to her, and the song that's caused him so much trauma consequently. I like to think this is his first step toward healing, and ofc Sirius was there to see it <3

As a final note, I know I didn't deliver on that 'something else' I promised in the end notes of last chapter. I just got too busy over the holidays. But if you're really good, I might post it alongside next week's chapter.

Much love - mot xo

Chapter 92: Blue

Chapter Summary

"What sort of blue?"

Chapter Notes

Note: This chapter picks up immediately following the end of chapter 91. Apologies to any people who have to wait until late in their evenings for these Sunday chapters to be released, lol. I'm in the PST timezone so I'm quite far behind the majority of readers.

Massive Trigger Warning for this chapter: Mental illness involving adults and children as well as strong intrusive thoughts (Remus) and mental trauma. I will say it loudly for those in the back **This chapter touches heavily on Hope Lupin's poor mental health.**
Here is a tumblr post I made a while ago stating what Hope was experiencing, however this has been a theme throughout Cadence and should not come as a shock, though I understand why it could be read as upsetting.

Trust me when I say I don't take any of these themes lightly, nor should any reader. Poor mental health is a hard topic to handle within media, but just because someone has poor mental health does not mean they aren't capable of being a good person who is worthy of care and love. If you are at all sensitive to this, please do not read this chapter or come to my tumblr to ask for a summary. As long as I'm active, I will always give it, no matter how long it's been. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don't let me down,
Don't let me down;
Don't let me down,
Don't let me down…

- "Don't Let Me Down" The Beatles, 1969

Sheila was beloved. Remus had always known that. She looked for the

troubled ones, the lost causes, and accepted them even when they shouted obscenities right in her face. She was kind, often too kind… too patient. But she was beloved. And as much as he hated her for what she'd done, Remus couldn't help but love her too.

Do you think she could love me, even after all this time?

"You don't have to go," Sirius told him. "Not if it'll make you sad."

*I am sad. I'm always sad. I have been **sad** for eighteen years.*

And who's fault is that?

The thought came violently; intrusive and punishing. He hadn't had one in so long—Sirius' influence, probably. *Stupid Remus...* And here he'd thought it must've meant that he was getting better.

You don't care! It rang, like some sick children's song. *You don't care, you don't care, you don't caaaaaaaaare!*

"Moony?"

Your fault, your fault!

"I'm going to see her, Sirius."

"… Alright then."

Remus had never been to the teachers' quarters before. Considered out of bounds to all students, the brick and mortar building sat just behind Castle Hall and boasted the largest car park on campus save the trolley depot. They had to scale the main gate to get inside, but it was easy enough for the two seasoned pranksters.

Unsurprisingly, James had gone after Peter. Remus had no idea whether it would help or what James even planned to say to him, but he didn't have the energy to argue. If Peter wanted to be angry with them then he could be angry, but Remus could only tolerate one relationship imploding at once. Maybe it was selfish, but if Sheila really was back then he wasn't going to wait. Not until he got his answers.

"Shit... Fuck!"

Remus threw his hands down, hearing the sharp *ting* as the bobby pins disappeared into the dark. He'd been working on the front door's lock for ages, but it was heavy and the wrong kind—harder to pick than

the usual pin-and-tumbler ones scattered about campus.

"What if we just knock on her window?" Sirius suggested, standing behind Remus and looking antsy.

"We don't know which window is her's."

"Eh, maybe we get lucky."

Remus sighed, haggardly. Even if they did manage to somehow get inside, there was no guarantee they'd even be able to figure out which door belonged to her. One wrong move and they could be in detention for the next month.

"We could wait until Monday," Sirius said, pressing a hand on his shoulder. "At least that way you know she'll be—"

"I don't want to wait until Monday, Sirius!"

The shout had poured out of him on accident, and Remus was instantly sorry. "I'm sorry," he murmured, standing up beneath the buzzing yellow entry light. "Sorry..."

"You don't have to be sorry." Sirius raised a hand, pressing his palm to the side of Remus' neck. It was cool; comforting.

"You can go," he said. "I'll figure it out on my own. No need for you to get caught up too."

"Not a chance. I'm here, Moons. Always."

Remus smiled, agonisingly. *What would I ever do without you?*

Just then the gate surrounding the building's car park gave a loud buzz. It began rolling back and a van drove through, its headlamps reflecting off of the first floor windows as it pulled up to the curb, cornering them on the front doorstop.

"Quick!" Sirius hissed, stumbling away from the doors and practically pushing Remus into a thatch of the nearby bushes. Had they dawdled for even a second longer they would've been caught by the delivery man pushing a heavy laundry cart from his van into the building.

"We have to do our laundry and they get theirs *delivered?"* Sirius whispered harshly. "Oh, that is so not fair."

"Shh!" Remus hissed, elbowing him to be quiet. Luckily the delivery

man didn't seem to notice. He whistled as he passed their hiding spot, a large silver keyring jingling on his belt. It was the perfect opportunity, but in his hurry to hide, Remus had gotten his shoelaces caught up in the lower brambles of the hedge.

"Sirius, the door!" He moaned, as the delivery guy pushed his cart inside and the door began to shut behind him.

"Yeah, I got it!" Sirius grunted, pushing free of the hedge. He caught the edge of the door at the last possible second, sliding his fingers in between the gap. After freeing himself from the bush, Remus joined him in the doorway. He had several leftover leaves in his hair, and brushed them away while Sirius smiled. "You missed one," he said, picking a stray twig from the front of his jumper. Remus caught his hand and kissed it, trying to keep his own from shaking. Sirius only looked at him sadly.

"Are you sure you wanna do this, Moons?"

"I'm never sure," he murmured into his knuckles, "but I'm tired of waiting."

There was not much to be said after that. Together they slipped soundlessly into the building. It was already past supper time, but unless every Hawkings professor made it a habit to retire at eight o'clock Saturdays, then they still ran a high risk of being caught. Thankfully they were not left to wander around aimlessly for long. The building's lobby was brightly lit, and next to a wall of tiny post boxes they found a directory that was most likely meant for deliveries. They scanned the list until they found her; *S. Buchanan, 3F9.*

"So..." Sirius raised his arms for a stretch; "Elevator or the stairs?"

They took the stairwell, which was made of cement and echoed horribly, and ran the risk of being caught only once when Professor Bilshin stepped out to collect his post.

"I could'a gone my whole life without seeing old Bil' in a robe," Sirius shuttered, when they finally emerged on the third floor. "Reckon he was naked under it?"

"I don't really want to think about it to be honest," Remus murmured, busy scanning the golden door numbers as they rushed down the hallway. Sirius had to practically skip to keep up to him, but Remus was hardly paying attention. He counted the flat numbers as they went; *F4, F5, F6—*

Just as they were nearing a hallway corner, Sirius grabbed Remus by the front of his coat and pinned him to the wall.

"Watch it!" He hissed. "Laundry dead ahead."

They flattened themselves against the wall, and Remus peeked around the corner to find the laundry deliverer from earlier. He was standing in front of one of the flats—*3F9*.

He should've expected the smile when she answered. Sheila always smiled.

"Oh, Linus. Hello. Final round of the evening, is it?"

"Yes'm. Just get in yourself?"

"About a half hour ago, yes."

It was like hearing her again for the first time. Remus didn't know if he wanted her to hold him, or to scream in her face.

Stop that. Don't be kind—I hate you!

Outwardly she looked no different from the way she always did, and yet something was off. From his hiding spot, he forced himself to look past the vibrant purple dress, the polka dot tights, the golden butterfly clip in her hair. What he found was dullness and exhaustion. The bags under her eyes had darkened, and the faint stripes of grey at her temples had grown more pronounced. Beneath her colourful shell, it was as though she'd aged ten years in only a few short weeks. Still she smiled.

"Apologies for bothering you so late, Mrs. Buchanan, but I got that laundry you sent out before you left," said the delivery man as he began digging around in his cart. "Figured you'd be wanting them clean linens for when you got back."

"My, that's very thoughtful of you." She took the linens as he passed them to her, and afterwards, she handed him a small package wrapped in paper. "And, just before you go... This is for you. I thought you might enjoy it."

"For me?"

"Yes, I was digging around in some boxes back home, you know, trying to clear up the clutter? Anyway, it's just a little book on bird

watching. Colin once got it into his head that he might pick it up as a hobby, but I'm afraid neither of us quite had the patience for it. I thought maybe you'd get better use out of it."

Linus peeled back the wrappings like a kid on Christmas. He softened once he'd gotten a look at the cover, and finally pulled off his cap.

"That's very kind 'a ya, m'um. And... Apologies for your loss. Your husband was a smart man, picking you for a wife."

She placed a hand on his shoulder, and Remus felt his own twitch.

"Thank you, Linus. You're very kind."

It was agony waiting for the man to move on, even more so to see her smile and wave—*stop it, stop it, stop it! Your fault, your fault!*—but then Linus rolled his cart out of the way and she finally looked up. He knew instantly that she had spotted them by the way her smile vanished.

There, Remus thought bitterly; *You finally see me.*

"Moons...?"

Sirius was prodding him gently on the back, but Remus couldn't see anything but her. He watched as she looked sadly down at the stack of linens she was holding and ran her hand across the soft lace. Then she nodded, and stepped away from the open door—disappearing back into her home. It was an invitation, Remus knew. And it scared him.

"I'm gonna go in," he mumbled, still staring at the flat's open door. Ever the brave one, Sirius nodded and began marching straight for it.

"Right. Let's go in then."

Remus caught his arm.

"Sirius, I-I love you, but... I think I..."

It didn't matter if he could hardly form a coherent sentence; as always, Sirius was reading his mind. "Hey," he whispered, reaching up to hold Remus' cheek; "Don't worry about me. I already had plans anyway. Gonna go see if Bilshin's itching for company. Heard he makes a mean cup of tea."

Remus chuffed, like a laugh that turned sad at the end, and Sirius, the liar, hugged him tightly.

"I'll be right here if you need me, Moons."

Remus held him for a long time, relishing in the comfort. Then he went to face his fears.

There was no missing the flat as hers; there was a coat rack stood by the door, draped in at least half a dozen patterned rain coats. On the wall hung a portrait of Duke Ellington, and every inch of the floor was covered in some eye-catching rug or other. There were stacks upon stacks of books, music sheets, and records piled everywhere—most of them jazz—and photographs sat strewn about in frames, though Remus tried hard not to look at them. Instead he stared at the boxes, an obvious addition to the room. Some were labelled*; kitchen, bath, bedroom...*

Colin's things.

Distantly he could hear the sound of her tinkering in the kitchen, and when she returned she was carrying two mugs of tea.

"Excuse the mess," she said. "I thought we might have tea while we talked."

"You mean you actually want to talk?"

"Don't you, Remus?"

He glared at her, but she was used to such things as angry children. Smiling meekly, she set the mugs of tea down on the coffee table, using a book on music theory for a coaster. She gestured to the sofa chair across from her, but Remus didn't trust himself enough to sit. Better to be uncomfortable; he had plenty of uncomfortable things to say.

"Do you want to tell me how you got in here?"

"Snuck in after the laundry guy."

"Hm. Clever thing," she hummed, stirring her tea. "And where has Mr. Black gone? I hope he's not out causing too much trouble."

"I'm not here to talk about Sirius," Remus snapped. "I'm here to talk about you. And me. 'Cause it's a related thing, isn't it?"

It was harsh, but no less than she deserved. With a slow sip, she swallowed and set down the tea cup.

"Would you like to sit?"

"No."

She sighed. "I understand why you're angry."

"No, you don't." Remus felt his lower lip begin to tremble. "Where were you—where did you go?"

"Glasgow. It's where our home was."

"Was...? You're back to stay for good then?"

“Mhm, yes. I love Hawkings, and I love teaching. I think I would miss it if I never came back.”

“So does this mean your husband…”

She nodded, hands folded tightly in her lap. “Colin’s passed away, yes. We had a service for him in early April. It was beautiful, but I needed to take some time.”

The sudden urge to lash out rose inside Remus. No one had ever given *him* time. “I don’t want to feel bad for you,” he said lowly.

“I understand.”

“I’m angry with you.”

“I… understand.”

“Furious, even. I hate you. There are so many things I want to say to you. Things that you… That you deserve!”

“You can say them. I promise not to be angry.”

He almost wished she was. At least if she were angry then they could shout at each other, be equals. As it was, he was still just the angry kid.

Your fault, your fault!

"Remus, I am sorry for everything I’ve—"

"SHUT UP!" He wailed, resisting the urge to slam his fist through the nearest pile of books. “You knew what you were doing! You put that photo there to fuck with my head, and you didn't even care! How long

did you think it would take me to find it? A week? *A YEAR?!"*

"Remus..."

"You didn't even care!" He said again. "You left that photo in there hoping that by the time I found it, you'd already be long gone. That I'd be grown up and you wouldn't have to worry about taking responsibility anymore! Like some sick fucking fantasy!"

"No! No, never."

"Liar! You're a liar—in fact, you're worse than a liar! Because you couldn't even tell me the truth yourself! You... You're a coward, just like her. You let me find out that you're my fucking godmother and then you disappeared. But you—you were supposed to be better! I *believed* in you!"

As his voice began to shatter, Sheila's mouth parted in pain. She stood up from her chair and started towards him, but Remus only stepped away, too afraid to let her close. She stopped then, and covered her mouth to hide the shakiness in her voice

"Remus, what I-I did to you… was so indescribably wrong. You can't imagine how sorry I am."

"I don't care how sorry you are!" He swore, losing his patience and slamming his hands into the back of the sofa chair ahead of him. "You know Linus the bloody laundry driver better than you know me! But I was owed! You owed it to me—all of you! I don't care if you were in fucking Scotland with a sick husband—I could've used you! I might not have wanted you—probably would've hated you, but dammit—I could've *used* you. You're my godmother, it was *your* job to protect me and you threw it away! And now… Now people pity me… I have everything—a home, friends who love me—and yet I'm pitied because the people who were supposed to want me—*didn't.* And it's YOUR FAULT!"

"Oh, Remus—"

"No! Don't you 'oh Remus' me! Just tell the fucking truth! I'm eighteen! Tell me *why* you did it! Why you never told me who you really are—*TELL ME!"*

He was come apart all over again. Confronting her was more terrible than he could've ever imagined, but they were both in it now. It was obvious in the way Sheila covered her face—hiding the tears that had

started trailing down her cheeks with her hands.

“I’m so sorry,” she pleaded, over and over again. *“Sorry—so sorry. What I did—I’m so sorry, Remus…”*

“Tell. Me.” He croaked. “Didn’t you… Didn’t you want me?”

“Yes,” she whimpered, “yes, oh yes. I swear, Remus, I wanted you from the first moment I held you in my arms. You were so precious, and I loved Hope more than anything. And then when I saw you in my classroom, I thought that maybe… but you..."

"But *what?"*

"You didn’t know who I was, Remus. I was a stranger to you, and for a while I thought it was for the best. You had your family, and I’d already promised your father I wouldn’t tell you anything.”

“You mean Tad didn’t want—”

“No.” Sheila shook her head sadly. “Not Tad. Tad—he... Oh Christ, we were so young. Hope, me—all of us. Just young and stupid. I’m sorry, Remus, but I haven’t spoken to Tad in years."

Remus felt his heart lurch, but it was what he’d suspected. “Lyall then.”

Sheila’s entire face creased into a horrible sob, and she dropped her head in shame. “Yes... it was Lyall. You see, when Colin and I met we were still in college. He was so brilliant back then, he could play anything under the sun. But he got in on scholarship, and his family was poor. So when I told my parents we were getting married they disowned me.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Everything,” she wept. “Colin was an aspiring musician in London, and I was just a simple school teacher. We had no money, and when he became ill and couldn't work anymore, I had to stay home and take care of him. I never resented it, never, but life can be cruel, Remus. We were drowning and Colin needed more than what I could give him. I went to your parents for help, but Hope wouldn’t see me. She was still so angry... Your father had to go behind her back to help us, and in the end he agreed to finance all Colin’s hospice care as long as I never tried to contact either of you again.”

“… Why?” He couldn’t think of anything else to say. He wished he’d listened to his gut and just run away.

“Because I knew about Tad, and he wanted you to be a Lupin. He wanted to keep his wife and son, no matter what.”

Suddenly Remus felt like he was drowning too. Couldn't get a breath in. His brain wouldn't shut up—*I hate him! I hate him! I wish he was dead.*

The thought was too much. He staggered, enough so that he had to grab onto one of the sofa chairs just to support himself. Immediately Sheila came forward, but Remus simply threw an arm out. *“Don’t,”* he hissed, before fisting the front of his shirt to help himself calm down. She flinched, but did not back away. Nor did she try to touch him again.

“Remus, you're right. I am a coward,” she said, with all the sadness of a thousand lonely nights; “I took the money your father offered and moved Colin and I back to Glasgow. I told myself it would be better for everyone. Hope would get better, as would Colin, and you would grow up loved.”

"Do you hear yourself?" He echoed. "Loved? No, all you did was keep more family from me. You kept *yourself* from *me.”*

Sheila nodded, unable to deny it. “I’m so sorry.”

“It's not enough, not by half. The world may not be fair but I deserved better, from all of you. So I want to know. I want to know why the two of you fought. You and Hope."

She stared at him, then her eyes fell to the floor.

"No more secrets," he said gravely. "If you lie to me now, I’ll know it, and I will never forgive you. Not for as long as I live.”

A beat passed between them, and Remus suddenly regretted ever sending Sirius away. It would've been easier to have him there to hear it, rather than have to say the words himself again later.

"Alright, I will tell you," Sheila said finally. "But first you have to sit down."

He wanted to say no, but couldn't find a good enough reason to throw it back in her face. He *needed* to know, and like her, he was tired.

"I need you to understand just how sick your mother was," Sheila started, once they were both sitting quietly across from one another. She thumbed her mug of tea anxiously, and often glanced at the photograph of a man sitting on the mantle. Remus didn't have to ask whether it was Colin or not.

"It was not a good situation for anyone, Remus, let alone a baby."

"I don't care what you thought about the 'situation', I want to know why the two of you fought. Why didn't I grow up knowing about you?"

She sighed. “Because I was the one who told Lyall she needed help.”

"... You?"

"Yes," she said grimly, wiping a few stray hairs from her face with shaky fingers. “Hope—she... She would have these breakdowns, just scream herself hoarse. It started about a year before you were born. Some days it was about Lyall, other days it was about Tad, some—nothing at all. She would just scream, Remus… And then you were born and for a while she seemed well again. She was so happy to hold you, hardly ever put you down. We thought it was over..."

"You're saying she was crazy?"

"No, not always. Most days were wonderful, you would've never known the difference. But then you were born, and she became fixated on you. She wouldn’t let anyone near you, not even Lyall. Then her outbursts got worse and I... Well, I told Lyall he should have her looked at, just for her own safety. At first they just chalked it up to pregnancy and mood swings, a traumatic after-birth. Later when the symptoms persisted the doctors started calling it, ‘severe mental depression’. It was rubbish of course, nobody really knew what that meant. They just stuffed her with medications, hoping something would fix it. When it didn't, the depression became ‘mania’. I didn’t want to believe it at first, but how could I not? One moment she was laughing and speaking to you clear as day, and the next she’s throwing herself down the bloody stairs—!”

She lapsed into silence for a moment, clutching her cup hard enough that her knuckles went white.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean that. It's just... we were worried. We didn't want her to hurt herself, and it almost always became worse whenever you were involved. I didn’t want to believe she could actually hurt

you, but one day, during one of my visits she was rocking you in your nursery. I got up to make us some tea and—and when I came back she was... She was trying to smother you in your crib. Oh Remus..." She shook her head, looking ragged. "That was the first time she was committed to the hospital. Lyall swore me to secrecy, he didn't want them to take you away from her. But Hope blamed me for telling him, and I couldn't even argue. But she was so sick, Remus, I swear."

He knew she was telling the truth. Even now, at eighteen, Remus could still remember the weeks his mother used to go on her 'holidays'. She'd be gone and no one could tell him what it was she'd left him for, and whenever she returned she'd always felt... empty, somehow. Like she wasn't really there. She could see him, hear him, but she wasn't the mum he knew.

"Your mother deserved better than those doctors," Sheila told him. "She was a *good* girl. And she loved you, she... She just needed more help."

"Did you know then that Tad was my real father?" *Don't lie, don't lie.* "Did she tell you?"

Sheila shook her head. "I knew the two of them were having an affair and that she was probably in love with him, but I think things changed when she found out she was pregnant. She was probably very scared, Remus."

"Scared enough not to tell her best friend the truth?"

She shrugged, sadly. "She wanted her baby to grow up with a father."

"No, she wanted her lover! She was always changing her mind. I remember how she used to follow him around like a lost fucking puppy, she didn't care!"

"She cared, I know it. We're all just selfish in love."

He was still angry, and he didn't want her words to bother him, but they did. Remus knew exactly what it was to be selfish. His selfishness had almost doomed him and Sirius from the start; it'd never solved anything. When he was in love, only one thing had ever helped.

Remus raised his head.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive you, but I'm glad you told me the truth."

"I am too," she said. "You are so brave, and I swear, Remus, I will never lie to you again. You deserve better, just like your mum did. And if you'd let me, I would like to be in your life. Even if it's just as your music teacher."

And so, Remus Lupin was at a crossroads. He could go right, and live unhindered by the past he so resented, free from any bonds made by so-called family. Or he could go left, and begin his trek through poisonous jungles of hurt and anger and resentment all while not knowing if it'd even be worth it in the end. Those were the choices; go right, alone, or left, with her. It almost seemed like an easy solution for someone who'd never put much stock into any adult, but she'd said she wanted him. And in the end that's all anyone could really hope for.

"I can't forgive you for what you did," he said, "but I don't want you to go. I want you in my life, if you're willing."

The look on Sheila's face was like blue skies after a month of rain. "Oh," she sobbed, "yes. Yes, please. I would like that very much."

"No more second chances though. I... I can't do it again."

"I know. I swear it."

He nodded, and then noticed a ticking on his cheek. Reaching up, he touched his fingers to his face only to have them come away wet. It scared him slightly to wonder how long he'd been crying, and whether his tears had influenced her decision. That thought—*that one*—was the one that broke the camel's back.

He began to cry, for his mother, but also for himself, and as he wept she came to him. She held him, and he did not push her away.

“I love you, Remus,” she whispered. "You are so loved."

They clung to each other for a long time, and through it all Remus was reminded of Mrs. Potter, and how it'd felt to be held by her. A motherly rock, a gentle hand over the forehead. Perhaps Sheila hadn't had as much practice, but there was time. There was always time.

When the tears had ebbed, Sheila released him and crouched by the foot of the chair. "You're okay," she told him, "You're okay."

He nodded, feeling like a used tissue, and using her thumbs, she wiped the tears from his cheeks as they both sucked back several sniffles.

“Guess this means we’re family,” he croaked.

“Guess so,” she answered.

“I don’t know a thing about you,” Remus confessed. “I mean, I know you like music and have questionable taste in fashion, but… not much else.”

She beamed; in all her beloved kindness. “How about we start with something small then?"

"Like what?"

"Like... I hate parsnips. I *love* tomatoes. And my favourite colour is orange, like a sunset. Now you go.”

"I... I like sweet things."

"Oh yes, I knew that."

"Yeah, and—uhm, I don't really like mushrooms."

She stuck her tongue out. "They're just fungus anyway. And your favourite colour?"

“Blue.”

“What sort of blue?"

Remus thought. *Sirius, Sirius.*

"A very specific kind."

* * *

He had waited for him. Of course he had. The dear idiot.

He’d fallen asleep on the bench in the hallway, head tilted back against the cinder brick wall. Remus bent down in front of him to wake him, and gently squeezed Sirius’ shoulder until he’d jolted awake.

"Ngh—*I'm not out of bounds!"*

“It's me.”

"Moons...?" Sirius wiped his eyes. "Shit... didn't mean to fall asleep."

"Surprised you could, what with all my shouting."

"You were shouting?" He sounded concerned.

"Only a little."

Sirius peered at him. Then he brought his hands up and gently traced beneath Remus' eyes with the soft pads of his thumbs. “You’ve been crying.”

“Yeah,” Remus said honestly. “I was sad.”

“Are you still sad?”

“A little. But I’m glad I did it.” Leaning in, Remus pressed his mouth to Sirius’, who kissed him back. Slowly their lips parted, but rather than coming apart, they simply dissolved into a tight hug. Sirius slipped down from his bench so they could be even closer, straddling him and wrapping his arms tightly around Remus’ neck.

“M'proud of you,” he murmured, as Remus’ shoulders began to tremble.

They held each other like that for a while, uncaring if anyone were around to see it. But it was late anyway, and when Sirius finally peeled himself away, Remus had no tears left in the bucket.

“Come on then, let’s get you home," Sirius said, picking him up off the floor. "I think a nice, soothing bath is in order."

“Sorry for making you take care of me all the time,” Remus mumbled.

“Don’t be stupid. We take care of each other.”

Despite the late hour, James was waiting for them back at the dorm. He glanced up from his A-Levels text and smiled hopefully, but Remus only had enough energy left to collapse down onto his bed.

“Where’s Pete?” Sirius asked cooly.

James’ smile faded. “Just needs some time, I think. You two proper spooked him, doing it the way you did.”

“I’m sorry our relationship is so shocking, but he’s the one who ran off."

"Sirius, do we have to do this now?" Remus asked. Sirius glanced at him and shook his head.

"Sorry."

Across the room, James sat up on his bed. "I didn’t know you'd told Mary and Lottie."

"Potter, Moony's asked for quiet."

"But you should've said something, don't you think?" James reasoned. "Even just helped him understand a bit more, instead of laughing at him. I mean, hell, I was shocked when you told me—not that I have an issue with it or anything... But you didn't think he'd be upset to be the last to know out of everyone? Wouldn't you be upset?"

"That has nothing to do with any of this," Sirius said staunchly. "It's not as if we planned the order on purpose. Mary was by accident. Lottie figured it out on her own. It's not our fault Pete's too thick—”

"Don't be a twat, Padfoot!"

The shout was so sudden, especially for James. Probably very unused to it, Sirius peeled off his coat and marched into the toilet. Remus watched him go and sighed, thinking about how he could really use a month-long nap.

“I didn't mean to shout," James said, guiltily thumbing his textbook.

"I know, Prongs."

"I'm just worried. I agreed on this band stuff so that we could stay together, but if this is how it's gonna be, I don't think we'll last."

Remus' stomach sank like a heavy stone. "You're probably right..."

"You don’t have to explain yourselves to me," James called. "But will you at least talk to him? For me?”

“Sure, Prongs."

James' shoulders seeped with relief and smiled at him again. “How were things with Buchanan? Did you sort it?”

“Mostly. I promise to tell you everything later.”

He nodded in understanding. “Okay, Moons.”

Trying not to appear sheepish, Remus kicked off his boots and followed Sirius into the bathroom. He hadn't locked it, and when he strode inside he found Sirius already filling the tub, muttering darkly to himself;

"Acting like he's the one who's been wronged… little rat…" Sirius straightened up when he saw him, and turned around with a hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry," he muttered, "you've already had a shit night and here I am going off."

"Wasn't all shit," Remus shrugged, and then gestured to the tub. "May I?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, drew it for you."

"Will you stay with me too?"

Sirius didn't need any more asking than that. Quickly he stripped himself down and crawled into the tub, spinning around in the old porcelain tub to hold a hand out to Remus. "Here. Think I'm gonna hold you today."

Oh, yes please.

Remus didn't feel the least bit shy as he peeled out of his clothes and slipped one leg over the edge of the tub, followed by the other. Both he and Sirius knew what the other looked like on the inside, down to their very bones, and that was ten times uglier than whatever could be found on the surface anyway. Against his back, he could feel the rough shape of the burn scars that laced across Sirius' chest. He was growing out of them just as the doctors said he would, but it was still slow going. Good thing Remus adored every part of him, even the sad ones. Inside the bath, the water was warm, but Sirius was by far the warmest part. Remus' legs stuck out the other end by a good half, but he couldn't be bothered to complain as Sirius hugged him from behind and pressed small kisses along his hairline.

"Bit ironic, isn't it?" Remus murmured.

"Mm..." *Kiss, kiss.* "What's ironic?"

"My life. Shit's like a fucking kitchen sink drama. Dunno where all the nonsense comes from."

"You mean that's just occurring to you *now?"*

Remus smiled, reaching up and pulling one of Sirius' hands to his mouth to kiss. "I don't think I can ever be without you now, you know."

"You won't be."

"Ever? You swear you won't go anywhere?"

"Never. You're stuck with me, Moons. I'm like gum on the bottom of your shoe. Handsome gum."

Remus kissed his hand again. "Tell me we're gonna fix things with Peter. I really want this—all of us, in London, together."

Sirius exhaled and Remus felt it tickle the back of his neck.

"Fine, alright. If he's willing to come around, I will too... Of course I will. Can't risk losing James, I think I've come to like Wormtail's stubborn push-back. Who knows, might win us a Grammy one day."

Remus chuckled, dipping further under the water, while Sirius leaned over him and smirked.

"What? You think we can't do it?"

"If there's anyone who can do it, it's you, Sirius."

Sirius gave a low hum and buried his face in the crook of Remus' neck. "Not on my own… Need my Moony, don't I? After all, you're our good luck charm."

Remus shivered. "How do you do that, Sirius Black? Make me feel so good when all I want is to feel bad?"

Sirius lifted his face to whisper into his ear.

"Magic."

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter than we're used to, but luckily I have a little treat for you all. Mwah!

Chapter 93: Stayin' Alive... Stayin' Alive...

Chapter Summary

Oooh, the girls are fighting... hehe. I love arguing :^)

Chapter Notes

CW: Alcohol and drunken shenanigans, including a brief cheeky bit in a broom cupboard. (These boys have no idea of the meaning of 'subtlety'.) If sex talk isn't your thing, pay attention to the '> > >' and '< < <' to skip over it.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyday, it's a-gettin' closer,
Goin' faster than a roller coaster;
Love like yours will surely come my way,
A-hey, a-hey, hey;
Love like yours will surely come my way...

- "Everyday" Buddy Holly, 1957

Remus had forgotten what it was like to have a mother. He'd witnessed bits of it, through Effie and Mrs. Pettigrew—even a few of the more overbearing ladies in the estate's kitchens—but Sheila was something else entirely. It wasn't as though she was suddenly bursting into his room every Sunday morning, screeching for the laundry or pestering him about how a cup of coffee did not qualify as a meal in itself. (He had James for that.) Rather, she told him things. Gave him her opinion, offered advice, shared memories from when she was a girl. Memories of himself, and his family. Before it had irked him, knowing that a stranger might remember more of his own past than he did, but Sheila wasn't a stranger.

She was something else.

He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to forgive her for walking away during the penultimate years of his life, but maybe he didn't have to. Maybe it was enough just to let her in at all.

“I think you should be glad to be named Remus," she'd told him once. *"You were almost Rodney.”*

“And then on your first Halloween, Hope dressed you up like a little dalmatian," came another; *"A bit on the nose, maybe, but the photos she sent of you with the dogs were so cute.”*

“The first time you met your grandmother you spit up right in her face. Hope and I laughed for hours. She really was a nasty woman, that Alys Howell. You're lucky, Hope was nothing like her.”

Every memory, Remus drank in desperately. It was as though he’d lived his entire life on a desert island, and was only now just getting his first taste of water.

“Do you remember the first song you ever heard, Remus?” Sheila asked.

He shook his head.

“I do. I was there actually. But of course you wouldn't remember... it was the first time you and I had ever met, after all. Hope had *just* brought you home from the hospital. Such a tiny thing—Lyall barely had you through the doors by the time I came whipping up the road. But I was so excited. I'd made your mother promise that I could play you your first ever song."

"You?" Remus echoed. "You played me my first song?"

"Not myself," she laughed; "Doubt I could've gotten through a single verse on my own, no matter the instrument. I'd already mucked up the whole thing, you see. When I arrived at the house, I'd meant to play you a Bobby Darin record, only I was so nervous that I'd grabbed Bobby *Day* instead. Not that it mattered much, you loved it. I can remember the way your pudgy little face just lit up! I swore up and down that you'd be a music lover, and you proved me right straight away. Playing that record was the only thing that could get you to sleep. I'm almost sure that Lyall and Hope were cursing me to my back —they must've had 'Rockin' Robin' stuck in their heads for months."

It was amazing. Like a golden ticket—the perfect flick of ash off the end of a cigarette. As long as she had it in her to keep going, Remus would listen.

"Hope and I would sing to you for hours, you know,” Sheila said proudly that same evening, after he’d finished the day's lessons and

snuck away to her office for the fourth time that week. It wasn't a secret where it was going, but Sirius and James knew better than to try and tag along. Remus needed this, even if hearing some of her stories made the knots in the pit of his stomach twist uncomfortably; he wanted to know.

"Your mother had decent enough taste when it came to music," Sheila went on; "Though, it was all thanks to me, of course."

"Yeah?"

She nodded, smiling. “But not everyone's perfect. Did you know that when we were growing up, all she would listen to was American pop music? Yes, she was *convinced* she was going to turn eighteen, move to California, and marry Guy Mitchell—kept a poster up in her room that she’d kiss goodnight and everything. Personally, I didn't get the appeal. He was *so* soppy.”

“I’ve never even heard of him,” Remus smiled, eager for more.

“He was a bit before your time, I think. Though I should have one of his albums around here somewhere...” Popping up from her desk chair, Sheila began digging through the many storage boxes that lined the office walls while Remus sat back with his tea, occasionally munching on the biscuits she’d set out for them.

“Ah! Found it!”

Practically tossing the record sleeve over her shoulder, she set the vinyl disc up on the turntable that took up most of the space in the office’s tiny corner. He listened earnestly at first, but there was no arguing that Sheila was right, it *was* soppy.

‘My heart cries for you,
Sighs for you, dies for you;
And my arms long for you,
Please come back to me…’

“She never told me it was this bad,” Remus said. “She always said she grew up on rock and skiffle. Like Chuck Berry and the Beatles.”

“Ha! As if... No, Hope was a good girl. Our parents would’ve had our guts for garters had they known we were listening to that stuff. Besides, by the time we’d left school John Lennon and Paul McCartney

were still playing their banjos around Liverpool as the Quarrymen." Pausing to sip her tea, Sheila promptly ripped Guy Mitchell up from the turntable mid-wallow and tossed the entire record lazily over one shoulder to join its sleeve on the floor.

"Now this," she said, setting down the teacup; "was *my* American standard."

Pulling out a simple little 45 LP, Sheila handed him the sleeve and set the record up to play. Remus turned the cover over in his hands.

"Little Richard?"

"Oh yes," she grinned, "they don't call him the 'architect of rock and roll' for nothing."

'Gonna tell Aunt Mary 'bout Uncle John!
He claims he has the misery,
But he havin' a lot of fun!
Oh, baby, yeah, baby!
Whoooo! Baby, havin' me some fun tonight, yeah!'

As the song continued to play, Sheila strolled back to her chair and sat. "Little Richard inspired the Beatles, right. They even covered this song ten years later. Can you imagine—inspiring the Beatles? I don't like giving those Yanks all the credit, but they did have some good'uns."

"Does that mean you don't like Elvis?"

"Pfft. Elvis—overrated." She winked at him, then pointed to the LP's sleeve. "You can keep that if you'd like, and the Guy Mitchell. That is, if you can find it..." Raising her hands hopelessly, she glanced around the cluttered office, which was still perfectly curated in its own chaos. Not that Remus minded. He polished off his tea while glancing over the LP's b-side, and when Little Richard's song ended Sheila flipped the record and went to fix him a second cup, humming the tune under her breath. Watching her, Remus began fidgeting.

"You've probably already heard about the band… o-or, *our* band..."

"Oh, you mean 'The Marauders'? Yes, I think Mr. Black has filled me in once or twice."

Damn you, Sirius.

"It's just 'Marauders' actually..." Remus cleared his throat. “We—uhm… We’re all gonna move back to London after school’s done. Live in a flat and see if we can actually do something with it—the band, that is..."

“Really?” Sheila’s eyes seemed to twinkle. “That’s wonderful, I hope I’ll get to see you in a show some day. Maybe at Wembley, hey?”

"Wembley? Are you joking?"

"Oh, c'mon, Remus. It's Wembley, not the moon."

This made Remus awfully embarrassed. Wembley Stadium might as well have been on the moon. Aiming to play there was like fetching a bingo card and expecting to win the lotto; a one in a million shot. Even with all four of their luck combined, it was statistically impossible. Still, it felt rather good to hear Sheila say it.

"We’re actually looking to record some of our own stuff," he boasted meekly. "Sirius writes a bit, and I—well, we'd like to put together a demo. Just don’t have the proper equipment for it yet.”

"Well, I’m sure I could dig something up around here if you’d like. Or there's the radio room! There must be something in there.”

Remus picked at his thumbnail, before letting out a long sigh. "Aren’t you going to tell me that it’s absolutely mental?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—us. Thinking that out of everyone who has this exact same dream—that *we* could make it.”

Humming thoughtfully, Sheila lifted a biscuit to her lips and took a bite. Then she crossed her arms, and shrugged very simply.

“Why not you?"

It stumped him for a moment, but then Remus remembered who he was. Why *not him.*

“Look at me," he said, "I’m not exactly John Lennon."

"Of course not. You're much more handsome."

"No! I mean, I can't *do* that. I can't inspire people... I'm only me. And you!? Shouldn't you be telling me that I should pick something more useful? A career that actually has a chance of making me a living wage?"

"Why would I ever tell you that?"

"I dunno, because you're the adult? The sensible one?"

She squinted at him and Remus felt his heart lurch. He quickly reigned the feeling in as she polished off the biscuit and dusted her hands, all the while looking him straight in the eye.

"Remus, I have lived my life being entirely too sensible, and you know what it's gotten me?"

"A roof over your head and a stable career?"

"Bored."

She winked again.

"Be a dreamer, Remus. I think you'll find that they have more fun."

It felt heavy, almost reminiscent of a conversation he and Lyall had had ages ago; but still different, enough so that he shied a bit, peering down at his shoes. Not that Sheila was ever much deterred by shyness. Still smiling, she reached across the table with the plate of fudge biscuits and offered him another as her show of support. Remus accepted with a simple nod, and though her confidence in him hadn't served as some awe-inspiring moment of clarity, it did strike him then just how much he was going to miss her.

* * *

Friday 5th May 1978

With April officially come and gone, the only thing left for the Marauders to worry about was their end-of-term exams. Or, that was how things should've been. Remus was still picking bits of flour off of his jumpers, but that was nothing compared to the silent war that had been raging in their bedroom for over a week. Peter was still reasonably angry with them, and any attempt to talk to him had so far

ended in a cold shoulder or rapid-fire shouting match. It made James uncomfortable, though not uncomfortable enough to pick a side.

"You three have to sort this out between yourselves," he'd said, "I'm not your mother."

It seemed a bit ironic that he'd chosen now to rein in his motherly tendencies, but Remus kept the thought to himself for fear of losing yet another friend. Without a drummer, all Marauders' band practices had been drawn to an immediate halt, and anytime Sirius suggested the three of them go it alone, James would make the excuse of having to meet Lily and the girls for study. This made for long hours in the library and a generally sour-Sirius, not that he wasn't also in attendance. The self-proclaimed 'King of Self-Study', ran the risk of having Lily bludgeon him with one of her textbooks every time he tagged along, and had eventually resorted to bringing a pillow with him just to catch up on his sleep. This lasted for about two days.

“This is such shite," Sirius complained over a yawn. "It's a Friday, and we've been here for hours! You can't possibly fit any more knowledge into those fat heads."

"Why don't you go back to sleep, you arse?" Marlene offered, already sporting deep purple bags beneath her eyes. Sirius might've, had Ms. Pince not confiscated his pillow that same morning. He'd already resorted to using James’ collection of textbooks as a pillow instead, which was proving annoying for James, who was forced to trade him books every time he switched subjects.

“A-Levels are important. Even for someone like you,” Lily said, not even looking up from her notes. It was no question who the 'you' was for, but Sirius only yawned again.

“Why? It’s not like I have any plans to go to uni. Honestly, I could probably skive them off altogether. I’d still pass.”

Lily pointed her pencil at him threateningly. “Throwing your marks simply because you ‘can’t be bothered’ might just be the worst show of slothfulness you’ve ever achieved, Sirius Black.”

Sirius rolled his head up, so he was just resting on his chin on the texts. “Ah, but you see, that in itself is still an ‘achievement’.”

Lily threw the pencil.

“Just wait until tomorrow,” James told Sirius. “It’s the FA Cup. Can’t

study when the game's on!"

"Oh yeah," Marlene started. "Ain't your team in the finals this year, Potter?"

James held up a triumphant fist. "Arsenal's gonna bring home the championship this year, I can feel it!"

"Exams start on the fifteenth, you know," Lily cautioned.

"Aw c'mon, Lils," Marlene reasoned light-heartedly, "it's one day."

"And we'll study on Sunday!" James added. "The whole day if we have to!"

"O' please, madam slave-driver!" Sirius begged, clasping his hands together. "Please let these poor sods off for a single day to watch James' favourite team suffer a crushing defeat to the likes of Ipswich Town."

While James frowned, Lily only rolled her eyes. "I'm only looking out for your marks. Don't blame me when you fail."

"I thought we weren't supposed to say the 'f' word around you," Mary said, appearing behind them with the books she'd gone to fetch. "I see Peter's sitting with Moira again..."

The rest of them all turned as a group to look, and spotted Peter sitting with another swath of students, Moira among them.

"Sorry git—wonder if he thinks he's traded up," Sirius grumbled, clearly irritated. "Sleeps in our room, uses our toilet, but spends every waking moment with that broad. Who knows what he's told her."

"She *is* his girlfriend," Lottie chimed in, sorting through a swath of Spanish notes.

"And we're his friends—have been long before Thurnberg came around. What about loyalty?"

"Easy for you to say, the three of you are *dating* your best friends."

Sirius and Remus shared a silent glance, as did James and Lily.

"Has he... said anything to you, Lottie?" Asked James.

"No, and even if he had, I wouldn't tell you. You were supposed to talk

to him yourselves."

“We tried!" Sirius interjected. "Tosser just sticks his nose up and walks out. Won’t give me or Moony a chance.”

“Is it the gay thing?" Mary asked quietly. "Is he being prejudiced?"

Remus shook his head. “Well, he hasn’t said anything distinctly… prejudiced. Hasn’t said anything at all, really.”

“Not true,” Sirius said, “yesterday he told me to pick up my ‘bloody socks’. Coming from him, it almost felt like character development.”

No one seemed to find the joke funny, and a staggered silence descended over the group, the kind that made it impossible to make eye contact with anyone. It was Marlene who finally broke it, folding her book shut and looking directly at Remus.

“Don’t worry about Peter, he’s just pissed off that you didn’t tell him.”

“No, he’s pissed he’s the *last to know,”* Lottie cut-in, coming to her brother’s defence with more vigour than before. “I don’t care if half of you are bent nine ways from Sunday—but just imagine how it would feel to be the last friend to know something like that.”

Marlene leaned in, whispering harshly to keep from being overheard by other tables; “Newsflash, Lot, Peter doesn’t get to be pissed over ‘something like that’—*none* of you do. People don’t just owe you an explanation, especially not about something so sensitive. You have no inherent right to anybody’s love, I don't care how long you've been friends.”

Lottie frowned, her nostrils flaring as though she were losing steam. “Big talk from someone who got to know first. Since when are you such an expert?”

“I just *am.”*

“Really? ‘Cause last I heard you had a cat down there, not a knob.”

“You hardly need a knob if you’re only interested in other cat, Lottie!”

Remus’ eyes shot wide in surprise. And he was not the only one. As soon as the secret was out, Lottie squeaked and Marlene’s hand flew to her mouth—the realisation of what she’d just said written all over both of their faces.

"Oh shit..."

"I think you mean—*oh shit!"* Sirius said, earning him a sharp shushing from the next table over. "Oh bite me," he hissed, before lowering his voice. "But seriously, colour me impressed, McKinnon. Never knew you had it in you to be so bold."

“Marls,” Lily breathed at the other end of the table, “you mean you’re actually—”

“I KNEW IT!” James cried, jumping up from his chair in one big whoop. The reaction was enough to draw attention from every neighbouring table, turning poor Marlene's face into a tomato. James sat back down before Ms. Pince could reappear and beat him with Sirius’ pillow, but it did not deter his enthusiasm.

"I knew it! I knew it!" He whispered keenly, while Lily gaped at him.

“What?! What do you mean you *knew?”*

“Okay, so I didn’t *know*-know, but I guessed!" He turned to Marlene. "You're so much tougher on the guys when we're practising. Most of the time you look at them like they're disgusting."

"That's 'cause they are disgusting!"

"Sounds like something a lesbian would say," Mary giggled.

Marlene was absolutely horror-stricken. “Potter, how could you… I mean—*you?!* Oh my fuck—how many others know?!”

James shook his head. “None, as far as I figure. I just know what it looks like, s’all.”

“What *what* looks like, James Potter?!”

“Oh, you know…” he glanced at Lily coyly, “love.”

“Eugh—gross, avert your eyes,” Sirius said, putting an arm around Marlene.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she moaned, pressing her face into her palms.

“Oh Marlene, don’t be!” Lily insisted.

“Yeah, s’nothing to be embarrassed about,” James said kindly. “Though, I can’t believe I guessed it before you, Daisy. I mean, you do

live together after all."

"Oh yeah? Shall I remind you of the two flaming hearts living in *your* room?"

Remus scoffed; *"Flaming?"*

More than a little red-faced herself, Lottie cleared her throat. "Well, I'm… sorry... I think? Or did I just do you a favour? Hm... Really, I'm not all that surprised—oh, don't gimme that face, Marls. Lily might be thick but I *also* know what love looks like. Happy for you, really. I mean, girls are so much nicer to look at. I find myself staring at them all the time." She gave a little gasp. "Does that make me a lesbian?"

"It-absolutely-fucking-does-NOT!" Marlene hissed.

Lottie shrugged, in that blasé attitude of hers, and turned to James.

"Say something to my brother," she said, suddenly serious. "I know he's a bit of a cunt, but he's my cunt, so don't just leave him behind, Potter. No matter how tempting."

"Of course not," James said firmly. "We're Marauders. All for one, and one for all, since the very beginning. Just wait, soon we'll all be shacked up in a place of our very own. No teachers, no parents—only the bobbies to stop us."

"And me, wild child," Lily said, leaning in to kiss her boyfriend fondly.

Again, Remus looked to Sirius, taking his hand beneath the table. He didn't fancy apologising, but the situation was so messy, and James wouldn't ever be alright with leaving one of them behind. That alone could possibly spell the end of their little dream before it'd even begun. The two of them couldn't do it on their own—it'd break Sirius not to have his best friend with him.

He just hoped James was right.

The next day, half of Godric found itself crowded around a single small telly in the common room to watch the sports broadcast. Remus and Lily took up a comfy spot near the back of the room and curled up beneath a single blanket, more content to watch the excitement on their friends' faces than the game itself. James and Sirius sat near the front, crowded in with Marlene and totally engrossed with every move the tiny players on the screen made. Mary was squeezed in among

them too, but she'd already given up watching and had resorted to braiding and unbraiding the longest bits of Marlene's hair, pausing every so often to flip through a magazine she must've read cover-to-cover at least a dozen times already.

"I'm really going to miss this," Lily said, after Ipswich Town had scored its first goal and the room erupted into equal parts cheering and booing.

"You mean being here?" Remus reached around and readjusted the blanket, which had slipped down from her shoulder.

"Yeah… it's like home."

Across the room, several boys gave a frustrated cry, James the loudest among them.

"Bloody O'Leary—c'mon! Get a leg on, mate!"

"Fat chance, Potter! O'Leary's got rubber for legs!"

"Oh? So you've got something in common then?"

"I get what you mean," Remus said, amongst all the laughter cheering; "I'm almost afraid I'll miss it."

"Right? I don't even remember what it's like to have my own room. How am I ever going to sleep without Mary's 'purring'?"

"You'll have James. Though he sounds more like a chainsaw."

Lily giggled, her cheek pressed against his arm. "Think we'll ever come back here?"

"Maybe. Life's strange like that. When I first got here, all I wanted was to leave."

"And now?"

"And now—"

"AHH! Did you see that? Did you see that?! Brady almost scored!"

" 'Almost' doesn't win a championship! Now sit down!"

"AUGH!"

Remus smiled. “And now I don’t think I want to leave.”

“Maybe you won’t,” Lily said, scrunching up her nose playfully; “Maybe McGonagall will offer you a job teaching music to the primaries. We could call you ‘Mr. Lupin’—or even better, ‘Professor Lupin’!”

“You’re silly, Lily.”

She beamed. “My dad used to say that to me. It’ll be nice to see him before we all go to London. And then… gosh—we’ll be in London! Bit exciting, isn’t it, Remus?”

“FOUL! Foul on Nelson!”

“That wasn't ‘a foul! Fuckin’ hell, ref! Are you bloody blind?!”

Remus hugged her close. “Yeah. Very exciting.”

In the end, Arsenal lost 0 to 1. Despite his obvious disappointment, James did manage to put on a brave face. As the telly began showing adverts for toothpaste and Benson & Hedges cigarettes, all of his teammates surrounded him in a big circle, offering heavy thumps on the back as consolation and ragging on him for his team’s defeat.

“Don’t worry about it, mate,” one of the lads teased; “one day when you’re playing for Arsenal, they’ll at least have a chance at getting a single goal!”

James laughed it off, but if he corrected his friend about his career-trajectory, it was swallowed by the noisy roar of the room.

“C’mon Potter, let’s have a few drinks!” Sirius cried. “There ain’t nothing like drowning a loss in some good ol’ fashioned hooch!”

There was a screaming rally of agreement, and Lily thumped her fist on the side of the sofa.

“That git, they agreed we’d be up early to study! He planned this.”

“Definitely,” Remus said, already thinking back to where he’d hidden that bottle of whisky.

It didn’t take long for word to spread about the impromptu party at Godric, and eventually alcohol and other illicits began to come out in droves. Never a Marauders party without it, Remus and Sirius dragged the stereo down from their room along with an entire milk crate of

records, and by nightfall the common room was full with entirely too much irresponsible bouncing and bobbing. What with the carefully curated list of records he'd supplied, Remus had expected to spend the night in a head-thrashing roar, except that someone had found the single Elton John record and put that on instead.

'Oh, your sister can't twist but she can rock and roll!
Out bucks the broncos in the rodeo-do!
She's only sixteen but it's plain to see—
She can pull the wool over little old me!'

Sirius scowled at the stereo from across the room. He had somehow climbed up onto one of the common room's windows and was teetering dangerously off the edge. "Hey, Moony. Can your sister twist?" He drawled, already severely inebriated.

"I don't have a sister, you thick-head!" Remus shouted, just to be heard over the noise. "Now get down from there!"

"Maybe you do!" Sirius shouted back, swatting at the hands Remus raised toward him. "Who knows what Tad-the-dad's been up to! Maybe you've just never met her!"

"Then how would I know if she could twist?"

Sirius cackled. "Good point!" Then with a delightful cry, he launched himself off the window rim, forcing Remus to catch him awkwardly and sprawl back on the common room floor. There were several hoots of praise from nearby kids, but when Remus sat up, Sirius was straddling him.

"Can *you* twist, Moony?" He whispered cunningly.

"No," Remus grunted.

"Shall we give it a try?"

With a sharp scratch the song had changed and a few moments later, Mary swung her head down to interrupt. "If you're quite done rolling your tongue in Remus' ear, we would like a dance."

Remus looked up. Marlene and Lottie were standing behind him, arms crossed and looking devious. Clearly the two had made up from their spat in the library the day before, just in time to torture him with—*oh*

god—disco.

‘Whether you’re a brother or whether you’re a mother—
You’re stayin’ alive, stayin’ alive;
Feel the city breakin’ and everybody shakin’—
And we’re stayin’ alive, stayin’ alive—’

“Take him!” Remus said, throwing Sirius to the wolves and scrambling up. Too bad for him, he was equally as sloshed, and the moment he got his legs beneath him Marlene and Lottie were there, grabbing his arm and turning him for the middle of the common room, where a boogie circle had unceremoniously started.

“Mercy, please mercy,” Remus begged as the girls pulled and prodded, tossing them back and forth between themselves like props rather than dance partners. Despite his eternal devotion to rock and roll, Sirius had no problem joining in. He dropped his weight into his knees and swung Mary around with all of his Saturday night fervor, laughing at Remus and singing along.

“C’mon Moons, it’s all in the hips! *‘Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin’ alive, stayin’ alive—Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin’ alive—!’* ”

“This is torture,” Remus said to Marlene, when she got in close and slid a hand up the centre of his chest.

Marlene grinned at him. “Is Sirius watching?”

“Of course he’s watching.”

“And Mary?”

Remus looked over her shoulder. Mary may have been dancing with Sirius, but she only had eyes for Marlene.

"I don't care if she's straight, Remus," she called, "just as long as she's looking at me when it counts."

“You’re so sly,” he smirked.

Marlene only winked at him, and giving a light laugh, Remus took her arm and spun her. Maybe disco was good for something after all.

‘Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk,
I’m a woman’s man, no time to talk;
Music loud and women warm,
I’ve been kicked around since I was born;

And now it’s all right, it’s okay,
And you may look the other way;
We can try to understand,
The New York Times’ effect on man…!’

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Remus loved music. He loved Sirius too, but music was his way to Sirius. For example, Elton John had gotten Sirius to dive onto him in front of a crowd of people, but the Bee Gees had gotten them alone in the broom cupboard. It was like Halloween all over again, only this time the music was loud enough that not even Remus was worried about being overheard. They grappled together in the dark, ridding each other of their shirts and fighting against stubborn belt buckles.

“Moony,” Sirius groaned, desperately.

“Ngh—Uh-huh.”

Their hands were in each other’s trousers, and they rutted desperately against each other so desperately Remus almost forgot to breathe. He could feel Sirius’ thigh against the inside of his own and the warmth of his lips against his neck as he crowded him against the wall. A broom rattled as they knocked it over, then came a short gurgle as a bottle of floor polish was pitched off the shelf to their right. A lemony scent invaded Remus’ nostrils as it spilled somewhere along the floor, but neither of them could be bothered to stop and do anything about it.

“Moony, I’m gonna—”

“Uh-huh!”

They kissed, deeply, and Remus’ moaned straight into Sirius’ mouth as everything that had been building between them came apart all at once. A few seconds later Sirius followed him over the edge, creating a noise Remus wanted to pluck from the air and bottle forever. As their grip slackened and they slumped against one another, Remus busied himself by sucking a light bruise along the ridge of his boyfriend’s collarbone, stopping only to breathe again. Humming

contentedly deep in his throat, Sirius began by peppering his jaw with several more tongue-in-cheek kisses.

“I love how articulate you become when we shag,” he taunted.

“Yeah? And all you said was my name,” Remus panted into his shoulder.

“Of course. It’s my favourite word. ‘Moony’. So stupidly sexy—or sexily stupid.”

Remus pulled back, drunk. “You’re sexily stupid.”

“Thank you. Shall I wank you off again now?”

He kissed him just to shut him up, and when Remus began itching for a second go, Sirius didn’t seem opposed at all.

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After digging around in the dark for their shirts, Remus peeked out into the hall and deemed it empty enough to emerge together. It was clear by the rowdy music that the party was still going on full-swing in the common room, which meant the night must still be young. Enough time to get another two or three drinks in.

“It is a mighty convenient place to shack up. So many towels,” Sirius said, tossing one of the rags in question over his shoulder with a self-satisfied look. He shut the cupboard door after himself, and Remus sent up a silent prayer for the next boy who went looking for a spare pillowcase.

Pressing his cool knuckles against the warmth of his cheeks, Remus followed Sirius down the hall to the common room foyer, where kids were streaming in and out of the front door, a cloud of smoke and haze following them. Inexplicably, Remus spotted Trish weaving among them, and just behind her, dragged along by her hand on his wrist, was none other than Regulus Black.

“Heeey!” Sirius called, spotting his brother at the same time. “Look who it is!”

“Found this one hiding out in his common room,” Trish said, pulling Regulus up alongside her.

“I wasn’t hiding, I was studying!”

“Same thing really,” Sirius said, before throwing an arm around Regulus’ shoulders. “I’m so proud of you Edge. Want some weed?”

Regulus blanched slightly. “You have weed?”

“Lupin’s always got weed.”

“He’s right, I do,” Remus nodded.

Regulus pulled away. “No thanks.”

“So what, no concert tonight?” Trish asked.

Sirius shook his head; “Nah, not tonight. We were a bit busy,” he flashed a sly look at Remus; “Besides, can’t play for free forever. But if you're really itching for a show...”

“You’re this drunk and you’re going to try and play an instrument?” Regulus snarked.

“No, but I could! You should try it yourself, sometime. Really opens up the imagination.”

Regulus made to open up his mouth, no doubt for some cheeky retort, but Trish swooped in first, smacking him fondly on the shoulder. “Everything’s *fiiiiiiine,* he doesn’t have to play anything today. He’s just gonna have one beer and play wallflower with me. No dancing either—we agreed—but he’s not allowed to leave before curfew. He *promised.”*

Sirius raised both brows. “You making promises now, Edge?”

“No, she’s just drunk already.”

“I’m not drunk, I’m *happily buzzed.* I swear, It’s like he’s determined to grow old without ever being young. Being a dick is the only way he can show affection, but I’m trying to *save* him.”

“Actually, I think she’s just insane,” Regulus amended, dodging a group of kids as they squeezed past them to get to the front door.

“Trish, are you insane?” Remus asked.

“Maybe a little,” she crooned, “but who cares—we’re young! Now’s not the time to grow old and bored. Life is colourful, and I want to taste it all.”

Regulus made a face. “That doesn’t even make sense!”

“No, I get it,” Sirius agreed.

“See? He *gets* it,” Trish said, looking about as pleased as a peacock with its feathers fluffed.

“Of course *you’d* agree with her.”

“Mhm, yeah, makes perfect sense. Now let *me* do the honours of getting you your first real drink.” Leaving them momentarily, Sirius slipped into the kitchenette before reappearing with four beers in hand. He handed them along to Remus, who used his dorm key to pop the top off each and pass them around.

“Cheers,” Sirius said, knocking his beer against his brother’s; “To never getting old, and to tasting all that life has to offer.”

“Cheers!” Trish cried, downing a deep gulp. To Remus’ surprise, Regulus immediately followed suit, before grimacing.

“You drink this for fun? It’s warm!”

“Gotta drink a warm beer before you can appreciate a cold one,” Remus said.

“And who told you that?”

“I dunno, Gandhi?”

Another song kicked up in the common room and Trish lit up. “Ooh, I know this one! C’mon Reginald, let’s go!”

Regulus gave a noise of objection that sounded a lot like *‘you said no dancing!’* but the two of them were already being swallowed up by the crowd.

Sirius squinted after them.“You don’t think that they…”

“Oh yeah,” Remus snorted. A second later a hand came down on his shoulder, nearly spooking the beer from his lips.

“There you two are!” James cried, before lowering his voice slightly; “Thought you snuck off on your own, like a couple ‘a slags. Ha!”

“As a matter ‘a fact…” Sirius snaked a suggestive hand up the side of Remus’ neck. James caught the gesture and snorted.

“Oh yeah, *where?* Mary just went up to the room to use the loo and she said it was empty.”

Licking his lips, Sirius jutted his head back down the hallway and James followed, his eyes growing very large.

“No… *No!* Did you actually—? *Dear god*—you bloody maniacs!”

“Don’t be jealous, Prongs,” Remus grinned. "There's more than enough cupboard to go around."

“I’m not jealous, you arseholes—I have to *clean* that! I'm the bloody dorm monitor!”

“Might as well call Evans then," Sirius said. "Make the most of a sticky situation, as they say.”

Remus knocked Sirius’ hand off. “That's it, you’re cut off.”

James left them with a scoff, neither confirming nor denying that he was on his way to do just as Sirius had suggested. After a few more beers, both he and Remus ended up back at the stereo, riffling through the messy pile of records as more disco was being kept on loop.

“Moony, I can’t find ‘Ziggy Stardust’,” Sirius whined, tossing a Rod Stewart album over his shoulder.

“It’s probably under your bed with the rest,” Remus said, cutting the stereo. “Is it even really a party record though?”

“It’s a staple!”

“Alright, alright. Don’t get your knickers in a twist, I’ll go get it. But if I walk in on James and Lily, I'm coming back for reparations.”

“Oh, how I love you.”

"Save it for the bedroom, babe."

Sirius might've melted a bit, but already Remus had slipped away. It was considerably easier to weave through the crowd now that the party’s mood had gone from jumping and thrashing to more subdued. His guess was that the weed had finally begun to take effect; the entire room smelled of cigarette smoke and kids were scattered about, lounging on the carpet or the backs of sofas like cats. Remus spotted Marlene and Mary off on their own, squeezed in together on a large armchair. Despite the fact that Mary was lying back with her legs over

the chair's arm and her head in Marlene's lap, they both seemed to be engrossed in rather deep conversation.

Lottie was missing, as were Lily and James—Remus tried not to be too smug—but even more out of the way was Trish and Regulus. The pair had made a home, leaning up against the common room's bookshelves. Regulus was reading a book like he was bored, and Trish had already fallen asleep on his shoulder. It was clear that the other boy was not keen on being there—he made a face whenever another stumbling student got too close—but as Remus stopped to watch, Regulus eventually dropped his book and peeked over. Then he lifted a hand, brushed a lock of hair from Trish's face, and went right on back to reading.

Maybe there was hope after all.

Leaving the common room, Remus took the stairs two at a time. He managed to trip on every fifth stair or so, but by the time he made it to his floor he felt downright giddy. Everything was falling into place. Soon exams would be over and there wouldn't be anything to worry about except the rest of their lives. And flat shopping. They could live anywhere! Limehouse, Lambeth, Soho, Chinatown, *anywhere they wanted—!*

"Oh, Pete. It's you."

Peter looked up from the hutch next to his bed, where he was currently putting away a fresh load of laundry. "Yeah, Lupin, it is my room."

Remus suddenly felt *much* more uncomfortable than if he'd just run into James and Lily with their shirts off. " 'Course…" he murmured. "You just get in?"

"I did. Good party then," Peter said. It almost sounded like a rhetorical question, but Remus answered because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yeah. Good. Erm… Was real spur of the moment—Sirius suggested it after the game. You know, to cheer James up after Arsenal's loss."

Peter nodded, moving on to his socks. Which was a bit shocking—Peter never folded his socks.

Flexing his hands at his side, Remus finally shut the door and crossed to Sirius' bed. He crouched down and flipped back the bed covers,

reaching beneath for the rest of their records. “You catch the game?” He called, back to Peter.

“Yeah. The girls were showing it over at Dorset. Watched it with Moira.”

“Cool. Bad luck for Arsenal.”

“The girls favoured Ipswich.”

“Ah.” Remus squeezed his eyes shut. This was the most Peter had said to him in weeks. He wished he were more sober.

Just do it. Do it for James.

He turned around. “Listen, Pete—”

“MOONY!” Sirius burst into the room. “MARY’S PLAYING ABBA AGAIN, TELL HER TO—Oh shit! Er... Hey Pete.”

Peter looked Sirius up and down. “Hey, Black.”

“Back from the Missus’s already, are you? Thought she'd be keeping you under lock and key by now.”

Horrified, Remus raised a sharp hand and drew it across his throat; *cut it out!*

Shrugging, Sirius shoved his hands in his pockets and came forward, falling back onto his bed with a haphazard flourish.

“How… How is Moira?” Remus asked, doing his best attempt at playing peacemaker.

“She’s fine,” Peter said, eyeing Sirius. “I’m gonna spend the night at hers again. Just came back for some clothes.”

“You want to bring her here instead? Party’s still going—we could all hang out downstairs for a bit,” Remus suggested.

“You mean bring her here? With you? Don't think that’s exactly Moira’s speed.”

Sirius swung up into a sitting position. “The party or *us?”*

“Both,” Peter said very quickly, his voice going up an octave as it always did when he and Sirius faced each other down; “You’re always

saying so yourself, right?"

Before Sirius could ruin their chances of reconciliation any further, Remus took another step forward. "Pete, we just wanna talk."

"I haven't told anyone about you," Peter cut-in, "not even Moira. So if that's what you're worried about then you can shove it."

"Oh goodie, glad to see you haven't betrayed all of our trust."

"Screw you, Black! Talking about trust… You two think you're so high and mighty, but really you're just—"

Sirius leapt to his feet. "Just *what?* Go on, say what you want to say!"

Remus got between them. "Sirius, enough! This is supposed to be about our band!"

"Ha! *Our band,"* Peter squeaked. "You mean the excuse to string James and me along while the two of you go on writing your songs and shagging behind our backs! We're not bandmates, we're just vessels for your bloody ego-trip!"

"At least we see some action!" Sirius shouted, crowding in on Remus in attempts to get closer to Peter. "At least I don't have to wait for a blue moon on the thirty-second of every other month for Moony to be in the mood!"

"Yeah, until you bloody break up, just like Christmas! That's right—I managed to put two and two together!"

"You mean James told you!"

"Fuck off," Peter snarled. "The two of you assholes broke up and made everyone one of us deal with it—we didn't even know what the fuck was going on and did you care? No! You're telling me we go off and do this band shit for as long as it takes the two of you to implode, and then James and I are the ones left with the fucking pieces! You're dicks, both of you!"

"And you're a homophobic arsehole!"

"I can hate you without being homophobic, Black!"

"ENOUGH!" Remus roared, pushing both Sirius and Peter away from each with a sharp shove. "This isn't what James wanted—we're supposed to be making up! You're friends for christ's sake, both of you

You've known each other since you were wetting the damn bed—*both* of you! Maybe this wasn't the best timing, but goddammit, get a hold of yourselves!"

Sirius let out a long breath, appearing almost guilty as he watched Peter from over Remus' shoulder. "I won't apologise for our relationship."

"I never asked you to," Peter seethed. "I never asked you for anything —least of all this stupid band!"

Just like that, Sirius' hackles were back up. He ducked under Remus' arm and got right into Peter's face, staring him down with thunder in his eyes. "Well, fine then! If you don't want to be in the band, then don't be in the band! Go and marry your uptight little girlfriend, find yourself some ugly terrace house with a shitty garden, and work for your brother for the rest of your goddamn, miserable life!"

"Snape's fucking right!" Peter wailed back. "You're gonna end up in prison one day, you no-good, self-important fuck-head!"

"At least I'll have accomplished something on my own!"

With a great cry, Peter shoved Sirius with everything he had, sending him spiralling back into Remus, who had to catch him for the second time that night. Peter did not bother waiting for Sirius to recover, and instead grabbed his things and ran from the room, slamming the door behind himself.

Recovered from his little spill, Sirius pushed away from Remus and took several steps toward the door, practically punching the air. "FUCKING COWARD!"

"Sirius!" Remus moaned. "What were you *thinking?* Are you really that drunk?!"

Sirius spun around. "It's his fault! He's always been a little rat, running off as soon as things don't go as planned! He's only trying to roll with the band because James asked him to in the first place!"

"And James is only rolling because of us! Now do you want him to leave you for a better friend?"

Recoiling as if he'd been hit, Sirius glowered at him. "James wouldn't leave me for *Peter.* Peter's no one—what that git has isn't loyalty, it's cowardice!"

“Peter is your *friend.* Where’s your loyalty, huh?”

“I’m an equal opportunity guy,” Sirius said lowly, “Pettigrew gets as much as he gives.”

It was clear that there was no winning… not tonight. Both Sirius and Peter were drunk with pride, not fondness for each other.

“I think we just need to take a step back,” Remus sighed.

“Oh? We do? *Fine.* I was just thinking it was about time I took a shower by myself for once."

“No. Sirius, no—that’s not what I meant.”

“Don’t follow me,” Sirius said nastily, stepping past him and marching into the bathroom. He slammed the door hard enough to rattle the entire room, and as the sound of rushing water joined the distant sounds of partying and fun, James’ Arsenal poster unceremoniously peeled itself off the wall and fluttered to the ground.

* * *

The next morning, James hadn’t even needed to ask. It was clear from the way Remus and Sirius were sitting apart at breakfast that something had happened. When both of them refused to talk, he left them to try and track Peter down for answers, but returned unsuccessful several hours later. It was then that Remus finally confessed to the argument, filling James in on all the horrible details.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?" He glared at Sirius, who would not meet his eye, then; "Fuck... Bunch of bloody drama queens, the lot of you."

Remus was just glad that he and Sirius weren’t *really* fighting. As if he were worried about proving Peter’s point, Sirius had apologised by Monday morning. Not for the things he’d said to their friend, but the way he’d reacted when Remus had tried to mediate.

"I'm sorry," he said again. The two of them had skipped second period exam prep and skived off to the astronomy building for some alone time. There was a lesson going on that they'd almost walked in on, but the fire escape was private enough, and so they'd looped their legs down over the edge and leaned forward on the railing, sharing a

cigarette.

“Me too," Remus said back, blowing smoke and passing the fag along. "I’m no good at playing Switzerland anyway... Always comes back to fucking bite me.”

“You say that now,” Sirius started, the corners of his mouth perking upwards, “but the moment someone else comes to you with their troubles, you’re gonna drop everything to make them feel better. It’s just a part of who you are.”

“You make me sound like some mother hen. Like James.”

“No, you’re just Moony. Moony the heart-mender. King of comforting all those lousy souls who must suffer a break up.”

“Guess I just… I know what it’s like, s’all.”

Sirius frowned, and reached up to stroke his cheek. “Never again.”

Remus took a pull off the cig and—stopping to make sure they were alone—leaned in to kiss him.

They went about their Monday after that; attending to the rest of their exam prep and music lessons. They met up with James, who was disappointed even further when it became apparent that Peter was not coming to class. While his drum kit sat empty, Mrs. Buchanan marked him absent and announced that it was a practice day, leaving everyone to their whims. A few kids began coordinating an accuracy contest in which they traded their instruments for something new, but the other three Marauders only sat back, not interested in joining in on the fun. Uncharacteristically quiet, James held his Strat to his chest and began plucking away at a sad little melody. Sitting opposite to him, Remus watched as his fingers rippled across the different frets, wondering briefly what colours James saw as he played the somber tune. Surely something depressing. Like beige.

“Moony.” Reaching over, Sirius tapped him on the arm and pulled Remus back to earth. “Sheila’s calling you.”

Turning around, Remus spotted Sheila, standing next to her office. She perked up when they made eye contact, and waved him over with her hand.

Hoping it wasn’t anything too life-altering—he really couldn’t handle finding out he had a long-lost twin right now—Remus left the Fender

behind and crossed the classroom, letting himself be ushered inside the office.

“I didn’t want to bring these out while everyone’s around because they might not think it fair, but look what I found you!” She threw her arms out over her desk, where a machine about half the size of Sirius’ stereo was sitting, a single microphone connected to its side.

“It’s a tape machine!” She beamed. “For your band—so you can record yourselves!"

"Oh."

She must've read his expression as being unimpressed, as she rushed to clarify;

"Now, I know it's nothing fancy, but it's something, right? And I’ve found you a whole box of blank tapes as well. The machine belongs to the school, so I can’t just give it to you, but I don’t think it would be a problem if you took it back to your dorm until the end of the year. Provided you take care of it, that is?”

He didn’t have the heart to tell her that there might be very little ‘band’ comings and goings without their drummer, so instead he just nodded and smiled.

“Thank you. Mrs. Buchanan.”

Remus could tell Sirius was thrilled by the prospect of finally getting to record their own songs, but it was obvious that he was holding back his excitement to appease James. After class the other boy regarded the tape machine with little more than a glower, and finally he turned and grabbed both of them by the arm, dragging them from the room.

“Wha—?" Sirius baulked. "What about the tapes? A-And our instruments?”

“Just shut up and come with me,” James growled.

He marched them across campus to the Agrippan Block and straight up to the second floor, where he dropped them in the first empty classroom and ordered that they sit.

“None of us have class in this building,” Sirius rebuffed. “And it’ll be dinner soon.”

James turned on him fiercely. *“Don’t. Move.”*

Without another word, he swept from the classroom, leaving them both on their own.

“I don’t think he wants us to move, Padfoot,” Remus said, while Sirius sighed and took a seat at one of the desks in the front row.

“He’s meddling—which is worse than your meddling because it means that he’s *also* going to nag me.”

“I think you need a bit of nagging,” Remus said, sitting down across from him.

Smirking, Sirius hopped up and leaned down over Remus’ chair, effectively blocking all means of escape. “Was that an innuendo, Mr. Lupin?”

“No.”

"Oh. Well, could it be?"

"... Maybe."

Sirius smirked and leaned in until their faces were but a mere hair’s breadth away, but just then the door opened. They were caught in the act by Peter, who was standing awkwardly in the doorway, clearly just as surprised to see the two of them. He went to turn around, but just as quickly—James was there, backing him into the classroom without a stern look on his face.

“In,” he ordered. “And sit down.”

Without room to argue, Peter gave in and ultimately took a seat at one of the desks several rows over from the rest of them. Taking his time, James shut the door behind himself before calmly proceeding to the professor’s desk and lifting himself up until he was sitting on top. Sirius had already opened his mouth to offer complaint, but James simply raised a stern hand and silenced him instantly.

“I think we all know why I've brought you here. And just let it be known, how disappointed I am—in *all* of you."

Both Peter and Sirius began to speak at the same time; *“No way, I—!”* and; *“But he—!”*

“QUIET!”

The boys slumped back into their respective chairs, and James hopped down from the professor's desk, body as taut as a string. "Especially you two!" He hollered. "You are best friends for Christ's sake! How could you say such things to each other?"

Before any of them could respond, James threw out his arms again.

"No! In fact, ignore that! *I'm* the one who's gonna talk now, and *you're* gonna listen. Years of friendship aside, we agreed to do this together! We became Marauders *together,* and that's not gonna change, not as far as I see it! If any of us wants out then that's their decision, but we do NOT turn our backs on our friends. We do not intentionally hurt them—no matter how angry we are! I don't believe anything any of you have said or done deserves the kind of hatred you spewed at one another, and I want it to end *here.* Today—right now. So go on, let's have it out. Say what you want—resolve it—and leave it at the door. Because we're friends first."

There was a beat of silence, and then another. James looked to Sirius, who only glanced down at his fingernails, uninterested. Similarly, Peter crossed his arms and also refused to speak. Finally, James turned on Remus.

"Moony...?"

Remus couldn't handle it anymore.

"I was the one who asked Sirius not to tell anyone about us," he admitted. "I asked him to keep it a secret. From everyone. And he did it for me."

Sirius threw an arm out. "Moony, you don't have to explain—"

"I want to!" Remus said. "When things started between Sirius and I last summer, I wasn't ready to come out. I didn't even have a word for it. I thought we had to be friends first, and that whatever it was I was feeling, wasn't real. But it was—it was real. And it scared me. I didn't want you to see us any different, for anything to change..."

At his words, Sirius turned his face into his shoulder. Still, Remus plunged on.

"We fought because I was scared, and because I was being selfish. I wanted everything at once, but I wasn't willing to risk what I already had... It was the same at Christmas. And I'm sorry that the rest of you had to deal with it, even though you didn't know what was going on. I

didn't know what it was that I wanted then, but I do now, and now all I want is for us to leave school and still be together. Even if it isn't as a band... or in London… It's like, I found out recently that I have a fucking godmother, but even if I hadn't I would still be okay, because I have you guys. You're my family... All of you."

James glanced at Peter, who didn't return the look, but eased the tenseness in his shoulders.

"Pete?"

Peter continued glaring at the floor, and then finally threw his arms down. "Fine! Yes, I understand. But it's not my fault you decided to like each other…"

"That's not what this is about, Pete," James said, then, more cautious; "Is it...?"

"No." Peter raised his eyes to Remus'. "You say you didn't tell people, but you did! You just didn't tell *me.* Even Lottie knew, only I was singled out! But that's how it always is, isn't it? I don't care who you're buggering, but christ—I thought it would be different when Miles left! Then you came and it was the same thing all over again... Do you even know why I like Moira? 'Cause she makes me feel like a person! You guys make me feel like crap."

"This isn't some polygamist cult, Pettigrew," Sirius said. "Not including you in mine and Moony's relationship isn't exactly uncommon! We had to know we could trust you first!"

"Trust me?!" Peter exclaimed. "What happened to being family?!"

"You can't keep a secret!"

"And my sister can?"

Sirius sat up. "Your sister did! For months—she didn't breathe word of it to anyone! You drop your spoon at lunch and you make sure the whole world knows it!"

"Piss off!"

"Stop!" James ordered. "We're not just gonna shout. We're here to work this out, because the way I see it, none of us are gonna move forward with any of our relationships as long as it's an issue. Now, Moony, why'd you decide not to tell Pete about you and Sirius?"

Remus felt at a loss. “It just… never came up.”

Peter scoffed. “Right.”

“Not even when you were telling Lily and me?”

“It’s not that simple,” Sirius cut-in. “Telling one person doesn’t mean you’ve suddenly got the confidence to shout it to the entire world. We had no idea how you and Evans were gonna react—it’s not like we were telling you our bloody shoe size had changed. It's like Moony said, it was about how you *saw* us. What you thought later and forever. Because it matters.”

“And I don’t, I suppose,” Peter shot back.

“You do, Pete,” Remus insisted, “but it was harder than that. And thinking about how we wanted to do this band… Be rock stars. One word to the wrong person could ruin everything.”

Peter slammed his hands on the desktop. “Fuck's sake, it’s always gotta be about the bloody band with you!”

“Lay off him!” Sirius snapped. “He just means we had to know you were serious.”

“Serious?” Peter echoed. *“SERIOUS?! Try seriously pissed off!”*

“Right, we got that part.”

“Oh, you think you’re so smart!” Peter hissed. “But how smart could you be if this mythical band’s all you’ve got going for you!”

“What did you say?”

“That’s right! You’re so desperately clinging to this idea of being rock stars because you’ve got nothing else going for you! Me and James have shit—he could take over his dad’s firm in an instant, or be a sports star if he really wanted! And I’ve still got options with my brother—no matter how pathetic you may think it is, I have people who want me! James and I could make something of ourselves, it’s you two who have nothing other than this fucking band!”

“I knew it!” Sirius howled, launching himself up to his feet. “It was never about me or Moony, it was always about following James! Of breaking us up so that he could be as pitiful as you! Some artist—just say you’re a coward and get out!”

This time Remus did not have to get in front of Sirius—James did it for him, using all his full height to walk Sirius back to his desk.

“Sirius, *sit down.”*

Remus couldn’t see with James’ back turned, but something about his expression must’ve made Sirius think twice. Slowly, he lowered himself back down into the desk, kicking the closest chair to him away for good measure.

"This is not how I wanted this to go," James said. "We were supposed to be making up!"

"Guess that's what happens when you try and force people to get along," Peter glowered. Sirius returned the look, and James' hands became fists at his sides. For a moment it looked as though he might actually hit something, but then he shut his eyes and let out a long breath and just like that he'd relaxed again.

"Fine," he said, leaning back against the professor’s desk. “If that's the case, then I wanna take a poll. No shame, no pressure, just answer honestly—all of you. But either in or out, I want us to promise right now that we’ll still be friends after.”

He cast his gaze over all of them, and one by one, they all managed a nod.

“Okay. Now who actually wants to be in a band? Not, ‘it’d be cool to do that for six months and then piss off’, but *actually*. Who *wants* this?”

Sirius’ hand went up without hesitation, and Remus’ too, a few moments later. James did not vote right away, instead he looked to Peter, who was picking at his desk with a fingernail.

“Pete, now’s the time to be honest, mate. No judgement, just honesty.”

Slowly, Peter looked up until he was able to look James in the eye. And then he raised one hand. At that moment, Remus wasn’t sure if he should be upset or relieved—and because it would’ve terrified James to know which, he pushed the thought away.

“Good.” James raised his hand too. “All four of us want this then. And we want it together, how it should be. But we have to know we can trust each other too.”

“Yeah,” Peter said. “How do we know that this won’t all go to shit if the two of them suddenly break up?”

Sirius turned sharply as though he were ready to stand again, but stopped when Remus grabbed his arm. “He has a point,” Remus said.

“We’re not breaking up,” Sirius said firmly. “Maybe this is all news to the rest of you, but I’ve loved Moony since—” he stopped short, and scratched his nose to cover it; “since… a while. Now we’ve sorted out our shit. We’re happy.”

“So you say now,” Peter said, “but your track record’s against you.”

This time it was Remus’ turn to spin around. “Pete, don’t be an asshole.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. We wanna do this with you, but not if you’re just gonna be a prick about it.”

“Well, I may be a prick but at least I’m not shagging one.”

“Pete!” James snapped. “What did we talk about this morning?”

Scowling, Peter leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, but said nothing else. Remus eyed him grimly for a few moments and then turned back around in his chair. Sirius was covering his mouth next to him, and when he pulled his hand away Remus expected to find a frown—only it was a smile. He looked from Peter, back to Remus, and then inexplicably, Sirius began to laugh.

“Ha… mhm… ‘not shagging one’…” he mumbled; “s’a good joke almost…”

“Sirius, are you actually laughing?” Asked James.

Sirius shook his head, even covering his mouth again. He held out for a good few seconds before sputtering through his hand and breaking down entirely. “He got you, Moons,” he cackled. “You are indeed shaggin’ a prick! HA!”

“And an idiot, apparently," Remus half-moaned, covering his eyes. Across the room, he heard James give a chortle.

"Is it a tiny prick, Padfoot?"

"No, *massive.* Right, Wormtail?"

"Yeah, well he is a massive prick..."

"HA!"

More laughed, and Remus finally removed his hands to find that all three of them had joined in, even Peter. It was ridiculous how easy it suddenly felt. All of that, and now this.

Infected by the sudden lift in mood, Remus began to laugh too, letting all of the pressure and anxiety seep from his bones. Sirius laughed until he was practically crying, and while he was wiping the tears from his eyes, Peter cleared his throat.

“Look, I don’t care that you’re gay—”

“Moony’s bisexual,” James and Sirius said together.

“What… So like, both?”

Remus shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. As you were saying, Pete?”

“I’m not gonna tell anyone," Peter said. "I want to be in the band too, and as much as I hate saying it, you're right... I don’t think the world is ready for a gay rock star, even if he is as fabulous as Sirius.”

Sirius smirked, and then shrugged amicably. "Wouldn't want to steal the spotlight off of the rest of you that much anyway. Sounds like a lot of work, that."

They shared another chuckle, and finally James clapped his hands together. "Glad that's over. I hate fighting, so if there's anything else the lot of you want to say, now's the time to do it."

Remus and Sirius both shook their heads, but three out of four wasn't a whole, and so finally they all found themselves looking back at Peter.

"Pete?" James said anxiously. "Come on, mate."

"I want this," Peter nodded. "But I need to know, what's gonna happen if the two of you break up?"

Sirius frowned, and Remus could tell he was trying to keep his anger in check.

"We *won't."*

"That's not good enough."

The hackles went up again, but luckily James was there to soothe it once more.

“Hey. I understand where Pete’s coming from, and it's not an insult, Padfoot."

"Easy for you to say. What if he'd just asked whether yours and Evans' relationship had an expiry date?"

"It'd suck, but it wouldn't have anything to do with the band."

The frown became another scowl, and Remus reached out to take his hand. "Say what you want to say then," he told the other two. "We'll hear you out."

"You gotta swear this isn't just for you," Peter said. "That this whole band thing, leaving school to live like bums—that isn't just a part of some crazy romanticised idea. That it isn't just for you."

"I see four people here," Sirius echoed; "Just because it was our idea doesn't mean you don't have an equal stake."

"But you could make or break it, Sirius," James finished. "Pete's right. I know you might not mean for it that way, but things like this can get warped. You… You—I dunno—Maybe you just have to swear that this whole thing—taking a year off, working for the band—that it's more than what we see. That it's not just for you guys, because it can't be. It has to be all of us, together, like you said—*four*. I love you both, really, but you have to be real about this, 'cause this is real life, ain't it? And if anything’s gonna come of it you have to put this first, or at least make it the same.”

Unsure of how to answer such a thing, Remus wiped his face. Opposite to him, Sirius leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling.

“Put it first, huh?”

Or the same, Remus thought sorely.

“I just mean we have to be friends first, don’t we?" James winced. "That’s how this whole thing started anyway. Like, if we can’t be

friends before bandmates and whatever else, then… Pete's right, how could it ever work?"

"I agree," Remus said, though he didn't want to. "We started this as friends, I think we should finish it... as friends."

Obviously relieved, James nodded. "Okay. And what say you, Padfoot?"

Sirius sighed, and dropped his eyes from the roof. "I say yes, I suppose. Marauders weren't meant to walk alone anyway."

" 'One for all, and all for one', right?"

"Right." Standing, Sirius took James' hand and clapped his shoulder in a friendly hug. "Pete," he called afterwards, "I didn't mean what I said earlier, I was just angry. My bad, won't happen again."

Remus thought that it wasn't exactly an apology, but Peter didn't seem to notice. He stood up too, and nodded in return.

"I hate fighting. It's so much easier to just let James boss us around."

James pulled a face. "Oi, I'm not bossy. Sirius, am I bossy?"

"Only as bossy as Moony."

"I am not bossy," Remus scoffed, "you just need a twenty-four-seven babysitter."

"Eh, boyfriend—babysitter. You're all the same. Sarcastic arseholes with a pretty face."

Remus grabbed Sirius by the jaw, squishing his lips together with a grin. "Says you."

"Is this what they're like when they flirt?" Peter asked James.

"Pretty much."

"Ah, so not that different from usual then."

Remus smiled back at them as Sirius pulled his face free. "I think we need to do something," he said keenly. "Something to make up—make us not so foul anymore. We're leaving school soon and everyone's gotten weepy, but I'm excited! Shove the exams, let's do something to celebrate! Something cool, so that when we leave we'll have no

regrets.”

“You mean like a prank?” Asked Peter.

“Yes… or, that too anyway. Suppose there's gotta be more than one way to have 'em remember us.”

James tilted his head, clearly intrigued. “What are you getting at, Padfoot?”

“I was thinking we could make a time capsule, actually.”

“Like the one Filch dug up last term?”

"Yeah!"

Peter scratched his head. “What would we put in it?”

“Anything—everything. Whatever we wanted! Put in James’ rank football boots for all I care.”

“But we’re not important. Who wants to dig up a time capsule full of our crap?”

“Yet, Wormy,” Sirius said, “we’re not important *yet.”*

“I think it’s a great idea,” said James. “We could get the girls in on it. Let McKinnon try out a time capsule of her own.”

“You’re so nice,” Sirius teased, knocking him gently in the shoulder. “But yeah, the girls too. Now whaddya say, Moons?”

They all looked at him, and Remus smiled.

“I think it’s about the lamest thing you’ve ever suggested."

"Oh? Really."

"Yeah... And I know exactly what we should put in it.”

Chapter End Notes

In my head the first song Sheila (accidentally, hehe) played for Remus was "Rockin' Robin" by Bobby Day (1958).

Lots of songs in this chapter, because I can do that, lol:
“My Heart Cries for You” by Guy Mitchell (1951),

“Long Tall Sally” by Little Richard (1956),
“Your Sister Can’t Twist” by Elton John (1973), and;
“Stayin’ Alive” by the Bee Gees (1977).

Once again, I update on Sundays around mid-day (sometimes before, sometimes after), but I'm in the PST timezone so I cannot help if that's basically a Monday for you, lol.

Chapter 94: Glory Days

Chapter Summary

The Marauders get ready to leave school while juggling exams, football, and an unfortunate lack of pranking ideas.

Chapter Notes

Will mot ever get a chapter out on time??? Probs not ¯_(ツ)_/¯

CW for this chapter: It's a fun one, but there is reference to some brief religious trauma. There's also a sex scene, but I believe it's the last one before the end of the school year. Pay attention to '> > >' if you wish to skip over.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For once in my life, I won't let sorrow hurt me,
Not like it's hurt me before;
For once, I have something I know won't desert me,
I'm not alone anymore;
For once I can say, "This is mine, you can't take it!"
As long as I know I have love, I can make it;
For once in my life, I have someone who needs me…

- "For Once in My Life" Stevie Wonder, 1968

Wednesday 31st May 1978

Remus clenched the post card tightly between his fingers. It was wrinkled as though it'd been dropped in a puddle and only had a few sparse words, but the excitement it carried was astronomical.

Imming was bust. Found a group and we're moving on. Phone me at the Roadman's Pub in Ipswich. Wrote the number down below. Luv Tom.

He took the stairs down two at a time, and was punching numbers into the closest telephone line before he'd even stopped to catch his breath. The phone rang for a moment, before it clicked on and an old,

breathy voice shouted down the line.

“ ‘Ello, Judy? Is that you?”

“Eh… No… it’s Remus…”

“What’d you say, Judy? Come now, speak up you old bat, you know my ears ain’t naught but whistles in the wind nowadays.”

“Sorry, wrong number!”

He slammed the receiver down, stopping just long enough to laugh at himself as he dialled the number again—more slowly this time. It took longer this time around for the call to cross the miles between them, but when the line finally connected, he was met with the rumbling drawl of another stranger.

“Roadman’s pub 'n inn, how may I direct ya?”

He told the man on the end of the line who he was looking for, and then there was a clatter as the phone was set down. In the background he could hear an entire rabble, most likely working men just got off from a hard day’s work. There was shouting, laughter, the occasional sound of a smashing glass. Remus imagined Tomny was fitting right in.

There was another clatter as the phone was picked up, and then his friend was shouting down the line;

“Oioi! Whatchu want—who’s this?”

“Got that many people calling you at some dingy pub, you slag?”

“LU! Oh baby, I missed you!”

Remus’ heart leapt in his chest. He could barely hear Tomny over all the noise, but he was smiling ear-to-ear anyway.

“Honestly, Tomny, the things I do for you—”

“What? Sorry’s, love, can you speak up a bit?”

“I was only saying!” Remus shouted into the phone; “That I just dialled the wrong number. Instead of the pub I just got some old bint yelling her head off and calling me Judy.”

“Eh, s’not a terrible nickname,” Tomny said. “Though, I do prefer

mine. How’s it do, Lu?”

“Life’s good, Tom. Got your letter. I see your penmanship’s gotten better.”

“Oi. Just 'cause I dropped out at thirteen don’t mean I’m a total thickhead. Burrin’s had me copying out his bookie notes since before I could see over the counter.”

“Mhm, sure. So what the hell happened in Imming? Why're you in Ipswich?”

“Oh." Tomny made a sound of discontent and sighed into the phone. “Eh, bit boring really. Eventually every'fin just went tits-up and no one was gettin’ paid anymore, so a few of us packed our bags and skipped town, s'all. Place is too cold to be a summer home anyway.”

“That’s shite.”

“Eh, easy when you only got one bag. We managed to snag a ride on the railway but got kicked off near Leicester when the poncy conductor found us hiding out in one of the sleepers. From there it was shanks’ pony all the way to Peterborough, but managed to bum a ride from there. But I got another gig down at the port out by Felixstowe! We're all heading over there tomorrow actually. Me and the guys are gonna live together down by the ports."

"Do you know them?"

"We're comfortable. Better than living in a dosshouse. And it’s honest work—port’s massive, way bigger than Imming. The boys thought a bit of a celebration was in order though, so we're's just having ourselves a bit of a piss-up now." In another, another shattering glass echoed in the background, followed by a round of hearty laughter. Tomny joined in, before shouting into the phone again; "But what about'chu?! How long ‘til yer done wiff school?”

“Few weeks."

Tomny whistled. "Then what?”

“Then I’m back home, s'pose. The lads and I are gonna get a flat—find work ourselves. Maybe a shitty pub to peddle our band in.”

“Ah yes, the band,” Tomny mused. “You’re not goin’ back to yer dad’s then?”

“No. Nothing there for me anyway.”

“Too right. Get this though, Burrin knows the guy who runs the racket in the yard round 'ere, says he's gonna set me up too."

"Doing what, something illegal?"

"S'only illegal if you get caught."

"Wonder how many felons have said that."

"Cheeky. Give me six months, I'll have the entire place eatin' out of the palm of my hand."

It was jest—probably an exaggeration at best, but Remus couldn't help the way his stomach seemed to plummet toward his feet.

"Six months...?"

"Ah." Tomny clicked his tongue, and Remus' fist tightened over the postcard.

“Tom, is this your way of telling me you’re not coming back to London?”

"Now hold on, I never said—" Suddenly Tomny went silent, and Remus had to press the receiver more tightly to his ear just to make out the voices over the noise.

"Piss off, m'on the phone, ya prick!"

"C'mon, Tim-Tom, don't be stingy. I just wan' say hello to your pretty bird from back home."

"Oh, fuck you, Harv."

The tussle went on for a few more seconds until eventually Remus was answered with a new voice. This 'Harv' was clearly drunk, and had a deep Black Country accent that was impossible to miss. He laughed down the line at first, and Remus felt his patience wither.

"Ow do, luv?" He drawled. "You one 'ah the girls our Tim-Tom's always chatting up from back home?"

"Shut up, Harv!" Tomny called; *"It's my fuckin' brother, orright? Now give me the bloody phone!"*

Another clamorous scuffle began, and distantly Remus heard the barman from before warn the two about messing around in his pub. In the end it was Tomny who won, shooing his friend off as he sighed into the phone.

"Sorry 'bout that... S'just Harv. Pretty sure he took one too many hits to the skull as a kid and it's left him a moron."

"No, it's my bad. Didn't realise I was clogging up the line," Remus scoffed. "I should let you go, let the 'pretty birds' have their turn."

"The git's lying! I barely have a second to myself, ain't no time leftover to flirt."

"Sure, Tim-Tom."

"Okay, I'd say your cheek's hit full for one phone call, don't cha think?"

Unable to help himself, Remus smirked and began absentmindedly twirling the phone cord around his wrist. "You called me your brother."

"Yeah, and?"

Remus' smile widened.

"I am coming back, y'know," Tomny said eventually. "Can't stand coming home every day stinkin' 'ah fish guts and oil forever. M'just... Well, I'm just gonna see how this works out first. But I'll be back. One of us still owes the other a warm meal, innit."

Remus sighed. "Yeah, alright."

"So you gonna finally tell me what's new or am I to stand here listening to you mope forever?"

"I found out I have a godmother."

"No shit?"

"And she's my teacher."

"Fuckin' 'ell!" Tomny exclaimed. "Your life sometimes, I swear... Are you happy about it?"

"Yeah, sorta. But it's still confusing, mostly."

“Family always is. I only ever had mum, and she was more than enough to deal with. I used to think she was a bit daft, but she was just some girl, and ya don’t get fancy things like ‘godparents’ when yer born a low-rent. Now how’d you find out about this god-mum of yours?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Maybe you tell me when I see you next then. Since you’re moving back for good?”

Remus brightened a bit. “Yeah, definitely! I can't wait for you to meet the others, properly this time. And you should meet Mary and Marlene too. They all know about Sirius and me now, all of them.”

“It’s a date,” Tomny agreed, then; “And you can tell lover-boy I said so."

"You shouldn't tease him."

"Why not? It's a big brother's job—giving the new boyfriend a hard time."

"Yeah, okay. I'll see you when we're both back then?"

“You know it. Make sure you give me the bell once you’re settled in. I'd like to pop by and catch one of your little shows.”

"They won’t be little forever. Who knows, maybe one day I'll be inviting you to Wembley.”

"As long as you'll be there. Now I'll be seeing you, Lu. Stay safe, enjoy yourself. You've earned it, posh-boy."

When Tomny hung up, all the sounds of his rowdy pub fell away and Remus was left alone in the quiet hallway of his school dorm. Nearby the common room was flush with groups of kids trying to enjoy what was left of their evening. No one noticed, but Remus' cheeks had started to burn even before he hung the phone back onto its hook. A part of him wished he hadn't mentioned Wembley Stadium in the first place; he blamed Sheila for ever putting the thought in his head—*Me? Play Wembley? As if*—but then again, Tomny had never been the sort to trample on other people's dreams. All Remus could do now was trust his word; that Tomny would be back as soon as he could, and everything would be alright again. And so he resolved himself to push the entire thing from his mind, at least until they were all back in

London and ready to do something about it.

Turning to face the front doors, Remus picked up the Fender's case from its spot along the wall and pulled up the collar of his jacket as he walked out into the crisp night air. There was no time to fret over Tomny anyway.

He was late for band practice.

* * *

Monday 5th June 1978

Lily stood in the doorway of their dorm room, squinting down at the tape recorder Sirius had just unceremoniously dropped into her arms. She and Marlene had really only come over to get their notebooks back after James and Peter had borrowed them for self-study, but Sirius had been quick to waylay them before departure with talk of their latest bright idea.

"I don't understand…" Lily said; "You want us to do what with it?"

"Pick a song—one that really means something to you—and record it on this here tape. It's set up for you already," Sirius instructed, scooting in closer. "This is the record button, and there's the stop button—basic stuff. Just hit the record, play your song off whatever radio, and then hit stop again. Easy-peasy."

"But why?" Marlene asked, peering over Lily's shoulder.

"It's for the time capsule," Remus said.

Both girls stared back in surprise. "You're making a time capsule?"

James' voice carried from inside the bathroom; *"It was Sirius' idea!"*

"But Moony thought of the tape!" Sirius added excitedly. "We're gonna put everything into a capsule of our own and bury it—right here on campus! Then, in twenty years when we're either rich and successful or fat and balding, we can come back and dig it up again. Relive our glory days, as it goes."

"Wouldn't it make more sense for you guys to record your *own*

songs?" Marlene asked, reaching over Lily's shoulder and tapping a fingernail along the tape recorder's keys sceptically. In answer, Sirius and Remus exchanged a smug look.

"We already did."

The girls' jaws dropped. "You *did?"*

"Finished it this morning in fact," Sirius beamed proudly. "Wormy's over in the AV room right now, getting those lads to piece it together for us. It's not perfect, but when he's done we'll have our very first amateur demo."

"So *this* is what you've been doing with all of your time for the last month!" Lily huffed. " 'Studying' my arse—you four were just shut up in that bloody music room, working on your riffs instead of working on your marks!"

"Don't worry, we're still passed all our exams," Sirius preened. "Some with flying colours, I hear." He glanced coquettishly at Remus, who had already done more than his fair share of bragging; which was of course only well-deserved. Their final reports had come back the day before, and he'd been very pleased to find that he'd made top marks in not only English but Classics as well. He tried not to gloat, but even Professor Bilshin had praised his work, and it was a well-known fact that that old sour-puss had never praised anyone.

"Well," Lily breathed eventually, "this is all brilliant then. When should we expect to hear this 'demo' of yours?"

"You won't," Remus said, leaning against the open door shyly. "We swore we wouldn't listen to it until 1998."

"1998?" Marlene gasped; "But that's twenty years from now!"

"We know. It's going in the capsule."

"And there will be room for you and yours," Sirius assured them, "just pick a song—get Mary and Lottie in on it too. It's an eight-track tape, and there's eight of us. Honestly, I couldn't think of anything more perfect."

Lily and Marlene smiled, obviously softened by Sirius' show of inclusion, and nodded their heads in agreement. "Alright," Lily said, "but you're not allowed to make fun of our choices."

Sirius put a hand over his heart. “I solemnly swear to not make fun of the songs you ladies choose… Even if they are absolutely grating on the ears.”

Contented, Marlene reached out and pinched Sirius on the cheek, before both girls turned to go.

“Make sure you give it back soon,” he called down the hall after them. “We’re gonna bury it after the tournament!”

Once they’d gone and Sirius had come back inside, Remus shut the door and raised his arms up in a stretch. “You think it’s silly?” He asked. “The tape idea?”

“Of course not,” Sirius smiled. “I can't think of anything better. The rest of you might be embarrassed of your music taste in twenty years, but not me. Bowie’ll always be timeless.”

“So you picked a Bowie song? I should’ve known.”

“Practice what you preach, right?"

"Right."

"What song did you pick then? You never said.”

“Sorry, not telling.”

"Uh-huh, nice try," Sirius scoffed. “No go on, fess up!”

“You're the one who said it should be a secret."

“Yeah, but it’s me!”

“Even more reason not to tell,” Remus said snidely, “you know far too many of my secrets already.”

“Ugh. You're no fun.” Stopping long enough to stick out tongue as a show of opposition, Sirius crossed the room to the bathroom door and promptly banged his fist on the wood. “Dammit, Prongs! How long you gonna be in there for? The rest of us need to piss every once in a while too, ya know.”

“Do you mind? I’m shaving!” James called back. *“Call me when you get more than two hairs on your chin!”*

Sirius kicked the door. “Wanker.”

Disinterested, Remus returned to his corner of the room. He had Hope's white trunk open on his bed, which he'd been slowly filling as the days went by. It was mostly books, spare socks, the odd essay he'd thought worth keeping, but there were also a handful of photographs, courtesy of Lily. She'd given them to him in an envelope only a few weeks before, and when he peered into the collection of polaroid photos he'd found more than he'd thought he would. Apart from a few chance moments, he could scarcely remember Lily toting the camera around with her at all, and yet the evidence was right there, dated and captioned just for him.

Some of them were priceless, like the ones of all four of them on Sirius' seventeenth birthday, standing in naught but their pants at the very end of the dock. Even now Remus could still recall the cold. Then there was Peter missing an eyebrow, and Sirius in Mary's tube tup at the end of twelfth year, and James on his birthday with that stupid party hat they'd made him wear. Those ones were definitely worth a good laugh, but there were also simpler ones;

Mary and Marlene cuddling each other on the sofa; a concentrated Peter in art class; Lottie waving in front of the Three Broomsticks; James and Sirius smiling for the camera, a tight-lipped Professor McGonagall standing between them; and finally four girlish faces squeezed into a single frame and an unsuspecting Remus passed out in the background. If he squinted hard, he could just make out the fresh tattoo on his chest.

They'd really had so much fun at school.

Each photograph had unlocked a memory for Remus that he'd almost thought forgotten, but it was the one of him and Sirius in the common room that had really gotten him. It was dated as March 24th, 1977, just a few days before James' birthday. Sirius had Andy's guitar in his lap, his eyes shut as though he were lost in the song. And Remus... God. He was smiling like a sop, wasn't he? Staring at Sirius as though the sun rose and set on him. He supposed it did. For whatever love he'd had for Sirius in that moment, it had only tripled since.

"I don't know why you're packing now. We don't leave for another week and half," Sirius said, appearing over Remus' shoulder and glancing down at the trunk. With a soft smile, Remus tucked the photographs away and turned to him.

"Your hair's finally grown back," he said, tucking a lock of it behind Sirius' ear for him. "It looks like it did before."

“Does it?” Sirius thumbed his fringe. “Doesn’t feel like it.”

“You could probably even braid it again.”

“Would you do it for me?”

“If you wanted me to.”

"And if I wanted you to do... *other* things?"

Remus tongued the inside of his cheek. "Now that would have to be negotiated."

"I think you'd find it to be a waste of time," Sirius tsked. "After all, I always get what I want. In the end..."

"Do you now?" Remus arched a brow. "Why don't you prove it."

For a moment it appeared as though Sirius might rise to the bait. He smirked at him, even grinned and ran the tip of his tongue across his teeth to tease. And Remus might've been satisfied with just that, but then Sirius sighed and turned away, as though the game did not interest him in the slightest. Remus didn't even think; it was instinct to reach out and grab him, haul Sirius back with every finger hingeing in the waistband of his trousers—and Remus got his due the moment he spun Sirius back around and spotted that smug look on his face.

"See?" Sirius purred. "Want you? Got you." Then he grabbed Remus round the jaw and kissed him hard on the mouth. It was something Remus never got tired of. Sirius was a bombshell—a firecracker come to life. He made everything exciting, no matter how many times they did it. The idea of one day having to share him with the rest of the world made him endlessly nervous, but Sirius was too big a star to ever be contained. They'd see him, they'd love him, but never like this. *This* belonged to Remus alone.

"I want this," Sirius murmured, kissing Remus' mouth; "and this—" his cheek; "and this—" his eyes; "and this—" his neck; "All of it."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

They ended up on Remus' bed, Sirius straddling him as Remus slid his hands up beneath his shirt. He'd just made it to the top of his ribs when Sirius grabbed one wrist and brought Remus' hand up toward

his face. Instantly Remus thought to grasp his neck and bring their mouths back together and—*kiss, kiss, kiss*—but then Sirius was sucking a finger into his mouth, biting him round the first knuckle.

"Careful," Remus moaned. "Much more of that and I'll—"

Before he could finish his eyes fell sideways, right over Sirius' shoulder, to where James was stood frozen next to his own bed in little more than his sport shorts. Remus screamed—*"AUGH!"*—and shot upright, just as Sirius was leaning back down to kiss him. Their foreheads collided with a dull thump and instantly Sirius had collapsed back on the bed.

"Fucking—CHRIST!" He groaned, as the two of them writhed on the bed, clutching their newly-formed bruises. "Moons, what the hell?!" Sirius rolled over, and Remus knew he'd spotted James as well when his arm shot out.

"YOU!"

James laughed once, and gave an awkward wave. "Sorry... Didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's always fucking you!" Sirius howled, snatching up a pillow in one hand and sending it soaring across the room to smack James upside the head.

"I was trying to get by without you noticing!" He wailed back, fixing his glasses. "But the bloody door's between your beds! What was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to stay in the fucking toilet!"

"That's not fair. How should I know that the two of you were out here eating each other's faces off?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! Next time we'll moan louder!"

"Yeah, yeah," James scoffed, pulling on his t-shirt. "Give it a few weeks, we'll all be out on our own... No more sharing a room then."

Still clutching his forehead, Sirius looked to Remus, who shrugged haplessly, rubbing his own.

"Fine," Sirius huffed, clambering off the bed; "Suppose the mood's gone anyway… Anyone feel like music?"

"Anything to drown out the sound of you sticking your tongue down Moony's throat."

"Don't be jealous, Potter. Macdonald says it gives you wrinkles."

As Sirius crossed back to his own bed, Remus stood and righted his mother's trunk, which had ended up on the floor in their haste to make room on the tiny four-poster. By the time he'd picked all his things up off the floor, Sirius had a Bad Company album playing and was lying upside down on his bed, tossing a tiny rubber ball up in the air.

"Big game's coming up, Potter," he said. James didn't reply at first, and Remus glanced over to find him lying back on his own bed, hands clasped over his chest and staring up at the ceiling as though he were lost in thought.

"Potter?"

"Huh? Oh... Yeah, it is."

Sirius tossed the ball up again. "You and McKinnon decide what it is you're doing for the tournament yet?"

"Sorta."

"Alright, be stingy then." Another toss, and another, and then; "Blimey, where is Pete? It's just one tape, can't be that hard—"

James sat up on his bed; "When you two kiss each other, do you ever think about how you're kissing another bloke?"

This time Sirius missed the ball. It hit him square between the eyes before bouncing off and rolling across the room and beneath Peter's bed. By then James had earned himself an incredulous look from both of them and Sirius had sat up so quickly he'd nearly taken a spill off of his covers.

"Pardon me?"

"Like, does it feel different from kissing a girl?"

Sirius made a small choking sound in the back of his throat. *"From a girl*—why yes, I expect it's a bit different!"

"Better different...?"

"That's probably up to the person, Prongs," Remus said, while Sirius leapt up from the bed and pointed yet another finger at his best friend.

"You been kissing other blokes, Potter?!"

"What? *No!"*

"Then why the sudden interest?"

"I was just curious!"

Remus suspected that if James could've blushed easily he would've been red from top to bottom. As it was, he merely let out a nervous huff and began organising his already-spotless bedside. "I've just been thinking about it, that's all," he babbled, tossing his arms out and rubbing the back of his neck simultaneously. "A lot's happened since you told us! Like—Like the shit with Pete, and—and Marlene! She's a lesbian, you know."

"Yes," Sirius scoffed; "We know."

"Well, I... I've been talking to her about it."

"That'll get you every time," Remus mumbled. It made Sirius smirk a bit, but James didn't seem to notice.

"She said she's always known," he continued; "That she—you know, liked girls. And I was just wondering... was it the same for you guys? You know, since you... 'like guys'."

He used air quotes, and Remus' jaw just about fell off his face.

"James, could you... I mean, do you think you could like—"

"Men?"

James looked up when he said it, and both Remus and Sirius seemed to be gripping the edge of their seats, but in the end James only laughed.

"Ha, no! Don't be stupid, you two, I have Lily."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Sirius demanded.

"Well, I have a girlfriend."

"Moony's had girlfriends!"

"So has Sirius."

James shook his head. "No. No, you're wrong. It's nothing personal, I'm just... you know, *not.* Like, when Padfoot and I kissed I didn't feel anything at all."

Sirius made a retching sound. "Please, don't ever bring that up again. I have nightmares about that day."

James rolled his eyes, and Remus came across the room to lean gently against one of the posts of his bed.

"You know, Prongs, having a girlfriend doesn't much have to do with your sexuality. You could still... 'like' people."

"I like Lily," James replied staunchly. "I wanna be with her forever."

"O-Okay."

James glanced between the two of them; Remus who kept rubbing his neck, and Sirius who wouldn't meet his eye. "I shouldn't have said anything," he chuckled, the humour not meeting his eyes. "Things are just different now, is all. Exams are pretty well finished, we're all about to leave school... It's just curiosity, right?"

"It's alright to be curious," said Remus.

"Yeah," Sirius shrugged. "Like, if you really wanted to know what it's like to kiss Moony you could've just asked."

"Really?"

"No!"

James grinned, then stood up from his bed. "Aw, Pads, no need to be jealous. You want a kiss too? C'mere, I'll make it up to you!"

"Piss off!"

But James didn't. He sprung forward like a cat, grappling Sirius even as he was playfully beaten and slapped. When he failed to reach his lips, James turned and hugged Remus instead, which only made Sirius want to pry him off even more.

“Don't be stingy, Padfoot! I want some boyfriend love too."

“Too bad! This one’s mine, go find your own!”

Sirius shoved him, and Remus was unable to stop it as they all fell back onto James' bed in a tangle of limbs. By then James was laughing —that great infectious guffaw of his that always brought a smile to each of their faces. Sirius laughed, then Remus too, and they were all done for. The laughter was still going even several moments later when their bedroom door opened and Peter strolled in.

“It's done, lads!" He cried. "Tape’s all fin—Oh, Jesus fuck... If this is your way of telling me that you’re really a part of some homoerotic triad I might actually have to kill myself.”

Sirius flung James’ arm off and sat up. “Nah, we wouldn't leave you out, Wormy! Here, let Daddy Padfoot give you a big ol' smooch.”

The next day, as they made their way down to the church for that morning’s communion, Remus kept the small tape clutched tightly in the palms of his hands. He hadn’t let the thing out of his sight since Peter had finished it, it was too valuable. They’d actually done it—it was real!

Their very first demo.

When Remus had first suggested they record a demo of themselves that day in the classroom, he had no idea just how good it would be for the four of them. It was the perfect way to reconcile after the Peter fight—instantly nothing mattered more than the music. Not relationships, not A-Levels, not even sleep—*only* the band.

And it was exactly what they’d promised! Each of them put in their fair share of long hours at the music room, perfecting every lyric and every melody until Filch was all but chasing them out with a pitchfork, and even then, they never fought once. It was almost a miracle. Figuring out the recording bit had been tricky—there was only so much room on the tape and more than once they'd ended up taping right over their already finished work—but after finally getting the hang of it, things had just come together. The demo had a little piece of all of them—Sirius’ bombastic ‘Downtown Girls’, James’ incessantly cheesy ‘Letter to a Lily’, even an entire three-minute drum-solo spearheaded by Peter.

Initially Remus had been a bit hesitant, but the tape's final draft also included ‘Tonya’s Song’, though... only as an instrumental. He quite couldn't bring himself to sing the words, and though Sirius had offered, it just felt better this way. Tonya was a plaster he still wasn't

quite ready to rip off, but thankfully his friends' intrepid love and talent made up for it.

"Almost seems a shame, leaving it in a box for twenty years," James yawned, stretching his arms up over his head as they filed into the pew. For the most part the church was empty; they'd made the mistake of coming down to the church early after James had forgotten to do headcount the night before. He'd spent all morning rushing around, ensuring that all of the Godric boys were alive and counted for. Watching him almost made Remus feel sorry for every dorm monitor that'd had to put up with the likes of them over the years. They'd probably given poor Kenny a few premature greys.

"We'll make another one," Sirius vowed, taking a seat between James and Remus. "Next one'll be even better than the last, you'll see. We can rent a real studio! In London, even."

"Are you sure?" Asked Peter. "I find it hard to believe that just anyone can waltz in off the street like that."

"You can if you have the cash."

"Dad'll kill us if we just buy our way up, you know. He says—" James stopped for another yawn. "He says it's not how it's done."

"Only because rock stars so often start out as dirt poor," Sirius drawled, "but yeah sure, we'll 'work our way up'."

"With what job?" Remus asked, tucking the tape away. "Gotta get one first. And you're about as work-hardy as a spring daisy."

"Look, it's a bloody job, okay? I'll get one—work at a pub or something. How hard can it be to pour a pint for a couple 'a old codgers."

"Mum's got a friend who runs this real fancy restaurant in the city!" James said. "She figures she could get me a gig waiting tables. Want me to ask for you as well?"

Sirius made a face, then shivered. "Thanks, Prongs, but no thanks, I got cousins in the city, Andy's family. And I'd rather spend the entire night scraping gum off bar stools in Hackney than risk having to fetch them their 'lemon water, no ice'."

"He says, having never done a day of work in his life." James craned his head. "Moony, how 'bout you?"

“Uh…”

“Nah, no way!” Sirius cried, grabbing Remus by the shoulders. “Hundred pounds says this guy’s gonna end up working at some twee little bookshop. ‘Pardon me, son, have you seen any copies of “Das Kapital” sitting around by chance?’—‘Oh, yes sir! That’ll be aisle twelve! And if you’re looking for some nice, light reading, may I suggest “Mein Kampf”? Very inspirational, that’.”

"You are an idiot," said Remus.

“Swotsaidwhat?"

Remus hit him with a bible, and James laughed as he watched Sirius bitterly rub his shoulder.

"What about you, Pete?" Remus asked, turning to his other side. "Got any plans?”

“Yeah, wanna work at a fine London bistro together?” James offered enthusiastically, pushing Sirius' head out of the way. Down the row, Peter looked away, mumbling under his breath;

“Erm… Yeah well, about that… Dad called yesterday actually. Called it an 'ultimatum'. Says if I’m not going to school, then I have to work with him at the press.”

"What crap!" Sirius cried, before raising his arms up behind his head and slumping down in the pew. “Sounds like he’s trying to bloody indoctrinate you.”

“I thought he was fine with you taking a year off?” Remus asked.

“He was, but guess he decided he doesn't want me slumming around and doing nothing.”

“Music’s not nothing,” Sirius tsked.

“You try telling him that.”

“S’alright, work the job, Wormtail,” James said. “Show him you're dedicated. We can make the band work on the weekends.”

It wasn’t the news that they’d wanted, but Sirius managed to keep his mouth shut and no one said anything more on the subject. Eventually a swirl of chatter began filling the air as more and more students arrived to find their seats. Next to him in the pew, Remus felt Sirius

begin to wiggle as though he couldn't get comfortable. He turned to him and raised a brow in question, and Sirius just shrugged half-heartedly before gesturing to the front of the church.

"You'd think they'd have taken it down by now," he muttered. "It's such an eye-sore."

The eye-sore in question was the large statue of Christ, still hung up at the front of the church but now covered from view. It'd been several months since Sirius' outburst—the only that had left the statue without a nose. They'd all been hoping the school would remove it, but instead a while sheet had been draped over top of the statue and was to remain until term ended and the God-son's nose could be repaired.

"At least you don't have to stare at it anymore?" Remus offered.

Sirius shrugged grumpily. "Wonder if Reg knows I did it." He nodded his head to a busy pew a few rows ahead, where Regulus was sitting with Barty. It was with great pleasure that Remus spotted Trish on his opposite side, their shoulders nearly touching. As he watched, Barty reached around Regulus and yanked a fistful of Trish's hair. It would've given Remus cause enough to intervene, had Trish not immediately retaliated by scooping up one of the bibles and thumping Barty over the head with it. He could see Regulus snapping at the both of them afterwards, probably telling them to act their age, which they'd both refuse—snidely.

"Imagine you hid someone behind it," Remus mused, pointing to the sheet and attempting to improve Sirius' mood. "And then the priests go to take off the tarp and end up scared shitless."

The corner of Sirius' mouth tweaked upwards. "You could jump out in the middle of the service."

"Wearing a robe and wig."

"Or *naked."*

Remus laughed, and imagined Regulus telling *them* to act their age. Then he laughed harder.

"You look as though you're having a good morning," Lily smiled, as she and the girls appeared in the row behind them. She kissed the top of James' hair before sitting, and Sirius immediately swivelled around in his pew to face them.

“Evans, McKinnon! You two tell them about the tape yet?”

“Let us wake up a bit first, Black,” Marlene said, still rubbing her eyes; “Yes, we told them.”

“Brilliant idea, right?” James grinned.

“Uh-huh, I love it,” said Lottie. “Our own time capsule! One to replace the shitty one they unearthed last term, right Marls?”

Marlene nodded in agreement.

“I think the tape’s a cute idea too,” Mary agreed. “I’m still undecided on a song though. Like, do I want to go with the expected choice, which would be amazing regardless, or should I try for something more interesting—more *éblouissant?* Which would also be amazing too. Obviously. Hm... Maybe I should compile a list.”

“Pick whatever song you want, just don’t tell us what it is,” Sirius said.

“Why not?” Lottie asked. “I thought we were putting it on the same tape.”

“We are, but it’s supposed to be a secret. At least until we play it.”

“Which will only be twenty years from now,” Marlene scoffed.

“Exactly! Now you’re getting it, McKinnon.”

Still stroking James' wild hair, Lily smiled and sat back in her pew. “Seems a bit silly, why wouldn’t we just play it together now? I want to know what you chose.”

“Have faith, Evans,” Sirius smirked, giving her a final wink.

The Marauders’ plans became reasonably predictable after that. They kept up with their band practices, and Remus continued to meet with Sheila on the regular. She was ecstatic when he told her that they’d actually managed to piece together their own tape, but when she asked to hear it, Remus had to stupidly refuse. He did consider sneaking it away just for her, but the demo had already proved to be too much of a temptation. For days they went back and forth over whether or not to listen to it, torn between pride over something they created and also entirely too nervous that even a single listen would point out all of their mistakes. They'd never listened to a recording of

themselves before; and so, to settle the debate, Sirius had taped the demo to the ceiling of their bedroom, where it might be seen at all times and they could each hold the other accountable. In the very least, it was certainly one of their most questionable decor choices yet.

With their demo done and summer growing ever nearer, most students found themselves free to do as they pleased. Even the teachers seemed to have already checked out for the holiday, but Hawkings itself was in a tizzy preparing for the hosting of the final football tournament. Meanwhile rumours of parties and celebration swirled about campus, egged on by the idea that Remus and his friends had yet to unveil some grand plot that would put all of their previous marauder-ing to shame. Though whenever asked, all four Marauders appeared to playing dumb. Firstly because they didn't want their plans to be foiled before being brought to fruition, but also because they'd yet to make any. Sirius had claimed that a regular old leavers party would be boring and not in line with their usual end-of-term tomfoolery at all, but so far none of them had been able to come up with anything better than the usual 'chickens in the dorm room' gag.

While they hummed and hawed, the days passed until there were hardly any left. The tournament would be on them before they knew it, and there wasn't much else to do aside from look forward to whatever was coming next. It felt odd that none of them would be returning in the following autumn, but it didn't mean there wasn't any excitement in the air. Remus and Sirius would be returning to the Potters' until the four of them could find a place big enough on their own, and come September Lily would be joining them as well. While they worked and peddled their band, Lily would be starting a criminal justice degree at the University College of London, where she hoped to one day earn herself a spot in their faculty of law.

To no one's surprise, Mary had decided to study French at a London university as well, where she would be living separately from her family and taking voice lessons at a local conservatory on the side. She had tried to convince Marlene to move in with her, but the flat Mary had her eye on was in South Kensington, and the weekly rent alone would've been more than Mr. McKinnon made in a month. Lottie, meanwhile, would be returning home to live with her parents for the first time since she was a little girl. Her boyfriend Roger had been overseeing his father's holding company out in Reading for several months and was expected to remain until the following year, and so Lottie had made plans to attend a women's bookkeeping course in the city for a few days during the week, so that she might be able to

take the train and see him on weekends. Marlene still maintained loose plans to throw her lot in with various charities and not-for-profit programs, though more recently it had come out just how badly her parents disapproved. Their wish for Marlene was that she attend a women's college closer to home, but when Marlene refused over Easter, the family's relationship with their only daughter had begun to deteriorate. Apparently rumours had started swirling at the McKinnon's church ever since it'd come out what sort of charity programs Marlene had been looking into. Most of them focused on helping young women and single mothers, but others had to do with more... *social* issues. Racial empowerment and queer rights were among the most condemned.

After that Marlene had decided that she would be moving out of her parents' house and into a shared living space in Southeast London. The flat itself was already being rented out by a few of the people who'd helped organise her trip to Morocco, and Marlene seemed excited for the change, despite her family's disapproval. Mrs. McKinnon threw a terrible fit when she heard, distraught over the soiled state of daughter's chastity and mortal soul. She began calling Marlene every night in a desperate attempt to get her to reconsider, but Marlene was resolute. Not only would she be moving out, she also told her mother that she would no longer be attending church. Afterwards Mrs. McKinnon said that she would pray for her, and that she was going to hell.

The eight of them spent a lot of time during those last few weeks exchanging plans and celebrating each other's big and small victories. As it turned out, Remus' friends weren't the only ones with exciting plans either. Jillian Stewart was off to Leeds to study economics, while Davey Gudgeon was heading into finance and starting off with an impressive internship at some large bank in Manchester. Several of Lottie's girlfriends were going abroad, while a few kids they knew from music class had been granted placement at various conservatories all across the country. Frankie Vasile, president of the school's photography club since his eighth year and someone whom Remus barely ever spoken to, was apparently headed to New York to intern for an American magazine. Even Moira was excited to share her news—that she was London-bound as well, and would be attending St. Mary's University. Apart from the general news of admission, there was talk of scholarships too. One of the lads on James' football team was set to play for the University of Northumbria—though Sirius had kindly added that this was purely because his father sat on the school's board of directors. James took it in stride, but there was no denying the little boy inside who still dreamed of being a football star.

“Don't be down, James. You could’ve gotten a top-tier scholarship if you'd wanted,” Peter told him kindly. “You’ll probably still get offers after the last game! McGonagall’s invited scouts, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m not so sure the scouts’ll be all that impressed.”

“And why wouldn’t they be?” Demanded Sirius.

Instead of answering, James shifted his gaze to Marlene, who looked positively red-faced and maybe just a little bit guilty. The eight of them were sitting around the common room together, soaking up what was to be one of their final evenings all in the same place. The girls still hadn’t finished with the tape (Mary kept changing her mind on what song she wanted to put on it) but they were still on track to bury the time capsule after the football tournament, which was now only a day away.

With all eyes on her, Marlene sighed and finally relented;

“They won’t be impressed because Potter, here, has decided to play the rebel. The tournament board has refused his request to allow us girls play on the winning team, so he's decided to throw the whole thing."

"You mean you're not going to play?" Lily gasped.

"Of course we're gonna play," said James. "Didn't you lot hear what McKinnon was saying? They won't let the girls play on the *winning* team, but if we don't win then their rules mean bupkis!"

“I don't follow," Peter groaned. "Why wouldn't you want to win?"

"Alright, hear me out then." Looking very giddy, James spread his hands out on the coffee table he was sitting before, as if he were about to orchestrate a team play-by-play. “The board’s exact words were ‘no team eligible for an on the podium win may employ players of the opposite sex’. Well, actually they said ‘secondary sex’, but we already knew they were a bunch of misogynistic dickheads anyway... But don't you see? They can’t stop us from playing, only *placing*. We may not get their stupid trophy, but we could still win the whole thing!”

The rest of them were clearly astounded. Win but not win? Somehow it was as fitting as it got. As James beamed at them, Marlene continued her role as the realist and clarified; "Ms. Hooch is still negotiating our claim, so we won't know for sure if we can play until tomorrow when the match starts. If they refuse, us girls have already

voted that the boys play. We'd rather sit out than see anyone else take first place."

"This is so wonderful," Lily said, still utterly gobsmacked. "And no offence Marls, but James... Are you sure you want to leave school without even placing? It's your final year, you've worked so hard."

"All of us have," James insisted. "And it's been for the better! So much has changed on the team since McKinnon and the girls started playing with us—the whole attitude is different! I have guys who used to make jokes about hiding under the game stands to peek up girls skirts, now speaking up when other prigs make nasty comments in class. They're actually calling their mums on their birthdays and being kind to their sisters, and five of them have already been approved as prefects for next year!"

"Yeah, they're practically feminists now," Marlene said snidely. "Did you hear that the other girls have given Potter a nickname? 'James the Good'."

"It's you girls who are the good ones," James told her. "You *try,* which is more than any of us can ask for. The team would be lesser without you, and I'm not the only one who knows it."

"Damn," Mary said, sniffling dramatically as she turned to Lily; "If you don't marry him, Lily, I will."

"So what does McGonagall think of all this?" Lottie called, busy painting Sirius' toenails a dark black.

"I'll bet she's on board, right?" Sirius laughed, watching Lottie paint.

"No, she's just giving Potter the benefit of the doubt," Marlene said. "She probably doesn't think we'll actually do it."

James grinned. "Well then, McKinnon, just imagine the look on her face when we do."

* * *

Wednesday 14th June 1978 — Day 1 of the Tournament

As per usual, James Potter was awake and shining before Remus could

be legally considered a living person. Perhaps it was easy for him, knowing that he was about to break every sacred law known to competitive football, but justice came when the thick idiot decided that it was his job to make sure that his roommates also had to be up with the larks.

“C’mon, Pete, my good man. Up and at 'em! Here, I've brought you some milk."

Remus heard Peter grumble back distantly, and the faint whooshing of James opening his curtains. He almost wished it to be a dream, but the sure-found feeling of Sirius’ breath on the back of his neck told Remus that it was definitely real.

“It’s game day, you guys!” James continued. “Don’t you lazy lard-farts want to come out and support your friends?”

“Nhgnnn… five more minutes, Mum…”

“Typical... Oi, Black! You get up too! You promised to record the team’s drill times.”

There came the sound of padding feet, but instead of crossing to Sirius’ bed, James had strode directly up to Remus’.

“Alright, that’s it! It's been three years, Moony, and today is finally the day! You keep sleeping in like this and one day you’ll be ten feet tall and we’ll have to bend you sideways just to fit through a—*AUGH!”*

Before he’d even finished his rant, James whipped back the bed curtains, blasting Remus and Sirius with the sun’s bright morning rays and nearly pissing himself in the process. Clearly he hadn’t been expecting to find the pair of them together in bed, which made sense.

Up until that moment they’d been sure to be careful not to be caught, but they’d all stayed up late the night before playing card games with the girls and practising their early-life alcoholism. Only James and Marlene had abstained, wanting to be in top shape for the game, and on their way to bed Remus had stopped in at the loo only to find out later that Sirius had slithered his way under the covers, and well… he hadn’t the mind to tell him off.

As the pair of them wriggled back and forth like half-naked vampires sizzling in the sun, James slapped a hand to his forehead. “Sirius—what are you bloody doing in there?!”

“Well, I *was* sleeping, you twat!”

“But—But this is Moony’s bed!”

“Really? Shit, thanks for letting me know, mate. Now will you kindly piss off!?” With an irritated grunt, Sirius sat up and threw a pillow at James, who was still standing there, gawking.

“Right, sorry—! Didn’t mean to intrude on your and Moony’s—erm… horizontal tango.”

Remus, who had been warding off the brightness of the room with an arm over his eyes, promptly turned over to face the wall. *“Fuck off…”*

“Tell you what, Potter,” he heard Sirius grunt, “how ‘bout you take Wormy down to the pitch with you for warm up, and Moony and I can actually get to tangoing.”

James gave a very exaggerated sigh, but finally pulled the curtains closed again and doused them in darkness.

“Remember, Black, my bed’s off-limits!" He warned. "Otherwise I start telling everyone the story about how you had your first wet dream during that time you spent the night in the infirmary with the nurse.”

“I was delirious with fever!”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say.”

Chuckling despite himself, Sirius turned over and pressed his face into the crook of Remus’ neck. “Hear that, Moons? Three beds left.”

"… You fuck off too.”

It took some time, but eventually James had Peter dressed and was ushering him out of the room for a very early breakfast.

“Why don’t they have to go?” Peter whined.

“ ‘Cause they’re in love," said James.

“This is discrimination.”

“That’s… not what discrimination means, Pete…”

The door clicked shut and Remus resolved to go back to sleep, only the thought lasted for about as long as it took for Sirius to run a

teasing finger over the shell of his ear.

“Mooooooonyyyyyy…”

“Ugh… bloody menaces, all of you… What time even is it?”

Some curtain rustling, and then the rattling ting of his alarm clock being lifted off the side table. “Half past six.”

“I’m going to break his legs.”

Sirius set the alarm clock down and curled back into Remus, pressing gentle kisses to the top of his spine. “Oh Moony…” *Kiss.* “Dear Moony…” *Kiss.* “Lovely Moony…”

“Whatever you’re trying to do—" *Oh damn;* "won’t work…”

Kiss. “Shall I sing to you then?” *Kiss.* “ 'You are my moonshine, my only moonshine…” *Kiss.* “ 'You make me happy, when skies are grey…” *Kiss.* “ 'You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you…” *Kiss, kiss, kiss.* “ 'Please don’t take my moonshine *agh—WAY'!”*

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In one deft move, Remus had flipped them both and held Sirius against the covers in a cage made from his own body. He didn’t bother waiting for some witty retort that Sirius had been inevitably plotting for the last month—just simply kissed him, silencing his stupidly beautiful voice with his own tongue. As he did, their noses knocked together and Remus could feel the shape of Sirius' morning erection against his lower stomach, driving him insane.

When they finally broke apart again, Sirius was panting, but Remus wasted no time.

“Show me.”

Licking his perfect lips, Sirius grinned and quickly grasped the waistband of his sleeping shorts, pulling them down and straight off. There was no shirt to be removed—it being June—and as Sirius raised his leg into the air to remove his shorts, Remus caught his calf and pressed his lips to the muscle of it, before nipping at the skin with his teeth.

“Now you,” Sirius urged, reaching out to tug at Remus’ pants himself. They came off without much effort, sliding to Remus’ knees as Sirius

cupped all of him into his palm and squeezed. Sucking in a breath through his teeth, Remus fell forward again and Sirius chased his lips, sneaking several quick kisses just as Remus turned and buried his face into the crook of his neck, inhaling all of him.

While Remus set to marking up his lover's neck like a map, Sirius kept his hands tight between the both of them, using the full extent of those clever fingers of his until they were both an inch from completion.

"There! Move a little—yeah, there, just there."

Sirius said nothing, just bit down on his bottom lip as they moved in tandem. Finally Remus fit his arm between them, pushing one of Sirius' hands away to cup them himself. Sirius' skin tasted sweet when they kissed, still clumsily washing over one another until they were little more than a tangle of sweaty limbs. With his free hand, Sirius reached around and knotted his fingers into Remus' hair, pulling his head back until it stung at the roots. From there every part of him was tight—pulled to the utter edge, and when it was over Sirius had to silence him with another kiss. He shivered as the tip of Sirius' tongue traced the ridges of his palate, and Sirius made a little noise that would've undone him all over again were he not already spent.

"Again...?" Sirius breathed. "Wanna touch you."

Remus didn't need telling twice.

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When their appetites for each other were once again sated and the sun was no longer staring them straight in the window, Remus turned over in bed and let himself drink in the image of his boyfriend as he laid beside him. Sirius was smiling up at him, still haloed by the dishevelled bed sheets. He used one painted finger to trace the hint of stubble around Remus' jaw, then his lips. Inside his mouth, Remus' tongue felt thick; he could still feel the faint sting of little crescent shapes Sirius had left along the tops of his shoulders. Bliss, actually.

"Seems a shame," Sirius said, his voice husky from sleep and sex's soft rasp; "to go out there and pretend as though I didn't just reduce you to… *this.*"

"Oh, you reduced me, did you?"

"Yeah, I mean look at yourself. You're a mess, Moons."

Remus kissed his swollen lips. "We could always go again. Give me a chance to catch up."

“Is there time?”

“There’s always time.”

Sirius chuckled, and it turned into a brazen purr as he sat up and took Remus’ hand, pressing two of his fingers to the pad of his own mouth. Remus watched, utterly entranced, as he turned it this way and that; sliding his tongue between the digits, nibbling each knuckle and swathing them until they glittered with damp.

"What is the time anyway?" Sirius finally asked, kissing each knuckle. With a disinterested grunt, Remus detached himself from Sirius and pressed up onto his elbows to fumble for the clock sitting on his bedside. Unfortunately it slipped, hitting the floor and skittering over to Peter’s bed with a sharp rattle.

“Uh… it’s late m’sure.” He sighed and flopped back down amongst the warm covers. “Suppose we should get moving…”

“Suppose we should.”

“Then again... don’t really want to.”

Sirius wrinkled his nose with a smile. “Me neither.”

“Shit," Remus smirked. "The things we do for our friends.”

By the time they made it down to the stadium, the Hawkings team was nearly finished with their warm up. It became obvious straight away that they were the only ones on the pitch with boys *and* girls on the team. Already Remus could see the others huddling around, eyeing James and his crew as they ran drills up and down the grass. A large table had been set up at the edge of the green for the tournament directors and scouts to watch. Beyond them, the vast stands were bustling with staff and students. Plenty of students had dressed up in the school’s colours of maroon and gold to show their support while some had even brought homemade banners bearing the names and player numbers of each of their friends.

Remus and Sirius didn’t bother finding a seat, and instead made a beeline for the players’ bench, where they found James chatting with Ms. Hooch, occasionally tossing nervous glances over his shoulder at the row of scouts.

“Ready to kick some ass?!” Sirius barked, the moment they’d approached.

“Leave the language for *after* the game, Mr. Black,” Ms. Hooch chastised, before patting James confidently on the arm and strolling off in the direction of the directors’ table.

“About time! Though to be honest I'd already put you two down as likely to miss the first half,” James said. He looked like a right dish in his brand-new football shirt, though the sports goggles he had to wear in lieu of his glasses were slightly unfortunate. But it *was* James; bloody tosser could make anything look good.

"Yeah, I'm starving," Sirius complained. "Got anything to eat?"

James shook his head, then handed them each a protein bar from the player's bench. Ripping away the wrappings, Remus bit into his and grimaced. *Ugh, like sawdust.*

“Have you had any trouble yet?” He asked around his chewing. “About the girls, I mean?”

“Nah, not yet. Reckon they must think it’s just for warm-up. A few of the other teams were cracking jokes earlier about cheerleaders, but at least they seem plenty distracted.” James cast a look over his shoulder to where several boys in opposing sports shirts were mulling about, busy watching the girls as they put in their drills. Across the field, Remus caught sight of Marlene barking orders and leading the team in a round of jumping-jacks.

“McKinnon already kicked one of them in the balls for making some dumb comment, but it was off the field so the refs couldn't do nothing. It was kinda awesome."

“Man, what I wouldn’t have given to see that,” Sirius agreed.

“You might have seen it," James pointed out; "if you weren’t so busy getting your rocks off."

“Sorry you didn’t have time for a morning shag, Prongs. Maybe if you had, you’d have less to whinge about.”

“You would know. Honestly, I'm surprised the both of you fit on that tiny bed.”

“We make it work. Positioning is key, Potter.”

"I'll remember that. But in the meantime, I'm sorry to say you've been replaced. Pete's volunteered to be water-boy this year, so you two'll have to sit in the stands with the girls."

“Bollocks, there goes my streak,” Sirius tsked sarcastically; "But it's fine. Moony and I were gonna get high under the stands anyway.”

“Nice. Really feeling the show of support.”

“You guys’ll be out here all day,” Sirius scoffed. “Make it to the final game and maybe we’ll bother with showing up.”

James promptly punched him in the arm, and Sirius moaned, holding his shoulder. “Moony, he’s abusing me!”

“Think you deserve it this time.”

“Damn you, Potter, you’ve turned my own Moony against me.”

“I told you last time, he's *our* Moony!”

“What’s this about our Moony?” Mary echoed, coming up behind them with her friends in tow. Lily had James’ shirt number, #8, painted on both cheeks in bright red, while Mary was sporting Marlene’s #9 on hers. Similarly, Lottie had gone with the crowd and painted both cheeks maroon and gold, with sparkling eyeshadow and lipstick to match.

“Nothing,” Remus finished, just as Sirius said; “Don't you guys look festive.”

“Shall we do yours?” Lottie offered.

“Yeah, go on then!”

Looking giddy, Lottie produced a pan of face paints and got to donning Sirius' cheeks with red and gold hearts. When she’d finished, Sirius turned to Remus and batted his eyelashes.

“Do I look pretty, Moony?”

“Pretty stupid.”

"Love you too."

Smirking, Remus leaned down to allow Lottie to do the same to him. She’d only finished the first cheek before Ms. Hooch came rushing

back up, flapping her clipboard.

“Ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen—I have news!”

“From the directors?” James demanded. "What did they say?! Have they shut us down?! But our loophole—!"

"No, no, Mr. Potter. I'm afraid I only bring *good* news! Now where is Miss McKinnon?"

Turning very quickly, James cupped his hands around his mouth to holler Marlene's name across the field. She—and everyone nearby—turned to look and quickly Marlene jogged over to meet them.

“You’ve got the verdict then?” She demanded, breathless.

“I have pleaded your case fervently, and you should know that although the directors are positively livid, there is nothing in that flimsy old rulebook of theirs that says women are not on the field. So if you're all quite sure, I'll say just this—you may not be eligible to win today, but you will certainly play.”

“Fuck yeah!” Sirius cried, before clamping a hand over his mouth. *“Oops*—sorry Hooch.”

The coach shook her head, while Marlene and the girls squealed in their excitement. None were as loud as James though, who grabbed Marlene and swung her around with a hoot of victory.

"We did it, McKinnon, we did it!"

“Yes, now get out there!” Ms. Hooch told them. “Get out there and show them that a person's sex does not determine champions.”

After James had kissed Lily goodbye and Marlene stopped to hug all of them, the pair took off across the field to tell their team the good news. As the crowd settled in and got ready for kick-off, Lily nudged Remus and beckoned him up the stairs.

“You coming? We have seats near the top.”

“Be there in a sec,” Sirius said, taking Remus by the arm.

“How many games do they have to play today?” Remus asked, as they turned and began walking behind the stands.

“Two today, and the final tomorrow if they make it,” Sirius said,

already rifling around in his jacket pockets. It made Remus laugh.

“I don’t know why you insisted on wearing your leather jacket. It’s June.”

“Looks cooler. Gotta impress these townies from outta town. Plus, how else am I to hide these?” Cheekily, Sirius pulled the collar of his jacket back to reveal several hickies that had formed along his collarbone. Seeing them, Remus tried not to be too pleased with himself as Sirius went back to padding down his pockets.

“Shit. Where’d I—ah-hah! There we are...” Sirius produced a baggie of several joints, which he'd most certainly nicked from Remus' drawer. “What?" He said. "You thought I was joking? I *never* joke about getting high, Moons. And besides, are you really going to be able to make it through an entire day of football sober?”

Remus considered.

The answer was no.

“Come now, my eternal conscience," Sirius laughed, "we’ll be back before they even drop the first ball."

They ended up skirting around the back of the stands as promised, ducking between the overgrown grass and leaning against one of the support beams. Remus was already properly stoned by the time they were caught. Luckily it was not a teacher, but a group of boys from another school. They wore matching dark green sports shirts and football boots; two of them were more lean and lanky, like the average secondary boy, but the one in front could’ve passed for a Clark Kent body-double. He was handsome, with green eyes and a dimple on each cheek.

"Sorry," he said, "didnae mean tae interrupt. We're looking for the toilets."

"Won't find 'em here," Sirius teased, making Remus laugh enough to start coughing around the end of his spliff.

“There’s always a few at ev’ry school," the handsome boy mused, already nudging his pals. "Even the ones for dreary English loons. Suppose yew were trying tah hide then?”

“That was the plan,” said Remus. "Congrats, you caught us."

“Hard not to. A'body could follow the smell."

Sirius took another drag, humming contently. “No one's paying attention, and 'sides we know our way around. What school you three from then?”

“Brentford, in Aberdeen.”

“Brentford? I remember you, you’re the ones that nearly beat our school in the tournament last year."

"You heard that?"

"Our best friend’s the team captain.”

“Is he now? That'd be Potter, right? Yeah, they put up a hard fight. Too bad we’re looking tae actually win this year,” the handsome boy grinned, then gestured to himself. “I’m Cal, team captain myself. This is John and Nut.”

Remus snorted. “ ‘Nut’?”

“Short fer Nutley,” one of the others answered.

“Sirius Black.” Sirius held out his hand to Cal. “This here’s Lupin.”

“ ‘Lupin’?” Nut echoed.

“Short for Loopy,” Remus answered, grinning around his spliff.

“Nice tae make yer acquaintance,” Cal said. “We’ve—erm… seen yer team actually. Ye’ve got quite the line-up.”

“That’s right,” Sirius said, then; “Isn’t Brentford a boys school?”

“Aye."

"Must be pretty boring, that."

"We have our moments. Still, ne’er seen a team with girls on it participate in an official tourny.”

“The future is now, Cal. Those girls are gonna have their own professional league one of these days. Today though, they'll settle for kicking your ass."

“Guess we'll have tae see.” Cal gave them the same smirk and nodded.

“Tell Potter good luck. We expect tae see him ‘n his motley crew in the finals t’morra.”

“Will do.” Taking the joint from Remus, Sirius held it out in offer. “But how about a hit for the road then? You know, as friendly competition.”

Cal considered, before finally caving. “Why the fuck not, we’re nae playing right awae.” He took his drag, before passing it along to his mates, and finally back to Sirius. “Thanks fer that.”

“Anything for a couple ‘a sods about to lose.”

Suddenly the feedback from a microphone echoed around the stadium, and the announcer—some twelfth year from the AV club—cleared his throat.

“HELLO FOLKS! Welcome to the first game of the 1978 Inter-School Cup! First on the pitch today is the home team of Hawkings and visiting team, Baldragon. Now let’s put our hands together in a warm welcome as the Baldragon team takes to the pitch!”

There was a dull roar, and Cal straightened up. “Should be getting awn then. First half's the best time to scope ‘oot the competition. Be see ye, Sirius Black.” He nodded at Remus. “Loony.”

Remus nodded back, curt and uncharmed.

“Oh and, crackin’ makeup.” Cal pointed to his cheeks before waving Sirius off and joining his teammates in heading toward the pitch. As soon as they’d gone Remus turned on Sirius, who was touching the face paint on his cheeks as though he’d forgotten Lottie had put it on him.

“What was that?”

Sirius dropped his hands. “What?"

"That."

"I was just being cordial, Moons.”

“You were not! You had your flirting face on.”

“My *what?"* Sirius stopped to cackle. "That's it, you’re totally high. Seeing things, even!”

“Hmph. Seeing things. Right.” Remus stood and began ambling off in the direction the boys had gone. Sirius stood too, attempting to hobble after him while also stubbing the spliff out on the bottom of his boot.

“Oi, where you going then?”

“To find my own athlete to flirt with!”

“Well, hold on—wait for me! I wanna watch!”

As it turned out, Sirius was right; watching football while high was much more preferable to the usual sort. Once they’d stumbled their way to the top of the stands, the girls made room and they both sat, giggling about something Sirius had said but Remus couldn’t even remember.

“You two stink,” Lily complained, waving a hand in front of her nose.

“Not possible, this one showers like twice a day,” Remus said, nudging Sirius and making him laugh harder.

"Gotta keep the mane glossy, Evans!"

They’d made it in time for kick-off, but the bit that came after was mostly a blur. Sirius had an easier time keeping track—knowing more about football than Remus ever would—but Remus made sure to continue cheering when the crowd did so he wouldn’t stick out. He recognised that when Mary shouted a little louder than the rest it meant Marlene must’ve done something smashing, but then again Mary was always cheering. When she wasn’t, she was having an imaginary screaming match with the referee.

“DIDN’T ANYONE SEE THAT?” She bellowed. “THAT ARSE-FACE TOTALLY TRIED TO TRIP HER! REF WHERE ARE YOUR EYES?!”

Remus thought about asking when she’d suddenly gotten to be such a sports expert, but then their team scored and everyone was leaping to their feet again as the announcer’s voice cast about the stadium;

“That was a score by Hawkings’ own Marlene McKinnon! Hawkings now leads with three-to-one! I’ve gotta say folks, these girls are really something!”

“Go Marlene!” Lottie shrieked, clapping her hands over her head as Mary did the same.

"That's my girl!"

Remus squinted to keep his eye on the ball. It whizzed about the field so quickly he could barely keep track, but when James got full-on body checked by another player, they all felt it. The entire crowd erupted into various *'oooooh!'* s and quickly followed with booing until the ref finally blew his whistle and held up a yellow card.

"Potter goes down hard! That's one penalty against Baldragon for intense pushing."

"Get up, Potter!" Lily shouted. "Walk it off! Don't be a pansy!"

As if he could hear his girlfriend's verbal abuse, James did so, and several of his teammates rushed up to help dust him off while the crowd cheered.

"Potter's been awarded a penalty kick. Let's see if he makes it worthwhile…"

"Nah, James is killer at penalty kicks, he won't choke!" Sirius muttered passionately.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath as James lined up at the edge of the opposing team's goal line. Even Remus was clenching his fists, barely clinging to the edge of his seat, but there was never a need for worry. The moment James' took off—leaping toward the ball with impossibly-long strides—it was clear he was undefeatable. His foot connected with the football and sent it spinning directly into the upper-corner of the net. The Baldragon goalkeeper didn't stand a chance.

"Potter scores! Hawkings now holds a four-to-one lead! They are certainly a team to watch for sure!"

The crowd instantly rallied, and Remus cheered as both Sirius and Lily threw themselves over him in celebration.

When the final whistle blew, it was Hawkings on top. The roar of the crowd could've been heard for miles, and no one was immune to it. Even Professor McGonagall celebrated—dancing around the edge of the field with Ms. Hooch. Remus, along with everyone else, threw his arms up and cheered until he was blue in the face, though if he could've heard himself, he might've been more embarrassed;

"WHOO! YEAH, GO EVERYONE! Blimey… are we done then? I'm

fucking hungry…"

They didn't have to watch the next game since their school wasn't playing, and instead all of them rushed to congratulate their friends.

"Anyone see Marlene?" Mary demanded right away, using her vicious elbows to fight her way through the crowd of students mulling at the bottom of the stands.

"There. She's with Nicole," Lottie pointed.

Mary's face fell slightly as she spotted the other two girls, hugging each other out of happiness. They broke apart fast enough, almost looking a bit bashful, but Mary didn't hesitate. She walked straight up to the girls, congratulated Nicole on the win, and hugged her friend.

Off to Remus' left, James appeared, sweaty and shining like some golden sun god, and ripped off his sports goggles. "Daisy, we did it!" He cried, scooping Lily up as she threw herself into his arms and showered him with kisses. The show of love was sickening, and Remus thought snidely that if this was how they reacted after their first win, that James would be proposing by the end of the final match.

The team took their break at the dining hall, which was extra-full with the addition of the other school's players, and afterwards they all went outside to sprawl across the lush lawns. Content to pamper her winning players, Lottie offered Marlene a shoulder massage, but when it was James' turn, he humbly declined and Sirius got to accept on his behalf.

"Wormy, I swear, your sister's got magic hands," Sirius moaned, face-down in the grass. Next to them, Peter grimaced.

"So what's the plan for the rest of the day?" Mary asked, sucking on an ice lolly from the cafeteria. "Which team do you play next?"

"Hevershire College," James answered, eyes closed and head still tucked in Lily's lap. "But they're not that good, so should be a shoo-in. They'll still place as though they beat us because of the tournament's barmy rules, but we'll get to be the ones in the final game tomorrow."

"And who do you think you'll be facing?"

"Brentford, definitely. They're tough, but I reckon that if we keep on like we have been we'll have a real chance!"

“Can’t be that tough,” Remus muttered, munching on his egg and cress sandwich. “Their captain’s a bit of a tosspot.”

“He is not,” Sirius sniggered into the grass. “You just didn't like him. Not that I care, I love jealous Moony—*ohhh!* Yeah, right there, Lot!”

“You’ve met him? Is he proper fit?” Marlene taunted.

“Ixnay on the aptin-cay,” Remus shushed. “Just make sure you beat them tomorrow, okay, Potter?”

James saluted. “Aye-aye."

Everyone giggled, and as Lottie finished with her massage, Sirius rolled over, stretching and popping everything back into place. His face-paint was so smeared now that he looked as though he’d been hit with a red and gold glitter bomb. It made Remus nervous to think what his own cheeks looked like.

“I mean it Lot,” he sighed, “you’re like a magician. A wizard.”

Looking well-pleased, Lottie checked her nails. “Comes in handy with Roger too.”

“You do know you’ve only seen him in person like ten times,” Peter chirped. “That’s like once for every year he was alive before we were even born!”

“Some of us mature more rapidly than others, Petey.”

“Yeah, right. You just want to be his trophy wife. You know, I'm not even sure your relationship is legal.”

“Are you quite finished?" Lottie snapped. "Because you’re boring me.”

“Speaking of finished…” Sirius sat up, cracking his neck once more. “Don’t forget the tape. It’s going in the time capsule tomorrow after the game.”

“Already done," Mary announced. "I’ll give it to you at supper."

“Let me guess—ABBA?”

“You can find out in twenty years.”

Sirius smiled and reached over to kick the bottom of James’ football boot. “I suppose all that’s left is for you guys to kick ass in this

tournament. Do try your best, I'd rather you not be mopey during our last day."

"Oh, we'll win alright," Marlene answered for him, "gotta put Remus' new arch-nemesis in his place, after all."

"He's not my arch-nemesis," Remus grumbled, patting his pockets for his cigs and a light. He'd just gotten one of the fags lit when Sirius scooted up to his side, reaching and grabbing him by the chain necklace he wore around his throat. Using it as leverage, Sirius pulled Remus in close and leaned into the cigarette, taking a long drag right off of his fingers. When he was finished, he mouthed the words 'I love you' and then exhaled the rest of the smoke with a silly grin.

It was enough to leave Remus blushing for the rest of the afternoon.

When lunch was over they all headed back over to the pitch to watch the final match. The rest of them got first dibs in the stands when James and Marlene went to warm up, and it was clear not even ten minutes into the game that Hawkings would take it. To be polite, Remus waited until half-time to split off to the loo, and on his way back, spotted little Sam Sheridan sitting beneath the stands on his own. He had a book with him, as Sam often did, and feeling rather candid, Remus ducked low beneath the metal bars to join him.

"Hey, Sam. What're you doing under here?"

Sam glanced up from his book, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Hiding," he said.

" 'Hiding'?" Remus licked his lips to cover a laugh. "From who?"

"From Fiona," Sam replied grimly.

"Ah, I remember her. She invited you to that dance on Valentine's, didn't she? I'm guessing it didn't go well?"

"It went terrible. She thinks I'm her boyfriend now."

"Are you?"

"No! It's mental, I don't want to be her boyfriend!"

"Have you tried telling her that?"

"Yes! ... Or, no." Sam sighed and Remus got a distinct feeling of déjà vu. "I tried staying in my room, but our dorm monitor wouldn't let

anyone younger than sixteen stay behind on their own, and I hate playing sports—or watching them. So I hid here..."

Chuckling, Remus took a seat across from the other boy, stretching out his long legs amongst the weeds. "I'm not much one for sports either. You live in Piaget House, right?"

Sam nodded. "And you're best friends with our school's team captain, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's James. He's playing now actually."

"He's nice. Last year some kids stole my glasses at lunch... He got them back."

"Sounds like James," Remus smiled, before nudging the toe of Sam's trainer. "What's that you're reading?"

Suddenly Sam grew very nervous. He snapped the book closed, then flipped it over in his lap so Remus couldn't see. Unfortunately for him, Remus had spent his fair share in the library, hunting for answers to a very *queer* set of questions. He recognised the back cover as well, and the writing on the spine; *Maurice.*

Suddenly Remus felt terrible. Sam was biting his thumbnail, face an angry red like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. He stood up, like he was going to run away, and Remus reached for him.

"Sam, it's alright."

"I-I don't want to talk to you anymore," Sam stammered. "We—We're not f-friends."

"Well, that's a shame. Since I sort of hoped we were."

Sam softened then, and Remus gave him what he hoped was a comforting smile. "I like 'Maurice'," he said. "It's a good book."

"You've read it?"

"Yeah. Twice, actually."

Sam's mouth opened in shock, and Remus beckoned for him to sit.

"It's alright to be nervous, you know. Or afraid," he told him, when Sam was back to nibbling his thumbnail in the dirt. "I'd say it's normal, even. People can be mean and they don't always understand."

"My dad thinks people like... Like Maurice are disgusting. He spat on a man once because he saw him holding hands with another man."

"I'm sorry that happened," Remus said. "But not everyone's like that, I promise."

"Do you think I'm a queer?" Sam murmured.

Remus smiled softly. "Do you think I'm a queer?"

He stared at him, with those big brown eyes, and ever-so-slightly, nodded.

"And do you think *I'm* disgusting?"

This time Sam shook his head. Suddenly Remus felt very light.

"Sam, how would you like to come watch the rest of the game with me and my friends? I know you don't really like football, and I can't really guarantee Fiona won't be there..."

"I'll come!" Sam chirped, already shoving the copy of *Maurice* into his bag. Grinning, Remus stood up and together they crawled back out from beneath the stands. Sam got a good laugh after Remus narrowly avoided smacking his head against one of the beams, but by then the game's second half had already kicked off.

As they rounded the end of the stands that faced toward the great green pitch, Remus slid an arm around his young friend's shoulders.

"Hey, Sam, have you ever heard of Queen?"

Chapter End Notes

A 'dosshouse' is a cheap lodging, often used by poor folk or those without a proper home.
If you're having a 'piss-up' then you're drinking a lot of alcohol.
'Taking shanks' pony' means to walk.
The Black Country accent is found in the West Midlands in England, near Birmingham.

There's only two (TWO!!!!) more chapters left of the school years. I almost can't believe it. My little babies are all grown up *cries*

Chapter 95: Here's to the Music

Chapter Summary

It's the final day of the tournament, and plots are being buried and hatched...

Chapter Notes

I edited this chapter while fully prone because I found out this morning that I have covid 💀 Not really in a serious way, more like an "are you fucking kidding me" sorta way, so if there are any glaring mistakes pls forgive me and just drop me a line or whatever.

On a lighter note, this week's chapter is dedicated to Charlotte. I consider her a dear friend, even if I'm always yelling at her for the UK's lack of appropriate synonyms ("lorry", "bin", "cupboard" I NEED MORE THAN THAT). She does like to say that I talk funny ("you say vague so weird" - Char, September 5th, 2022) but she's thinks Justin Bieber's voice is sexy (it's not) and she's actually a Scot so she sounds much funnier by default.
Also, she ships snily
No CW for this chapter. If you notice something that should be tagged, please let me know x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jenny said, when she was just about five years old,
“You know, my parents are gonna be the death of us all,
Two TV sets and two Cadillac cars,
Well, you know, ain’t gonna help me at all";

Then one fine morning, she turns on a New York station,
She doesn’t believe what she hears at all;
Ooh, she started dancin’ to that fine, fine music,
You know, her life was saved by rock’n roll;
Yeah, rock’n roll…

- “Rock & Roll” The Velvet Underground, 1970

Thursday 15th June 1978 — The Final Day of the Tournament

As promised, the Hawkings football team beat out their second opponent in a nail-biting 2 to 1 match. The team from Aberdeenshire was still guaranteed a spot near the top of the podium, but no one was celebrating yet. To win, Hawkings' first-ever co-ed team would have to beat out Brentford in the final game. The boys team had managed it the year before with no meagre amount of effort, but so far Brentford had been dominating on the field, with a startling 6 to 1 win over their previous opponents. Now with a few girls now thrown head-first into the fray, the championship game went from being about school pride to self ego—which in their current state, was worth far more than any ruddy trophy anyway.

Unfortunately, ego often made sickly monsters out of everyone.

“It’s bloody ridiculous. A mockery of the sport!"

“They can’t even place! Who would give up the chance for a first place trophy just to have a bunch of manky girls on the team...”

“Brentford’s gonna ground those henpecked bastards into the dust.”

“Bunch of bloody contrarians... They must think it's gonna get them noticed, but no league scout wants a player who’s gonna break the rules just to for the hell of it. Pointless...”

“Yeah, plus they all look like blokes!"

“Ha! Maybe these lads like blokes.”

“Heh! They should change their name—instead of Hawkings they can be ‘Arsemongers’.”

Remus wasn't entirely sure but he almost thought he could feel his blood boiling. The slander had been going on ever since their school's team had taken to the field the day before, but now that it was confirmed that Hawkings was to be playing in the final game, all bets were off. Every player in the tournament—loser or not—had come out to watch, and the stands were packed nearly to their bursting point. As James and Marlene led their team in a warm-up, Remus stood off to the side of the players' bench with Peter, helping him as he refilled water bottles. Down from them, a group of boys from another school had formed a circle at the edge of the pitch, mostly to shit-talk the other teams. And Remus might've been able to handle it, were they not speaking loudly enough that anyone within a twenty feet radius could hear them.

"If you *had* to pick one, which would it be?"

"Mm, one on the end I think, with the brown hair."

"Her? She's got shoulders bigger than my Pa. And no tits."

"Alright then, the one next to her. Though, might have to put a bag over her head first—heh."

If Remus had sleeves, they would've been pushed up to his elbows by now. Peter must've noticed this, as he came around the bench and got between Remus and the boys.

"Don't listen to them, Lupin. They've already lost, they just wanna run their mouth."

"Yeah? And how easy d'ya think it'd be to run their mouth with two fat lips?"

"There's like five of them and one of you, plus you know James'll kill you if you got kicked off the field for fighting right before their final match."

"I like my odds." Remus ground his teeth together. "And 'sides... Potter's halfway across the pitch, what he don't know won't kill him."

"Oh c'mon, Moony..."

As Peter sighed, one of Marlene's girls, an eleventh year named Summer, came trotting up to the bench for a sip of water. When she was finished, she set the bottle aside and returned to the field, only to be jeered and whistled at by the rival team on her way.

"Yeah, go on girl, bit faster! Can't quite see those knickers under those shorts!"

"If you aren't gonna give us a show then you could at least turn around so we can see the front!"

Poor Summer baulked, shame-faced as she covered her chest with her arms. She ran the rest of the way back to her team with the boys' laughter nipping at her heels, but the final straw for Remus was when one of the boys turned around and smirked.

"Ha... Frigid bitch."

They went on mocking her, holding their hands to their chest and

poking their fingers outward like a pair of nipples as they laughed. Summer was sixteen, she just wanted to play football.

"Right, that's it." Dropping the armful of water bottles he'd been clutching, Remus side-stepped Peter, who tried meekly to haul him back. "Oi!"

“Shh! Lupin, don’t—!”

“OI!”

It got their attention.

As Peter hung back, looking around nervously for a teacher, Remus strode right up to them.

"What do you want?" The first of them asked, looking up at him with a disinterested scowl on his face.

"I wanna know what it is you think you're doing," Remus spat.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You call harassing a bunch of girls 'nothing'?"

"It's just a bit of friendly pitch-talk," said another. "If you Hawkings freaks can't handle a little laugh, then maybe you shouldn't be playing in our tournament."

The boys all shared a smirk, as though they were waiting for Remus to concede defeat in lieu of their cleverness. Too bad Remus never really did learn how to quit.

"Can I borrow that?" He asked, pointing to the football one of them had tucked under his arm. The kid glanced dubiously at his friends before ultimately handing it over. They watched as Remus took the football and spun it between his hands several times.

"Do you even know what you're doing with that?"

"Nah, not really. Not all that good with my feet, to be honest." Remus stopped the ball, looking up. "But I am good with my hands... Know a game, even. Wanna know what it's called?"

The group shared a look, and then all jumped as Remus surged forward and grabbed the front of the first boy's sports shirt in a single fist.

"It's called, you piss off, or I'm gonna be shoving this football so far down your throat, you'll be shitting it out in an hour."

"Now *that* sounds like a fantastic game! I always did say these things didn't do enough to help us get to one another. Pity."

The voice came from behind them, and a second later Remus felt a pair of hands snaking up his back and over his shoulders.

"Hello, lads," Sirius purred. "Having a good time, are we?"

No one said anything, and finally Sirius smirked and gestured to the boy Remus had by the collar.

"Lupin, you can let go of him now."

He didn't want to, but the slight squeeze Sirius gave to his shoulders told him that he probably should. To the boy's credit, he was brave enough to try and take his football back, only to recoil when Remus flinched sharply toward him.

"There, that's better, isn't it?" Sirius grinned. "I recognise your shirts. You're from 'Cow-poo', aren't you?"

"It's *Caldew,"* one of them moaned.

"Right, right. The school from Carlisle! You're the ones who lost in the first rounds, to—oh sorry, I seem to be forgetting..." Sirius stroked his chin a moment, before snapping his fingers. "Oh! Right, to us! You lost to us. Man, that must sting."

Remus sniggered quietly, and each of the rival boys shot him a dirty look.

“Listen," sighed Sirius, "I did overhear one of you using the word ‘contrarian’ correctly, so I suppose not all of you have brains falling out your arse, but I’d still watch out if I were you. I mean, you already lost miserably to a bunch of 'manky girls'—how long do you really think you could last against Lupin, here?"

"Long enough!"

Sirius shook his head. "I don't think so. You see that scar on his nose? He didn't get that fighting a bunch of teenage brats from Dalston and Cumbria. You see, Lupin here, is our headmistress's big rehabilitation project. You take a kid from the streets and give him a place to live,

clothe him, feed him 'til he's strong, then you release him back and hope he's learned enough not to kill anyone. Doesn't always work though... Sometimes they reject the education. Sometimes they've just got too much of the ol' killer in 'em."

"You're full of shite!"

"Maybe. Shall we let Lupin open you up and see what you're full of?"

None of them seemed eager, and either because they believed him or because Sirius' ramble had bored them enough to lose interest, each of the group finally turned away. The last, the one who was missing his football, waited a second longer until Sirius had snatched the ball from Remus and held it out.

"You want it? Fine. Go—*get it!"*

With a purposeful smirk, Sirius kicked the ball straight up into the air and let it soar toward the edge of the stands. The Caldew boy chased it for a moment, until he realised just where it was going to land. All morning, Filch had been shambling across the field, collecting rubbish and muttering to himself about the 'lazy, ungrateful ingrates' he was forced to pick up after every day. When the football came down over his head, it smacked him dead-on, nearly knocking the nasty old caretaker right off of his own knobby knees. When he'd recovered enough to look up to see who'd hit him, Filch spotted the guilty-looking boy and let loose a well-deserved shriek.

"You! Get over ‘ere now!"

"That was quite the speech back there," Remus said, after they'd turned and made their escape toward the middle of the stadium. A few kids who'd watched the entire affair from their seats, cheered as they passed, and Sirius threw his arms up to receive them.

"You loved it!" He called, still waving excitedly as they started up the metal staircase. The crowd was huge now, supplemented by the addition of various classes from the elementary campus and all of the teams that had been knocked out before the finals. Lily and the girls had taken their seats in the dead centre—even Sam was there, trying to flag Remus down like a jet on a runway. The field was fuller now too, and as they got higher into the stands, Remus could see that the Brentford team had already taken to the pitch for warm-up, led by their annoyingly handsome captain.

“I told James to kick Brentford’s arse today, right?” He called over the

noise.

“Yes! About three times before breakfast.”

“Good. I hate them.”

Sirius laughed and pat his shoulder. “Okay, Moons.”

They’d reached the midway point of the open-air stands, and Remus shot a wave at Lily, who had joined Sam in trying to get their attention. “Remus, here!” She shouted, gesturing to the two empty spots next to her.

He went to follow, already muttering an ‘excuse me’ to the kids at the end of the row, when suddenly Sirius had grabbed his arm, pulling him back into the aisle.

“Hold on, Moons, your almost-brawl nearly made me forget. I have a genius idea.”

"For what?"

"A prank, of course."

Already intrigued, Remus stepped in close and watched as Sirius slid a small cassette out of his pocket, holding it up for him to take. “Found that behind my bed yesterday when we were packing up the rest of our crap,” Sirius said. “It’s Mary's, thought I’d lost it ages ago.”

Carefully dodging a few kids on their way further up into the stands, Remus turned the tape over. “The Runaways?"

Sirius nodded keenly. "You've listened to them then?"

"Yeah, once or twice. But why’re you showing it to me now?”

“Turn it over, ya numpty," he tsked. "Read the first track.”

Remus did as he was told, and a second later he felt a bemused smile spread across his face. “Really? Bit on the nose, don't you think?”

“I think it's perfect, actually! And the band’s made up of all chicks. American ones. Think McKinnon will like it?”

“Maybe. Or she'll bash your head in."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take." Humming gladly, Sirius plucked

the tape from his fingers. “I thought we could play it as the team takes the field. Really amp up the crowd—like how they do it during the Cup.”

“Alright, but your stereo’s a bit quiet to be heard over the crowd.”

“Who said we were gonna use *my* stereo?” Smirking, Sirius jutted his head to his right, and Remus glanced up to spot the announcer’s box sitting at the top of the stands.

“Oh no. They’re never gonna let you do that.”

“Well, we won’t know unless we try, right?” Elbowing him, Sirius turned and quickly began skipping up the steps. Taking a moment to glance back at Lily, who had her arms raised in question, Remus shrugged and followed, catching up to Sirius at the very top. It was colder at the top of the stands, and so high up that peering over the backside of the stands made Remus feel a bit woozy. Down below they could see the referees begin to clear the field.

"Best be quick if we want this to work," Sirius called.

“But how are you even going to convince them to let you play it?”

"Do you really have so little faith in me?" Sirius scoffed, then flashed him a wink; “Watch and learn, love.”

Sliding tape out of its plastic case, Sirius opened the door to the press box and strode inside. The interior of the tiny room was covered in wires and control panels, each of them snaked around each other in a never-ending tangle. Remus’ only had about a foot's worth of clearance over his head and the entire thing looked like a fire hazard, but luckily for them, there was only a single other person inside. His name was George Kelley. He was sitting in the announcer's seat when they walked in, scribbling urgently in the margins of his notes. The three of them had taken nearly two years of forms together and George had always seemed nice enough, even if he was a bit of a suck-up.

“Hey Georgie,” Sirius called, as the heavy door slammed behind them. In answer, George spun around in his chair, his headphones sitting idly around his neck.

"What are you two doing in here?"

“We've got that track from McGonagall for ya," Sirius said, quite

simply.

“What are you talking about? What track?”

“I dunno, I assume it’s for the game’s intro. She just gave it to me and told me to pass it off to you, that you’d know what to do with it. Reckon she didn’t want to do all the stairs—you know, with her knees.”

Sirius pat his own knees keenly while George stared at them, squinting as though he didn't quite believe it. When Remus offered a kind nod, he appeared less sure and glanced back at his notes, quickly flipping through each paper.

“But… I just talked to Professor McGonagall this morning, and she didn’t mention anything about music.”

Sirius pulled a face. “Then why would she make us walk all the way up here to give it to you? I mean really, don’t you know it’s customary for the home team to be introduced with their own song?”

“Well, sure, but I—”

“How long you been doing this gig, Georgie?”

“It’s my first year,” George answered indignantly.

“That explains it.” Sirius turned to Remus. “He has no idea what he’s doing. Ah, *c’est la vie.* C’mon Lupin, we’ll just explain to McGonagall that Georgie here doesn’t know how to work the stadium’s stereo.”

“I know how to work the stereo! Ugh, just hand it over then...”

Remus had to swallow his own smile as Sirius shot him a delighted look and quickly passed the cassette along to the other boy.

“It’s just the first track,” Sirius said quickly, earning himself an irritated glance from George as he rolled his creaky chair over to the battered sound system and pushed the tape into its slot.

“The game’s gonna start any minute now, so you two should get to your seats. I don’t like people coming and going during the intros, it’s too distracting,” George said, snapping the tape deck shut and punching a few buttons into the large audio control board to his left.

“Do you mind if we stay and watch actually?” Sirius asked, peeking over George’s shoulders. “Just for the intros. I mean, it’s just so cool—

that you're doing all of this. Do you really know what every one of those buttons does?"

At the praise, George puffed up slightly. "Sure, I do. I've been part of the AV club for six years running."

"That's right! Pete mentioned you were even named president this year. So cool... What's this one do?" Sirius pointed to a set of dials.

"That's a channel. It splits the sound and directs it around the stadium."

"Oh shit, like a soundboard in a recording studio!"

"Kinda… except we're not recording anything here. It's all about output."

"I see, I see. And that knob there?"

"It's the microphone's gain. Means volume."

"Wow, you are so knowledgeable, really. Does that mean it's separate from the stereo's?"

"Yeah, the stereo's gain is here. But don't touch it. Everything's carefully balanced. Even a single nudge could throw it all out of whack."

"No, of course. Hands to myself... Now what's that button over there do?"

As George kept on, all too happy to show off his vast knowledge to his upperclassman, Sirius shot Remus a pointed look and gestured his head in the direction of the controls. Remus didn't need to be a mind-reader to understand what he wanted.

"Hey Georgie," Sirius interrupted, "you sure you put the tape in correctly? Looks backwards."

"What?" George wheeled the chair back over to the stereo. As he did, Remus reached forward and dialled the stereo's volume up to max, before quickly putting his hands behind his back again.

"Oh sorry," Sirius said, when the tape turned out just fine, "my bad. You clearly know what you're doing, I'll stop pestering ya now."

George waved him off and checked his watch before cursing; "Game's

about to start. Remember, no talking."

Sirius nodded, zipping his lips and throwing the invisible key over his shoulder. Pleased, George returned to his seat and set his headphones over his ears, pulling the microphone towards himself. It truly was a wonderful view. Soon the players would be taking the field, Remus just hoped that they'd find what they were about to do as funny as they did.

A few moments later, a timer began to chime loudly, and George silenced it before clearing his throat, one hand on his papers, the other on the microphone. When he was ready, he took a deep breath, and hit the button on the mic's base.

"GOOOOOOD MORNING, FOLKS! And welcome to the final game of the 1978 Inter-School Cup! Today's match may not be deciding who takes home the trophy, but it will determine who has bragging rights for the following one-hundred and ninety-two school days! Now please put your hands together to help me welcome our visiting team—BRENTFORRRRD!"

The team began to take the field, and George listed off their names and numbers while the crowd whopped and clapped excitedly.

"Good show! Good show! And rounding out the Brentford team, we have its loyal captain. Number four and defensive midfielder, Captain Cal—"

"AH-CHOO!"

George spun around in his chair, and Remus wiped beneath his nose, giving a rather convincing sniffle. "Sorry, allergies."

Downright sputtering into his hand, Sirius bent over to hide his laughter while Remus wiped the smug look from his face and George turned back around with a huff.

"Ahem—*that'll be Captain* Callum *McAllister… And here they are, taking to the pitch. Good show, lads! Now let's all put our hands together in a great Hawkings welcome to the Brentford team!"*

As the crowd cheered, Sirius nudged George from behind.

"The tape, Georgie, the tape!"

"Jesus christ, I know!" With one hand covering the mike, George reached over to the stereo and let his finger hover over the play button. *"Now, guys and gals, let's get ready to welcome today's home team*

to the field—let's hear a great cheer for HAWKINGS!"

The button was pressed. The stereo gave a great purr, and then a single click echoed, before the entire stadium was assaulted with the sound of an electric guitar. The stands rattled in face of such volume, while bodies flinched and hands flew to cover sensitive ears. Those closest to the press box spun around in their seats just in time to see Sirius wrestle a horrified Georgie from his chair, Remus standing delighted behind them. The entire crowd had turned rigid out of shock, and their friends on the field had become statues as they gaped up at the speakers.

It was marvellous.

"Can't stay at home, can't stay at school—
Old folks say, 'You poor little fool';
Down the streets I'm the girl next door,
I'M THE FOX YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR!"

"It's too loud!" George wailed over the speakers, his headphones getting knocked askew as Sirius struggled to restrain him. "You big fat liars!"

"GEORGIE—GEORGIE—! Just hold on a minute, man! Look around you—you're gonna be a legend!"

"I'M GONNA GET EXPELLED!"

"McGonagall's not gonna expel you for something like this!" Remus promised. "If she did, we'd have been gone years ago!"

"HELLO DADDY, HELLO MOM—
I'M YOUR CH-CH-CH-CH-CH—CHERRY BOMB!
HELLO WORLD, I'M YOUR WILD GIRL—
I'M YOUR CH-CH-CH-CH-CH—CHERRY BOMB!"

Remus dearly hoped someone was getting this on camera.

Still wrapped on the floor, George gave a great moan as he finally stopped struggling and Sirius was able to straighten up, pushing his hair from his face as he stared out over the stadium. Most people still looked baffled, but others had started to laugh, and a few students

could even be spotted mouthing the words or pumping their fists. Down below, the Hawkings team was cheering, and Remus could spot Marlene by her blonde hair—hands over her mouth in what he hoped was delighted shock.

"C'mon, Moons!" Sirius urged, as the second verse started up again. "Might as well take the credit."

"You guys suck!" George wailed, scrambling for his headphones. They laughed, and Sirius bent down to give the other boy one last pat of confidence.

“Don’t touch that volume, Georgie-boy, and I promise you’ll be hailed as a legend for the rest of your days.”

Grabbing Remus’ hand, Sirius whipped the door open and they spilled out of the press box into the sun. Outside the booth the music was even louder, and the moment they were spotted, further cheers went up, as if everyone had been betting on who was responsible. At the noise, Sirius clapped and drove his fist up into the air, before throwing himself down the stairs and rapping his hands on the metal railing in time with the drums. Remus went with him, beaming even as his gaze met Lily’s and she shook her head in disbelief.

“HELLO DADDY, HELLO MOM—
I’M YOUR CH-CH-CH-CH-CH—CHERRY BOMB!
HELLO WORLD, I’M YOUR WILD GIRL—
I’M YOUR CH-CH-CH-CH-CH—CHERRY BOMB!”

They flew down the stairs toward the pitch, slipping past teachers and accepting high-fives from other students as the drum fill hit and literal moans started coming through the speakers. *Blimey,* Remus thought; *American women were truly something else.*

“Hey, street boy, want some style?
Your dead end dreams don’t make you smile;
I'll give you something to live for—
HAVE YOU AND GRAB YOU UNTIL YOU’RE SORE!
HELLO DADDY, HELLO MOM—”

Sirius’ feet hit green, and he threw up his arms. *“ ‘I’M YOUR CH-CH-CH-CH-CH—CHERRY BOMB’!”*

The team erupted, charging forward and surrounding them with cheers and praise. The girls were ecstatic—even Marlene was smacking Remus fondly on the back with the entirety of her strength. As the two-minute long bender slowly came to an echoing end, they continued to chant; *“CHERRY BOMB! CHERRY BOMB!”* until the Ms. Hooch and the other referees had blown their whistles and stepped in to break them up.

“Alright, that’s enough, very funny—back to your benches, all of you!” Hooch was shouting to no avail. "Sirius Black, what were you thinking?! What if the entire team was punished for this?"

"C'mon, Hooch, what's the worst they can do?" Sirius bleated; "They've already lost the tournament!"

She huffed at him, but as she turned and made her way out of the crowd, Remus couldn't help but think that she was secretly smiling.

“That was amazing!” Nicole said, pushing her way to the front and throwing herself over Sirius' arm. “Can we walk-on like that for every game?!”

“Look at the other team’s faces!” Another boy cried.

“Did you pick that song on purpose?” Marlene was asking Remus.

"Of course we did," he answered, just as James came streaking up to them.

“I can’t *believe*—You’re insane, you are!"

“I know! And you two better win!” Sirius ordered, jamming a finger into the centre of his best friend’s chest. In answer, James grabbed his face and planted a wet kiss on his cheek, bold enough to leave even Sirius blushing. After that the team surged back in with more cheering and laughter, and Remus was able to put an arm around Marlene. They'd just taken up their chant again; *"CHERRY BOMB! CHERRY BOMB!”* when it was all cut short by another booming voice;

“SIRIUS BLACK—REMUS LUPIN! COME HERE THIS INSTANT!”

“Oh shit,” someone squeaked. "It's the headmistress!"

She approached quickly, narrowing in on them like a shark to blood. Of course Sirius didn't seem nervous; their stunt in front of hundreds had put him on top of the world, no way he was coming down for

anything.

“Two days,” Professor McGonagall hissed; “Two days left of school, and here I’ve got a prefect and another leaving student pulling pranks at the Inter-School Cup! What do you suppose I should do about this?”

“We just wanted to hype up the crowd a bit, Minnie."

“Yes, well I’d say you’ve managed that quite perfectly.”

“Was it the song? Are you more of a blues-rock fan?”

Remus elbowed him; *“Shut up, you dickhead.”*

McGonagall pressed her lips into a thin line. “I’ll assume you roped Mr. Kelley into helping you then?”

“Nah, we tricked him,” Sirius conceded. “Don’t blame poor Georgie for our misdoings.”

"It was all you then? No one else?”

They nodded. Might as well.

She gave them a long, hard look, before clicking her tongue and checking her watch. “Ms. Hooch? Where is Ms. Hooch?"

The gym-teacher-turned-football-coach scurried forward immediately, and Professor McGonagall rounded on her with a sigh. "Ms. Hooch, please apologise to the referees for the disruption. Tell them we're ready to begin at their leisure, and that I've apprehended the rabble-rousers."

"Really, it was more like we came to you," Sirius pointed out, earning himself another elbow.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Y-Yes, Professor?"

"I trust you to show your friends to their seats?”

James came alight, eyes nearly twinkling behind his sports goggles. “Yes, ma’am!” He chimed, grabbing both Remus and Sirius by the arm.

“And I’ll expect you to stay there!” McGonagall said sharply. “It’ll give

me time to decide what to do with you."

"Be gentle with us, Minnie—" Sirius started to say, before he was promptly grabbed by the arm and marched off.

As McGonagall set to dispersing the crowd at the edge of the pitch and George's nervous voice chittered back through the stadium's speakers to finish introducing the team, James led them toward the team's bench, where Peter was waiting with a sea of water bottles and no small amount of praise.

"Everyone loved it. You should've seen Brentford's faces when the girls started screaming."

"Probably looked a lot like they're about to when they lose," Sirius said, holding a palm out to James. "Now get out there, Potter, and kick their arse already."

Taking a moment to look at all of his friends, James smiled down at Sirius' hand and slapped it without hesitation.

"Just try and keep your eye on the ball, lads."

* * *

In the end, Hawkings took the game in another decisive two-to-one win. Both teams had been clinging desperately to a tie since the second half had begun, but it was Marlene, their best striker, who'd ultimately broken it within the last twenty seconds of the game. Backed by James and several others, she'd charged the Brentwood team and made one final, heroic leap toward the goal that sent the football rocketing into its upper corner. The bell chimed, indicating a goal, and that's how they'd all known that they'd won.

The crowd had gone absolutely mad, screaming so loudly that George's announcement could barely be heard.

"THERE YOU HAVE IT—MARLENE McKINNON SCORES IN AN ALL-TIME NAIL-BITING FINAL MOMENT! HAWKINGS WINS! HAWKINGS TAKES THE TOURNAMENT!"

Remus had never been hugged by so many people. And for once he didn't even mind.

“Given any more thought about becoming a football fan, Moony?” Peter asked. Remus put an arm around him, his other fist beating the air in celebration.

“I wouldn't hold my breath, Pete.”

James, who had been busy accepting congratulations from every person who could get within ten feet of him, helped Sirius raise Marlene into the air, and together they and the team carried her around the stadium for a full lap. Better sports than Remus would’ve given them credit for, a few of the Brentford players even joined in, and when they’d rounded the pitch, he watched as Cal shook hands for James and they clapped each other on the shoulder.

“Mm-hmm! He is proper fit, isn’t he?” Sirius said, reappearing at Remus’ side, slightly out of breath from all the running.

“Now you’re just doing it to be a dick,” Remus laughed, too happy to really be bothered.

“Ah, don’t worry none, babe, I much prefer the skinny and scrawny type anyway.”

“Yeah, and I like them short and unfunny apparently.”

“Low blow, Moons. Low blow…”

Cal turned away from James and caught their eye, giving each of them a friendly salute before jogging off to join his own team. They took with them the tournament trophy, but none of the Hawkings’ players seemed the lesser for it. Especially not when one of the sports scouts broke away from the rest and strode right up to James.

“Would you look at that,” Mary said, coming down from the stands to join them. “Looks like Potter’s got some prospects after all.”

Twinged with nervousness, Remus glanced at Sirius, but the look he gave him was not that of distress. “I’m not worried,” Sirius said; “He deserves to be recognised.”

Afterwards, while the team was doing their celebratory sweep of the grounds and the girls had gone off to prepare their additions to the time capsule, Remus and Sirius were ordered to serve their punishment by clearing up the stadium stands of all leftover rubbish. Most of the prefects had come together as volunteers as well so there didn't seem much point in complaining, but in actuality Remus was

not a happy camper. The June sun was sweltering, and bending over the benches to collect the rubbish was turning his back achy and his mood grim. It didn't help that Filch insisted on barking orders from the bottom of the stands, but at least things weren't entirely boring.

“Do you think they’re actually dating?” Sirius asked, as Remus shoved an empty crisp packet into the bin bag he was holding.

“Who d’you mean?”

Sirius gestured further down the stands. Regulus and Trish—both prefects—were side by side, plucking styrofoam cups and other rubbish into black bags of their own. They didn't look suspicious, though every now and then Trish would say something that made Regulus smile, and he would hide it by turning his face away so as to not let anyone know he was actually enjoying himself.

“Well," Remus smirked, "stranger things have happened."

“I always sort of thought that if Reg was going to reproduce it would be asexually. You know, like a starfish. Break off one arm, and a new annoying little cunt grows in its place."

"I really hope that's not how you reproduce. Couldn't handle two of you."

Sirius cracked a small smile. “It’s good though… that he could find somebody.”

“Shall I let Regulus know you’re happy for him then?" Remus offered. "We have that prefect party tomorrow. They'll both be there.”

“Nah, bet he’d just get all riled up. Better to leave him be.”

Remus dropped an empty can into the bag, then turned away to reach for another. “Wow, is that restraint I hear? This punishment must really be sinking in.”

“You’re not the only one capable of subtlety, alright?” Raising his foot, Sirius tapped him lightly on the arse. When Remus spun back around to do the same, he found Sirius staring down at his brother, a wistful look in his eye.

"It was his birthday last week, wasn't it?" Said Remus.

"Yeah. Turned seventeen. Bit outrageous, that. I mean, he's getting so

old. What if he grows taller than me? Bet he'd do it too, just to spite me."

Remus smiled to himself. "Did you get him anything?"

"Oh, you know... this and that. A few records." With a guilty smirk, Sirius began grinding the toe of his trainer along the metal bench. "Ones we didn't listen to, or... or like. Mum'll probably take them when he goes home, but I thought he should have something to remember me by, since I'm leaving and all."

"I hope he visits," Remus said. "I think Regulus would like London. You'd have to force him to come though."

"Mhm, yeah, I know." With a sudden twist, Sirius went to thump Remus in the arse again, only this time Remus caught his leg and pushed him back onto the bench. Sirius accepted the loss, and instead sat up coyly, one leg over the other. “When are you gonna tell me what song you put on the tape by the way?”

“I'm not."

“Don't be stingy, Moons. Bet you could guess mine. Come on, we can make it a 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours' sort of thing."

"I think you'd just as likely 'show me yours' anyway, Padfoot."

"Calling me a slag, are you?" Sirius huffed, and slumped down on one of the benches, flapping the bag back and forth between his knees. “Fine, whatever. I’ll get it out of you eventually.”

“And just how do you suppose you'll do that?” Remus asked, picking up half of a torn 'Go Hawkings, Go!' poster and stuffing it in his bag.

“Plenty of ways. I could fuck up your tuning before every practice. Or purposely forget to change the bog roll every time it’s out. Or eat cream crackers in your bed—I know you hate the crumbs. And if I’m feeling particularly nasty, I could even tear out the last page of every one of your books. Leave you endlessly wanting for more, in a sense.”

“That’s your plan? You’re just going to annoy me until I tell you which song I chose?”

“I could. Or I could do something else... Something nice... Something like that thing where I kiss down your chest and your stomach, and then your thighs, and all around…” Sirius trailed off, which was

probably a good thing, because while they were busy having one of their cheeky back-and-forth, a group of boys had scurried up the stairs toward them.

They were panting slightly from the climb by the time they'd stopped, though it hadn't managed to wipe the suspicious grins from their faces. At the front of the small back was Bobby Johnson, the kid who'd made the toilet roll firecracker that'd gotten them in trouble with Filch during Remus' first year. Sirius had been hailing him as a certifiable genius ever since, though he and Remus rarely ever ran in the same circles.

“Sirius! I–I mean, Mr. Black, sir!” Bobby started, looking a bit too excited.

"Hey, Bob," Sirius grinned, while Remus nudged him with his foot.

“You get them to call you ‘sir’?”

“Shush," Sirius ordered, before turning on the boys. "What can we do for you, lads?”

“Just wanted to congratulate you on the awesome prank!” Bobby said, while his friends nodded along enthusiastically.

“Why thank you. That's very kind.”

“We also wanted to know if we could be in on the next one," asked another.

Remus and Sirius shared a glance.

"The next one...?"

"Well, yeah!" Said Bobby. "Whatever you've got planned for the end of the year, we want in on it. Bet it's gonna be brilliant—and we'll do anything! Just wanna help pull it off, really."

At their enthusiasm, Sirius began to look equal parts thrilled and flustered. There was no way he was ready to admit to not having any grand schemes planned, especially when faced with such sheer devotion, but they'd yet to think up anything 'brilliant' or worth celebrating. Most people were only interested in a leavers party, and unlike the year before, no one had spread any suicidal mother rumours so there was no revenge to be had. Perhaps the Marauders were finally spent.

“You wanna help plan other pranks, do ya..?” Sirius echoed, only to be returned with a chorus of *'yeah!'* and *'of course!'*. Peering again at Remus, who had no answers, Sirius ran an anxious hand through his dark hair and finally looked up.

"I'm humbled, Bobby, I really am."

"Does that mean you're planning something?"

"Er—of course! We always have a few things on the go, Lupin and I. It's just that right now it's all very much in the malleable stage, but when we've got something concrete, we'll be sure to let you know."

"Cool!" Bobby exclaimed. "In the meantime, we have a few ideas ourselves if you'd like to hear them. Nothing huge, but..."

"No, no," Sirius coaxed, jumping on the opportunity; "Let's hear 'em, we're all ears."

Without any hesitation the boys began launching into various ideas, practically tripping over each other to get the words out.

“We could all ride our mattresses down the steps of Castle Hall!”

“And I could always make more fireworks! I perfected this new recipe a few weeks ago—the smoke blows red and yellow! There’s also this other one that makes a cracking boom! I’ll bet you could explode a few toilets with it! Call it the diaper-bomb!”

“And Professor Kettleburn’s got some Madagascar hissing cockroaches in his office!”

“He DOES?!” Sirius interjected. “Blimey, wish I’d known that.”

“We could totally let ‘em loose in the girls’ dorms!" The boys tittered. "Imagine the chaos...”

"A-And we could get others in on it too! Only those we trust, of course."

“Oh-ho-ho, you boys are evil!" Sirius cackled. "I’m so proud. Moony, what do you think—aren’t you proud?”

“I think I’m not going to get any sleep tonight,” Remus yawned.

Jumping to his feet, Sirius tossed his half-filled bin bag aside and leapt up onto the bench above him where he could stare out over the great

green pitch. With one hand on his hip and the other pressed thoughtfully to his chin, Remus could practically see the cogs moving inside his head. He knew it; Sirius Black was plotting.

“I'll be honest," Sirius called out eventually, "up until this moment, the Marauders have been running on empty. All of our other plans have felt rather pedestrian, not at all up to our usual standards—but your spectacular show of gag-dom has motivated me to try again. I think that if we can get enough people together, then perhaps this will be a leavers' party to remember after all."

"You mean you have an idea?" Remus asked.

"I have many! You even gave me one of them, Moons. In fact, I'm feeling rather inspired now."

Before Remus could ask what it was he'd given him, Professor McGonagall appeared inexplicably on the staircase above them. “I hope that inspiration leads to more cleaning and *not* more trouble-making, Mr. Black," she said, spooking Sirius so badly he was nearly propelled into a forward roll.

"Crikey, Minnie! You shouldn't sneak up on people like that, you're likely to give someone a heart attack."

Ignoring Sirius' sass, the headmistress came down several steps and stopped to regard Bobby and his friends with a stern eye.

“Gentlemen, shouldn’t you be heading down to supper?”

“Yes, Professor McGonagall,” they all chirped, before promptly high-tailing it back down the stands. They were replaced a second later by the headmistress herself, who stood in the aisle and peered down at their nearly-full bin bags in satisfaction.

“I see that clean up is going well."

"Yes, we are but humble servants," Sirius drawled, picking up his own to swing around. "Really sorry about the music earlier, Professor. We just assumed everyone would enjoy it as much as we did, honest."

Behind their spectacles, Professor McGonagall's eyes narrowed. "That little performance of yours almost caused a riot. Poor Professor Flitwick had to be wheeled out on a trolley after being practically trampled trying to get down the stairs. You'll be glad to know he was not seriously injured."

"I am glad!" Sirius nodded. "And hey, maybe next time he can sit with a group closer to his height. Like the fourth years!"

Remus threw an empty drink can, which bounced off the back of Sirius' head and rattled down the stairs. When Sirius rounded on him, he was frowning and rubbing his fresh bruise, but the moment he laid eyes on Remus his expression changed, becoming that of eager delight.

"Oh, Minnie!" He cried, spinning back around. "Since it's only just occurred to me that we won't be seeing each other next year, there's something I have to ask you before we go."

"And what is that?"

Clapping his hands together like a pleading beggar, Sirius fell down to one knee and cleared his throat.

"Will you marry me?"

"Oh, Jesus christ," Remus muttered.

He was expecting further accostment, or at least a good telling off, but for whatever fury and frustration he had put her through over the years, Minerva McGonagall must've still held Sirius in high regard. Flashing him one of her rare smiles, she sighed and shook her head.

"Sirius, just because you are leaving school for good does not mean you have to turn our final days of peace into a spectacle."

"Oh, Minnie," he echoed; "Dear, sweet Minnie... You don't really believe that, do you?"

Another sigh, and she'd turned for the stairs. “You boys are going to do great things one day," she called, "I just hope that for your sakes, your children will take after their mothers, rather than their *fathers.”*

Sirius shot an amused look at Remus, who only cringed in embarrassment, and then cupped his hands around his mouth.

“Oh, I don’t think you have to worry much about that one, Minnie!"

"Goodbye, my 4A boys," Professor McGonagall waved. "You will be sorely missed."

* * *

Later that night...

It was their second-to-last night at school—*ever*—and Remus could feel the nerves and excitement radiating off of his friends like stink off a boys' changing room. After dinner, they'd all agreed to finish any last-minute packing and then meet back at Godric just after curfew, where they could then head out together to bury their time capsule. They'd already scoped out the perfect spot; just a little ways into the trees, in the same place they'd managed to pull off the most magnificent Halloween prank known to man. (Or the worst, if you were to ask the girls.)

The ground where they'd chosen to plant the capsule was soft and it'd been easy enough to dig through the damp mulch. Originally their main worry had been how they were supposed to store the capsule so that it'd stand against any elements it might encounter while underground, but when Peter had had the bright idea of "borrowing" the school's capsule from its exhibit in Castle Hall, they'd all pitched in to help nick it. It'd taken less than an hour to smuggle the metal canister back to their dorm, and now all that was left was to bury the memories and forget about them for the next twenty years.

After spending the better half of the evening packing their things away into it, James had just returned from his nightly headcount when a knock on their door made everyone look up.

"I'll bet it's Minnie!" Sirius cried, throwing himself over the stolen time capsule as though his body alone could hide it. "Knew she couldn't resist me for long. She must've come back to accept my proposal."

"Or to expel you on your final night!" James said, doing the same. "She's found out what we did and has come to stop us!"

"You guys are so lame," Remus said, getting up to answer the door himself. He opened it just a crack at first, and rather than finding an angry, capsule-less Headmistress, he was met with another boy, yawning and holding out a letter.

"Post for you, Lupin."

Remus took the envelope and shut the door. He noticed strangely that there was no return address, but his name had been neatly printed across the front, and the stamps were all marked correctly.

“Who’s the letter from, Moony?” James asked, shoving Sirius off the time capsule and tugging it to the edge of his bed.

“Dunno… Giles, probably.”

“That driver of yours worries more than both of my parents put together,” Peter said, shutting the capsule’s lid and tossing a sheet over it as a poor disguise.

“You can call him in the morning," Sirius said, grunting as he and James lifted the heavy capsule between them. "Meanwhile, our ladies await."

Remus turned the letter over in his hands. Up until a moment ago, he’d been completely ready to rush out into the night with his friends, but now he found himself hesitating. The lack of a return address had made him suspicious. Could it really be? *Could it actually be from Tonya?*

Quickly, he hid the letter behind his back. “You three go on, I’ll catch up. Just need to use the loo.”

“And you guys say I have the shitty bladder,” Peter said, opening the front door.

“Don’t be too long, Moony,” James chided, as they manoeuvred the large container through the door. "Don't want to miss the burial!"

Remus waited until the sound of his friends’ footsteps had faded down the hall, before scurrying over to his bed. Tearing into the envelope, he found two carefully folded papers, each written on thick paper. For a split second he let himself hope, but when he unfolded the top half of the first page, he did not find a letter from a lost love. Instead, the words *‘Faculty of Humanities—University of Manchester’* stared up at him in black ink.

Remus’ breath caught. Slowly he unfolded the letter the rest of the way.

Dear Remus,

We have received your application to The University of Manchester’s Faculty of English Language and Literature, and are pleased to offer you a seat for the incoming 1978-1979 school term. Competition for September’s

intake has been fierce, but we were highly impressed by your strong application and clear plans for the future. Below you will find a concise outline for what must be completed in order to secure your seat for this term's intake. We look forward to your arrival.

Remus lowered the letter. To his knowledge, he had not made any application—and certainly not any plans for a future at the University of Manchester.

Furiously, he tore open the second letter.

Remus,

I debated fiercely whether or not I should write you this letter, but after pulling some strings with the head of admissions at Manchester University, I decided it was worthwhile. I know you and I have never had the best relationship, but I want the best for you, and I would see it done if I can. I had never envisioned a life for you as someone who reads books and argues ethics as a career, but if it is to be that or a life without point, then I would have you in school. I implore you to look past any feelings you have for me and see sense. Remember, I do this for you, and I swear to not ask anything else of you if you agree to attend.

The world wants you, Remus. Don't let it down.

Lyall Lupin.

He'd signed the bottom, as he might've signed a notice to another legislator. Two great swooping 'L's, wrapping up a string of 'I' statements that made his stomach turn. *'I debated', 'I decided', 'I implore'* … Despite the bitterness, the letter might've been the kindest thing Lyall had ever done for him.

And Remus hated it.

Not just because he was angry, but because it made him hesitate.

While his classmates had attended lessons and informational sessions on how to properly apply to and navigate university life, he had found every excuse to skive off. He hadn't wanted *anything* to do with *any* of

it. All he'd wanted was to be Remus Lupin of the Marauders. Not "Remus Lupin of Manchester University". But he could be now—couldn't he? The ticket was right there in his hands. All it would take was one call, and his entire future would be different. It didn't mean that he had to forgive his father, or even speak to him. He'd be in Manchester after all. Two-hundred miles between him and anything that might trigger even the slightest memory.

You could leave it all behind, that traitorous voice said; *Be a completely new person. Actually make something of yourself.*

Why would I ever want that? I have a place here. People that I love.

Sure, they love you now, but what about when all that rubbish about a band fails? What about when they realise that it's all a fool's errand and everything blows up in your face? What about when they become bitter, and ***angry?*** *And when you start fighting—go your separate ways like all adults do? What will you have left? James and Peter have back up plans—Sirius has his inheritance. But what does* Remus Lupin *have outside this one thing? An almost-godmother? A father? Two? Lyall could so easily take you out of his will—leave you with nothing. He just might, if you blow this.*

We can do this, he swore. *We can! I want this band.*

For now…

Remus squeezed his hands into fists, crushing the twin letters in his grip. He knew he should burn them—try to erase all of it—but there wasn't time. Before he could decide what to do next, Sirius was opening the door, stepping in expectantly.

"Finished with the toilet?" He asked, one hand still on the doorknob. Quickly, Remus stuffed the letters into his back pocket, but it didn't matter; Sirius had seen, even if he was trying to play it off by looking elsewhere and casually rubbing at his eye.

"So... who was the letter from?"

Remus' shoulders sagged. "No one—just my dad."

"Ah. Good or bad?"

"Neither… Pointless."

Mouth quirking upwards at one corner, Sirius held out his hand.

“Let’s go do something worthwhile then.”

He wasn’t sure how it was possible, but Remus instantly felt better.

Screw you, he thought as he took that hand, *This is my future. If the world wants me so bad, I’m gonna decide what it is they get.*

They found their friends waiting for them outside the dorm, school shirts and ties hanging open for the last time. Marlene smiled at Remus as they walked out, and took his other arm.

“And they say it takes girls forever to get ready.”

“Sorry. Nice goal today, by the way.”

“Thanks. Didn't win us a championship, but it still feels pretty good.”

"You'll always be a champion in my eyes, Cherry."

"Sop."

With James and Sirius splitting the load, they all made their way down the dark street, dodging street lamps and being careful to hide from any late-night trolleys or large groups of passersby.

“Do you think we’ll all really still be friends in twenty years?” Peter asked, as they made their way toward the treeline. "Statistically speaking, most childhood friend groups barely make it to late-adolescence. If we're going by that standard then we've already expired."

"Expired? Way to bring the mood down, Wormtail," Sirius huffed, half struggling under the weight of the capsule. Remus noticed and came forward to help, only to be waved off with a steady; "I got it, I got it."

“Of course we'll still be friends,” James said afterwards. “We’ve made it twelve years already, what’s twenty more?”

“I’ve only been here for three,” Remus pointed out.

“But you’re so stubborn, Moony. Couldn’t get rid of you if we wanted to.”

“And we don’t want to,” Lily added keenly.

“Speaking of getting rid of,” Mary started, “Potter—what’d that scout say to you earlier on the pitch? You never said.”

Immediately, several heads craned in his direction, and James fell to a stop on the edge of the forest. “Well… If you must know... He offered me a contract.”

Peter’s mouth fell open. “No *way.”*

“What sort of contract?” Remus asked.

“He means a team wants to sign him,” Marlene said, equally stunned.

“Just as a youth recruit,” James amended. Not discouraged by this fact, Sirius promptly dropped his end of the capsule, making James stumble while Sirius reached over to shake him by the shoulders.

“What team, you lunatic—*what team?!”*

“L-Liverpool!”

Sirius’ eyes grew two sizes. “What?! I thought that Liverpool never took people outside of the academies? And you! You’re already eighteen!”

“I know,” James said, “but McGonagall wrote the team and they sent a scout. It’s… It’s pretty crazy.”

“It’s more than crazy—it’s brilliant!” Marlene trilled. “What’d you say?!”

“I said no, obviously.”

That shut everyone up.

“You said *no?”* Lottie echoed.

“Mhm. Told him thanks, but I already have plans of my own.”

“Does this mean you've told your parents?” Lily asked.

“Yep. Called dad over dinner.”

“And surely he shouted some sense into you?” Peter demanded.

James just shook his head. “Maybe he was a bit disappointed, sure, but he told me to do what I thought was right. And that he’d support us no matter what we chose.”

“Wow…” Mary said. “Is he looking for a daughter?”

James laughed then, but it was Sirius who stepped forward. “You do know that Liverpool’s been in the top three teams of the division for the last six years running, right?”

“ 'Course I know, but what do I need with a top three English football team? I’m gonna be in the biggest band in the world.”

Sirius paused, and then raised a knuckle to his mouth to hide his smile. “Aw, alright—c’mere, you bleedin’ tart!” Throwing his arms around him, Sirius clung tightly to best friend while the pair of them laughed, and all it took was a single beckoning hand for all eight of them to be hugging again. As he held his friends, Remus pushed all thoughts of Manchester and university from his mind. He didn’t need it, and he didn’t want it.

Everything he wanted was right there.

When they eventually broke apart, Lily kissed James on the cheek (as did Sirius, though his was much more passionate) and they picked up the sheet-covered capsule to trek further into the trees. Guided by the light of the girls’ torches, they walked until the path started to look familiar again, and soon enough the darkness gave way to a small clearing with a large pit dug out in its centre.

“Let’s make a pact,” James suggested as he and Sirius set the capsule down at the pit’s edge. “Even if we aren’t friends anymore, we’ll all agree to come back and open this thing together.”

“What if by then I hate your guts?” Sirius teased, wiping sweat from his brow.

“You still have to come, it’s part of the pact.”

“We could always drag him back by his hair,” Mary suggested, setting down her own bag. "That'd get him moving."

“Won’t have to drag me back,” Peter said, unzipping his school pack and pulling out a large handful of comic books—copies of *Eagle, Spider-man,* and *Captain Britain* among them. “Man, I’m really gonna miss these issues.”

“I’m still not convinced they’re gonna be worth any money,” said Lottie.

“Shows what you know. One day they’re gonna start making these into movies or something, and then you’ll be eating your words.”

“Guess we’ll find out in twenty years,” Sirius interjected, stepping between the two squabbling siblings to tear away the sheet, revealing the old metal capsule.

“Oh my god,” Marlene gasped straight away; “Is that…?”

“Oh, that’s right, you girls didn't hear. We *may* have snuck out and robbed your favourite display over at Castle Hall, McKinnon. Kept the capsule for more personal reasons though.”

“What’d you do with the rest of it?”

“It’s perfectly protected, don’t worry. Filch’s office makes for a great storage space.”

“Figure it’ll take them years to find it in there,” James grinned.

Lily’s mouth dropped open into a very shocked ‘o’. “You mean you actually stole from the school?!”

“As if it was the first time,” Peter snorted.

“That time capsule was half a century old! It was part of history!”

“Sexist history!” Sirius rebuffed. “Or were you not there when McKinnon was having kittens over the whole thing?”

“I was there,” Lottie chimed in, making the rest of them snigger.

“We made sure to dig through it first though,” James said, busy rooting through his pocket; “Even managed to find this.”

Extending his hand, James gave Marlene a faded piece of an old school article, dated all the way back to November of 1927. While the other girls crowded around, Mary slipped in a small patch of mud and nearly dropped her torch.

"Fucking woods... Can't see anything out here!"

"Just read it aloud, Marls," Lily urged.

Taking a second to clear her throat, Marlene raised her torch; “ ‘This year, the top student award in an academic standing goes to Margery "Midge" Williams, who shattered over five academic records that had been previously set by her peers. Miss Williams is described by her professors as a 'brilliant mind with limitless potential' and is on course to attend Oxford University this coming September, where she will be

studying medicine in hopes of being among the first female graduates to pursue surgery. Pictured below is Miss Williams, holding her certificate while shaking hands with Headmaster Dippet'. Good work... Midge'."

As Marlene lowered the notice, she found Sirius and the other boys grinning at her.

"We thought you should see a bit of female Hawkings history for yourself," he said. "Do you like it?"

Marlene nodded, before sniffing and wiping her eyes. "God—I think I'm gonna cry."

"Awe, Marls!" Mary hugged her, and Marlene held her arm while sparing Remus a sheepish glance.

"Look at me while I'm crying and I'll punch you."

Remus shrugged, and hugged her too.

"Okay, I'd say it's about time to get this show on the road," James said later, when Marlene had recovered enough to dole out several punches. "Time to load 'er up, ladies."

One by one, each of the girls stepped forward and began pulling small items from their bags. When it was her turn, Lily produced an entire photo album, of which she stopped to show Remus—pointing out a small series of photographs featuring four boys with flowers in their hair.

"I made sure to make copies," she told him, "but I think it'll be nice to open this up when we're older and see our younger selves again."

"Our 'younger selves'? Way to blow my mind, Lils."

Mary added several items herself, such as the Rowena patch from her old school jacket and a collage of her favourite celebrities that she'd made out of glitter and magazine clippings. Marlene included the game line-up of the final tournament as well as Midge's article and a diary she'd been keeping throughout the year, and Lottie slipped in a letter she'd written to her future self, a list of every boy she'd ever kissed and their rating out of ten, as well as a tiny clay sculpture of the Goddess Aphrodite, which she'd made in art class when she was fourteen.

“What the hell you putting that in for?” Peter asked.

“To remind me of the beauty of the female form.”

“It looks more like a gnarled tree trunk with a face.”

“Tell you what, when we take it out again in twenty years, I’ll celebrate by smashing it over your head.”

It went on like that—letters, photos, a single badly produced demo track—until the case was nearly full. At one point, James remembered that he'd left something in his other pocket, and pulled out a blue baby bonnet, along with a torn stred of a label bearing the words *Baker's Favourite Bleacher Flour*.

"Poor Prongs Junior," he moaned, kissing the paper label. "Gone, but never forgotten."

He tossed the label and bonnet in, while Sirius rolled his eyes. "And now for something actually worthwhile..." With no further prompting, he produced the single 8-track tape they’d made and held it aloft for all of them to see. “Here's to the music,” he said, “and to all of our favourite songs.”

“You mean we’re really not going to play it?” Lily asked, sounding disappointed. Sirius tipped his head wryly in her direction and smiled.

“Have faith, Evans. I'm sure when you listen to it, it'll feel like no time's passed at all.”

And then he tossed the tape into the capsule with a short clatter. It was full after that, officially completed with a part of each of them. To Remus the capsule felt like an accumulated treasure trove; a collective effort of who they were, much like how all the best songs and albums they would go on to produce would surely feel, though they didn’t know it then.

Equal parts of all of them, equal parts in the charade, equal parts in the end.

With the capsule full, James went to shut its lid, and Remus remembered what he’d been hiding in his back pocket.

“Hold on, Prongs. Got one more thing.”

Untucking the letters from his pocket, he smoothed them out in his hands and felt his fingers begin to shake.

"Remus, what's that?" Lily asked, laying a comforting palm on his arm.

A chance? He wondered, then;

No.

A cage.

"My dad wants me to go to school," he told them, passing the letter around for each of them to take a look. "More than anything else, he wants me to make something of myself. He would rather me buy my way into a decent life than take the risk of an extraordinary one... But he's never understood me, don't think he's ever really wanted to. And I don't hate him for who he is to me—he can't help it any more than I can. But... I want different things, and I'm gonna do it my way, not anyone else's."

"I think that's an admirable thing," Lottie said softly, passing him back the letters. Remus stared down at them for a while, doubting—until he remembered Lily's hand on his arm, and the thought of all of his friends' faces washed it away.

Remus took a breath, and on the exhale, he tossed the letters inside the capsule and watched as James shut the lid up tight.

They struggled a bit getting it into the hole, and it took a while to rebury, but as Sirius pat the final shovelful of dirt into place, Remus knew he'd made the right choice. As they all dusted the dirt from their clothes, Mary and Marlene began passing around tiny styrofoam cups from the dining hall, which they filled generously with whisky from Sirius' flask.

"To us!" Sirius declared, raising a toast.

"To friends!" James added. "To love and care and all the other bits!"

"And to staying together," Remus finished, giving Sirius a very fond look.

" 'TO STAYING TOGETHER'!"

They knocked their tiny cups together over the freshly-buried hole, toasting each other and themselves, and polished off the booze.

“Whoooo… burns so good,” Sirius coughed, before crushing his cup in his hand. “Now I suppose it’s a good time to tell you all about my plan for a final prank.”

" 'Prank'?" At least three of them echoed.

"Woah, don't all start applauding at once."

“What do you mean 'prank', Sirius?" Lily exclaimed. "I thought that thing back at the tournament was your final prank!”

“What? No, are you crazy? A final prank has to involve all of us, or it’s not a Marauders’ prank at all.”

Lily covered her face, but James and Peter looked on, appearing far too eager.

“What’d you have in mind, Padfoot?”

Sirius began stroking his chin thoughtfully. “McGonagall’s holding our grand end-of-school send-off in the Great Hall tomorrow, right?”

They all nodded.

“Great. Now how many chickens do you reckon it’ll take to make her rethink her choice of location?”

As Sirius’ smile turned absolutely wicked, Lily peeked out from behind her fingers;

“Oh no.”

“I think you mean, oh *yes."* Sirius wiggled his eyebrows, before slinging an arm around James and Peter and drawing them in close. "Ladies, lads, best drink up, ‘cause we ain’t sleeping tonight…”

Chapter End Notes

I feel compelled to put here that my dear friend Charlotte does not actually ship snily
(or does she? 👀)

I am still planning on putting the final 'school years' chapter out next week, but if my illness persists/gets worse, it might have to be post-poned. Should I decide to do that, I'll put out a post on

tumblr (@motswolo) as well as make an edited note here. Otherwise, see you next week for our final school chapter ever <333

Chapter 96: The Great Last Day

Chapter Summary

I am dedicating this chapter to all of you who love music as much as Remus Lupin. To all of you who are as kind as James Potter, and as wild as Sirius Black, and as dear as Peter Pettigrew. To everyone who's kept up with this story for as long as they have, and for all of you who've just discovered it.

This one is most certainly for you <3

Chapter Notes

There is really no reading this chapter without the music.
None.
Zip.
It won't work.
And so I advise you to resist until you have a moment alone, where you can play our songs and think about these boys in all of their foolish loveliness.
HERE is a link to a “tape” of songs the characters will be listening to in fic. My advice: have it queued for the final scene of this chapter, when all the students have moved back down to the football pitch. I promise you will not regret it.

Also, one very special shout out to Anita, who came to me all the way back in April and asked if I could put the song "Ballroom Blitz" into the fic. Even then, I had the wonderful pleasure of telling her, that I already had <3

PS: A lovely tumblr follower has also decided to start translating the fic into Russian. You can find that linked here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two of us wearing raincoats,
Standing solo in the sun;
You and me chasing paper,
Getting nowhere on our way back home;
We’re on our way home,
We’re on our way home,
We’re going home…

- “Two of Us” The Beatles, 1970

He was far too drunk. How could he not be? It was the eve of their last day at school ever.

Ever.

The thought hit him like a train. Once he would've killed to say as much; back when he was younger, angrier. Back when all he wanted was to live in The End with Tomny and be anyone else. It'd been easier then, in some ways. Less rules, less people to disappoint. Less friends to hold him when he was feeling ill. And he had been ill, for a long time. Wouldn't find out how ill for a long time *yet,* but still... they made things easier.

After they'd buried the time capsule and christened the earth with their empty bottles, all eight of them set themselves to Sirius' plot of insanity. It took nearly all night, but when they were finished Remus and the boys shambled back to their dorm with their hearts thrumming in anticipation. It was an unspoken truth that they'd be alone; that the girls would depart on their own for a few precious hours longer in the room they'd grown up in. There'd be plenty of opportunities to fall together in a drunken pile later on, for now everyone had their own memories to say farwell to.

"Goodbye bed," James blubbered, pressing his face into the maroon curtains. "Goodbye side table, goodbye lamp. Goodbye mysterious piece of gum that's shaped like Winston Churchill."

"Go on, Pot," Sirius said, swaying dubiously as he helped his friend into bed. "There'll be other beds."

"Not like these," James whimpered, still clinging to the curtains.

"Here, then."

Sirius peeled the stale wad of gum from the bedpost and handed it to James. At first the expression on his face had read as horror—the gum had been an unspoken companion for as long as they'd lived in the room—but then James simply started crying again.

"Sirius, you're so nice," he whimpered, as Sirius nodded mechanically and brought the covers up over him. "I love you, man. Really!"

"Yeah, yeah. You too, mate."

"Sirius, will you tuck me in too?" Peter moaned, legs half hanging off of his own bed.

"Bloody christ... Do I have to do everything around here?"

As Sirius wobbled drunkenly toward Peter's bed, Remus sat crouched beneath his own. He had his mother's case open again, and was gently moving the last of his belongings from his bedside into it for safe-keeping. He hadn't meant to leave things to the last moment, but life had just been so busy lately. As he packed away the tapes boxes and the cigarette boxes—some of them empty—he eventually came across the final photo in his collection, still rumpled and creased from the days it'd spent living in his pocket, and all the lives it'd lived before that.

Finished with Peter, Sirius turned around and gently nudged Remus' thigh with his foot.

"What about you? Need tucking in?"

"I'm okay."

Sirius crossed his arms. "Well? Aren't you gonna ask me if *I* need tucking in?"

Remus shook his head, regretting it only when the room began to spin. "Be there in a tick."

Sirius retreated genially, and Remus turned back to the tiny white trunk and the photograph in his hand. *April 23rd 1954,* it read. They smiled at him, the same way they had the first time he'd ever held it. It'd almost burned him back then. It didn't anymore. Yes, the ache was still there, but like most hurts, it'd grown dull over time. Perhaps eventually it wouldn't bother him at all.

"Moooooooony..."

"Coming, Pads."

He held the photograph for a moment longer, and could swear he was lighter. For the first time he thought that *yes*, he did look like him. Tad. Once that would've bothered him too.

It didn't anymore.

I don't need you, he thought; *but I'm glad you exist.*

Before shutting the trunk, he slid the photograph into one of his books. He'd forget come morning which book, but it'd be protected and that was all that mattered.

Peeling away the day's dirty clothes, Remus lifted Sirius' bed covers and climbed in next to him. Sirius' arms were warm around him. His hair, like spilled ink, was dark on the pillow.

Remus buried himself in it; the warmth, the dark, and shut his eyes.

* * *

Friday 16th June 1978 - The Last Day of Term...

"Right, now it's two o'clock, and you all know what that means. I'm afraid our final music lesson has reached its end."

There came a chorus of groans—twenty-five unhappy nine year-olds, each disappointed by the idea of having to let go of the only cool teachers they'd ever had. Little Dominic Henley honked his trumpet indignantly, while the whole of the percussion section began banging their drums and ringing their bells in protest.

"Come on now," Remus tried, shouting over the noise; "Surely you wouldn't want our last day to end on such a sour note?"

He surveyed them, their tiny, forlorn faces, and felt pride begin to bubble up in his chest.

"I never thought I would miss this, but I will. And that's okay. You all have come so far, if you keep practising then I'm sure you'll be blowing Bach out of the water one day. You should be very proud, all of you—well done."

He clapped for them, and they clapped too, but it was clear what they were all waiting for.

Or *who* they were waiting for.

"Any parting words of wisdom, Mr. Black?"

Despite Remus' speech, Regulus did not look impressed. He stood behind the teacher's podium with his usual uniform of Salazar green

and a frown.

"Honestly I'm disappointed," he said. "Eight months and not a single one of you can manage the introduction to ‘Für Elise’. You've no discipline, lack general motivation, and there's simply no relying on you to do any of the work on your own. It's almost as if you think people play music for *fun*. Well, you wanna know what I have to say to that?"

The entire class baulked as Regulus turned to the tiny drummer boy sitting off to his left.

"Jacob, tell them what I have to say!"

The boy raised his drumsticks dubiously, and then brought them down again in three sharp strokes;

BA-DUM-TSSS!

"I say job well done."

The children erupted into fitful bouts of laughter, each squealing their delight. They came to him in a rush—first the girls, then all the rest—hugging his legs, begging him to stay. They loved him; even with all the prickly demeanour he could muster, they loved him. And Remus loved to watch.

When the chairs had been stacked and all the instruments had returned to whence they came, Remus tucked Sheila's guitar back into its case. He'd kept the photograph of her and his baby-self at the christening, and now it hung taped to the inside of the lid. *Little victories...*

"They have gotten better," he called, smiling down at the guitar. "Mrs. Bean told me they're the best sounding class of fifth years she's ever had."

"Not best behaved, though."

"Yes well, who'd take 'well behaved' over smiles like those."

There was a pair of snaps as Regulus shut his violin case. He had his back to him, but Remus imagined him smiling too. Just a little.

"You're really very good with them," he said, leaning casually back against one of the desks. "Think you'll do it again next year?"

"Without you?" It was a scoff more than it was a question.

"Why not? I think you'd be good at it. Good enough to be a teacher yourself, if you really wanted."

Regulus turned on him then, and where Remus expected dismissal, he found hesitation.

"I'm not the one who's good with them, you are," he huffed. "You're the patient one, I just know all the notes. If you're seriously telling me that that's the only thing you need to be a qualified te—"

Remus held up a hand, head shaking. "No, you're right," he mused. "It takes far more than just knowing a few notes to run a music class. You've got to keep them in line, make sure they listen. Then you've also got to excite them—make them *want* to learn. You have to comfort them when they struggle, celebrate them when they overcome... And that's exactly what you've been doing, Regulus. Now, I'm no expert, but I'd say that makes you more than qualified."

A flush began to creep up beneath Regulus' collar. "But you're the one who started it," he said, busying himself by tapping the stack of sheet music into a neat pile; "They follow you."

"Maybe. But look, you can be as 'sacrificial lamb' as you want about this, but you didn't need me, Regulus. Not for the important bits. Those you did all on your own, for eight whole months. You can be proud, you know."

"My father always said pride is man's number one downfall."

"Mine always said I was his kid. Parents can be liars."

The look Regulus gave him was incredulous, but Remus only shrugged.

"Makes it easier if you joke about it."

They lapsed into silence, and Remus glanced at the clock hanging on the classroom wall. Already the others would be down at the church, setting up what would be the final show of their entire school-career. It'd been hard going in the beginning, but with the help of Bobby and the other lads, the plan was shaping up to be the prank of the century. Best get a move on before one of them accidentally blows their fingers off.

Picking up his guitar, Remus wrapped his school bag over one shoulder and prepared his goodbye;

"I'll see you later, then?" He called. "For the party and the tour with the new seventh years?"

Regulus nodded. "Remember, we're meeting at the dining hall, then outside the Great Hall for the tours. Don't be late."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Smirking, Remus turned away but stopped just short of the door. When he glanced back, he found Regulus staring down at the stack of sheet music.

"You can be whatever you want, Regulus," he told him. "But I think you'd make a pretty great teacher too."

Regulus looked up at him, his usual aloofness having returned.

"Yes, well... I suppose if you could do it, anyone could."

Remus shrugged. "You got me there. See you."

Outside the sun was shining. Heaps of kids had taken to the lawns, playing games and enjoying what was to be their last full day on campus. After supper McGonagall was set to give her leavers speech, and come morning, the class of 1978 would be parting for good. That wasn't to say they weren't going to get a few good laughs in first.

On his way to the church, Remus passed by the Great Hall in all its exuberant finery. Normally the hall was reserved for large events, such as exams and the odd theatre performance; all other days it tended to sit empty, but not this day. Today it was mayhem, and everyone knew it.

Chickens! Chickens *everywhere!*

They were spilling out of the hall's main doors like flood water, squawking and preening for what might've been their first and only taste of real freedom. As it turns out, the barnyard fowl had mysteriously appeared in the Great Hall overnight, leaving behind a mess that could've turned even the strongest of stomachs. The stench was foul, and Remus could see teachers and school workers holding handkerchiefs to their noses as they ran about, desperately trying to corral the beasts. Feathers and muck scattered the lawn, and while a

large group of students stood by to gawk, Professor McGonagall hung furiously around the top step with a very pursed look on her face.

"I don't understand where they all came from, Minerva!" Professor Flitwick cried, letting out a strangled yelp as one of the chickens soared overhead and clipped him with its feet.

"Tricky things, chickens," came Professor Kettleburn, the old agricultural teacher with only one eye. "They've been known to open doors, you know. Why, once in the middle of the night, I found one swimming in my bathtub, I did! Figured a storm blew its coop open."

"This was no storm," Professor McGonagall thundered.

Quickly, Remus turned and legged it the opposite direction.

It was still mid-afternoon by the time he made it down to the chapel. He'd had to dodge a few passing priests on their way out of the parsonage, but after they'd advanced to the other end of the courtyard, Remus creeped up the church's front steps and slipped inside. The main foyer and the sanctuary were both empty, but Remus made sure to keep quiet as he cut across the back of the room and darted up the balcony's staircase. It felt a little silly to be sneaking around in broad daylight, but he wasn't there to confess his sins. If anything, he was orchestrating them.

Flinching at every groaning stair, Remus finally emerged on the balcony's landing, where hence he found James and Sirius arguing over how to fit the stage platform together. It'd taken them nearly all night, but somehow they'd managed to haul everything from the music room up to the church's second floor veranda. All of their instruments sat piled up along the balcony's far wall along with the several speakers they'd borrowed from the AV room, though they all paled in size when compared to the church's mighty pipe organ. A tool in their initial prank all the way back in Remus' first year, the grand instrument was now perfectly outfitted to play the backdrop for their final one.

Remus could hardly wait.

"No, no, no—you gotta put the pin in one notch higher," Sirius hissed, as he and James struggled to fit two brackets of the stage together.

"I'll notch you," James grumbled back. "Why don't you lift the bloody thing *higher* then? Maybe that way I could put the pin in instead of supporting the whole thing myself."

“I am lifting it!”

“Are you sure? ‘Cause the lack of strain in your bicep says otherwise.”

“Fine. *Ugh*—This enough for you?”

“Is that you actually flexing?”

“Oh fuck off.”

Remus almost laughed. Clearly the lack of sleep was getting to them.

“Oi,” he called, “be any louder and the Heavenly Father Himself might overhear you.”

Not expecting to find anyone behind him, Sirius nearly dropped his end of the platform, causing James to hiss as his fingers got caught beneath. *“MOTHERF—NGH!”*

There was a clatter as James dropped his end and wheeled away. Remus winced just watching.

“Oops. My bad."

Huffing, Sirius set his half of the bar down and went to his friend. “Sorry. Your hand okay?”

“Yeah, s’fine,” James said, grimly sucking on his thumb. “You finished with your kiddie lessons then, Moons?"

"Yeah. Regulus says hi."

"Really?"

Remus made a face. "No?"

James turned away, still sucking grumpily on his thumb, while Sirius stepped up and took Remus' guitar from him.

"This place is looking good," Remus said, glancing at the stack of amps behind stage-right. "Think it'll be ready for later?"

"Only if Pete can sort the electrical on time," Sirius said. "He's downstairs, working on that ancient plugboard in the cupboard. Say, you got that...?"

In answer, Remus raised his wrist, showing off one of the hair bands

he'd pawned off of Mary that morning.

"Ah, bless'm," Sirius said, removing the hair bauble and kissing Remus' wrist on the way. “I didn’t even hear you come up the stairs," he said, mumbling around the elastic as he gathered the rest of his hair into a ponytail. "You think we should be keeping watch?"

"If you haven't been caught so far then I'd say we're alright. They found the chickens, by the way."

Sirius lit up. "Really?! How'd it go? We've never used that many chickens before—was it a total mess?"

"Worse. I'll wager that if McGonagall spots any of us she'll let Filch skin us and wear our hides as a coat."

"Well, I think I'd make a very handsome hat, don't you?"

"Yeah. I think that hair of yours would just about pass for raccoon fur."

Sirius smirked bashfully, and just then a tremendous blast of noise came soaring out of one of the amps. When they spun around, they spotted James with his guitar strapped across his chest, leaning down over the balcony railing.

"SOUNDS GREAT, PETE!"

"Potter!" Sirius lashed, rushing forward to slap his hand over the amp's off switch. "Are you *trying* to get us skinned alive?"

James threw his hands up, offended. "What? Gotta test the equipment before the show, don't we?"

As the two set back to bickering, Remus adjusted the strap of his bag and began backing toward the stairs. Sirius caught him just as he was about to slip away;

"Off so soon, Moons? Suppose you've got your perky little prefect party to attend."

"Just say you're jealous, Padfoot!"

"Pull my own teeth out first!" Sirius hollered. "Have fun with MacDuff and my brother, traitor! We'll be here, setting up the prank of a lifetime!"

"Miss you already!"

"Wanker. Oh, and don't forget—the field! Tell everyone you see the party's happening on the field! *After* the show!"

Remus waved behind himself, dropping down into the foyer below. As he did, he heard James hiss;

"Oi, Black, what happened to being quiet...?"

"Don't be a hypocrite, Potter. You used to moan from the back of the classroom during silent study."

"That was always your idea!"

It was hard not to laugh. Even when the days of exams and pranks were long behind them, would those two always be so *JamesandSirius*, Remus wondered?

He hoped so.

It was harder to avoid any teachers and staff on his way back toward the dining hall. When he walked in, Remus half expected to find Professor McGonagall waiting for him with mediaeval shackles in her hands, but instead all he found were the other prefects, each of them dressed nicely and swarmed around a table ladled with cake and pudding. There was music going—a lot of Wings and Paul McCartney —but no one complained when he showed up in plain slacks and his Sex Pistols t-shirt. In fact, judging from their reaction, they'd expected it. Word must've already spread regarding the chickens, and Remus was immediately bombarded with questions regarding the stunt and whatever else the Marauders had planned for that evening.

"Is it true we're throwing the leavers' party on the football pitch?" Asked one of them.

"Yeah, so tell all your friends," answered Remus.

"Was it really you guys who put the chickens in the Great Hall last night?" Demanded another.

"Now where'd you hear a rumour like that?"

"I heard you were the ones who put the trolley in the lake!"

"Er..." The questions were coming faster now.

“Is it true you nicked more equipment from the AV room again?”

"No way, where'd you put it?"

“Yeah, do you need help hiding the stereos this time around?”

"I want in!”

“Remus, are you really leaving school to be in a band? Like really, really?!”

He could barely keep up; but it was good to know that his friends had succeeded in spreading the word. Remus just hoped that none of the teachers had caught wind; it would've been disappointing to put a stop to a party before it'd even started.

“Just make sure you bring all of your stuff down to the pitch tonight,” he hushed to everyone. “Tell everyone in our year to bring blankets and torches."

"And bug spray," sniggered one.

"Can people in other years come too?" Whispered another.

"Yeah, 'course. It's just for fun anyway."

In truth the camp-out had been James’ idea, but even Lily had gotten behind it in the end. They’d all agreed that sleeping out under the stars seemed the perfect way to end their final day at school, and judging by the looks of fascination Remus was getting from the other prefects, they were right.

When he was halfway through his pudding, he was approached by a friendly boy named David Alcott. Remus had only ever spoken to David a handful of times, but he seemed perfectly eager to be in on the plot when he strode up to Remus and tapped him on the shoulder.

“I heard another little rumour going around, Lupin. Word is, that you and yours are hosting a private concert, that true?”

“Ask me after church later.”

“Why, what’s happening in the church?”

Remus swallowed the giddy instinct to blab, and instead did something very un-Remus-like; he pulled David in close, as if they were friends, and smiled. “Can I trust you to keep a secret, David?”

The consensus was positive and Remus eagerly bent his head in closer so that he might begin explaining everything. Afterwards he and David shared a fist-bump, and Remus withdrew his arm.

“Remember, get as many kids into the centre aisle as you can. Tell others if you like, so that we can fill it up. We don’t want any of the teachers or fathers to catch on too early otherwise they'll ruin everything. When it's over we'll all meet down at the pitch.”

“You can count on me, mate. Can’t wait to see this—it’s gonna be absolutely legendary!”

Smiling, Remus had just turned away when a camera flash caught him across the face, leaving him momentarily incapacitated.

"Sorry, Remus," Jillian cooed, flapping the fresh polaroid through the air. "I just needed proof."

"Proof of what?" Remus grumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"That I knew you before you were a famous rock star. This could be worth a lot of money someday, you know. After all, not all prefects can get away with having piercings and tattoos.”

“It’s one tiny tattoo, which I received *against my will.* How do you even know about that anyway?”

“Girls talk,” she shrugged, before popping her chewing gum. "Now chop-chop. We've still got a few kiddies to show around campus."

It was cutting it close, but Remus didn't have a proper excuse to get out of doing the tours. He figured that at least if McGonagall were to find him there, she'd have to consider his generous contribution to the school when sorting out a punishment.

“This—is the Great Hall!” Remus hollered, stopping his group of seventh years just below the hall’s main steps. “You’ll write all your examinations here, but they also use it for drama lessons, team-building exercises, and all the other stuff no one cares about.”

There was a second holler as one of the kids through their arm out in a point;

"CHICKEN!”

Sporting several fresh scratches to his face and neck, Filch had

appeared at the top of the hall's steps with a single chicken tucked under one arm. He scowled when he saw the kids, and the bird promptly pecked at his shrivelled, old hand. It made the caretaker yelp, and he promptly dropped the bird, only to have to chase it back into the hall again.

"Oh, well yes," Remus said, as everyone laughed. "Apparently it's a popular spot with chickens too."

They continued on with the tour, passing Castle Hall and weaving in and out of the science and arts blocks. A few of the more dutiful eleven year-olds were scanning their campus maps as their guides called out to them, while others just drifted this way and that, looking about as excited as Sirius in detention. Near the back, Regulus had busied himself with regularly scolding a pair of boys who had thought it funny to use the side of every building as target practice for their spit wads. A small group of girls stuck close-by, whispering to each other and hiding small giggles behind their maps. Regulus didn't seem to notice.

"You're becoming popular," Remus said to him, when they made a tour toward House Lane.

"You're crazy," Regulus said, then, more boldly; "I've always been popular."

"Oh my god, was that vanity? Coming from *our* Edge?"

"I can't wait until you leave Hawkings, Lupin."

Regulus went on ahead, ushering the students past one of the main trolley depots and doing his best to help them understand the different routes. While he did so, Remus fell into step with Trish, who was lagging toward the back and absent-mindedly balancing an unlit cigarette between her nose and top lip.

"Well, if it isn't the great Remus Lupin," she mused, moving the cigarette behind her ear, "breaker and mender of hearts."

"I don't remember breaking your heart, Trish. Does that mean you have one for me to mend?"

He'd meant it as a joke, but after seeing the smile slip from Trish's face, he instantly grew to regret it.

"He's not that good-looking," she muttered, eyes trained on the front of

the group. Remus didn't have to ask who she meant. "Looks more like a bastard, if you ask me. A gommy, self-important little bastard."

"Shit, Trish... I'm—"

"Ah, shut yer puss, Remington. I'm not killing ma'self over it. Just a bit upset, is a'h."

"Did he say something to you? Was he rude—"

"Nah, nah. Now it's last day, dinnae fash yerself."

"How can you say that? If he said something foul, then you deserve a chance to return it, tenfold!"

"But he didn't." Trish smiled quietly, kicking a stone from her path. "I told him I fancied him, 'n that dobber... That fucking dobber... He said that I was the prettiest girl he'd ever had the pleasure of talking to."

"He did."

"Mhm."

"Then why...?"

"Because." And then she looked up at him, voice almost a whisper; "Ain't it obvious? There's someone *else*."

Oh.

Trish looked him up and down sceptically, before finally sighing and moving the cigarette down to her lips. "So I told him how I felt 'n he didnae feel the same, big whoop. He could've laughed at me, but he didn't. Instead he..." She cleared her throat. "Have ye got a light, my dear gowk?"

He did, and so as the tour group grew further away, Remus bent down and lit the cigarette for her.

"He never said wha 'twas, in case ye were wondering," she muttered, almost dismissively. "Just that it couldnae work. Guess we're both losers in love."

"You're not a loser, Trish. You're..." He looked down at her; her tartan dress and gleaming dress shoes paradoxed by the large tear in the knees of her stockings. "Well, you're..."

"Go on, dinnae break your neck."

"You're *cool,"* Remus amended. "I mean, I like you, so..."

"And that's supposed tae be a compliment because, what—you dinnae like anyone?" She laughed then, heartily, hand over stomach. "I should be so humbled. Too bad you're about as sprung as a daisy in June."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh come on, Remington. You... Black..." She made a 'go on' motion with her hands. "I ken I have a funny accent but I'm not an eejit."

Suddenly Remus felt a lot like pitching himself off of a roof.

"You think that I...? That me... That *Regulus* and I could ever—?!"

"No! Fuck, in th' name of the wee... I meant older Black! Bigger Black! *Wolloping Sirius!"*

"Ah."

Trish laughed again, nearly dropping her cigarette. "Dear Loonarny, you always did have a habit o' assuming people were in love wi' you."

"How'd you find out?" He asked, grimly. "Was it... obvious?"

"Obvious? Nah. Nae until ye straight told me, that is."

"I, what?"

"You told me! Dinnae ye mind? It was that day down by the loch. We were talking 'n then Sirius showed up. I was mostly joking, but you—you cried him yer boyfriend! Figured ye meant it, what wi' the way you two are always going along."

He laughed awkwardly. "I don't remember... Did you happen to give me any drugs?"

"Is that a trick question?" Smirking, she passed him the cigarette, and Remus took a long pull as they continued ambling down the pavement.

"Regulus knows," he said, almost surprising himself. "He figured it out too. Actually, pretty sure he figured it out before I did."

"Clever cunt."

"Yeah... But listen, Trish, you can't tell anyone."

"I ken. Figured your band's plan o' world domination might be hindered if it came out that th' lead singer 'n the bass player are doing each other behind the speaker stacks."

"Thanks for that image."

They walked on a bit further, nearing the back of the tour group just as they came to a stop ahead of the first set of dorms. Jillian was at the head of the group, lecturing about the history of each house while most of the kids meandered unenthusiastically around the lawn.

"Listen tae her," Trish chuffed, "she'd lecture to a wall if given half th' chance."

Remus passed the cigarette back, before rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. “So... Does this mean you and Regulus are still friends then?”

“What? Like I'd just let him drop me? Nah, I spent months working on that bugger. Besides,” she ruminated, “I’m nae so easily deterred.”

“You’ll take care of him then?” Remus asked. “Sirius won't admit it, but he's worried about leaving him behind."

“Yeah, tell Black number one not to worry. I’ll stick so close, Reginald’s gonna think I’ve started growing off o' his arse.”

“Thanks, Trish.”

She took another drag, and then promptly punched him in the arm. Even as he rubbed the soreness from his new bruise, Remus knew that he would miss her too.

"That reminds me," Trish said, as she kicked another stone onto the lawn. "Find me after the assembly, I have a gift for you."

"A gift?"

"Just a wee something. You know, for luck."

Remus shrugged genially. "Oh. In that case, could always use more luck..."

"Hey! Who said you could have a smoke break?" It was Regulus, come to chide them for being useless dregs to society. "Don't think you're

getting out of this so easily!" He called, practically shaking a fist at them.

"Who's smoking? I'm not smoking," Trish said, grinding the cigarette out on the bottom of her shoe. "Remington, were ye smoking? Tsk-tsk."

Regulus crossed his arms, and Trish came forward, tapping him fondly on the chest. "Dinnae be such a wee clipe, Reginald, I'm coming."

She twirled around him, humming cheekily, and when she was gone, Regulus gave Remus the eye.

"Did she say anything to you?"

Remus shrugged. "Dunno. She talks so funny I can't understand her half the time."

It was enough to earn him an indifferent eye-roll, and as Regulus marched to the front of the group, Remus followed feeling distinctly pleased.

“This is Byron House,” Regulus called out; “It’s a boys’ dorm. Next door is Finch House, for girls. The secondary campus has a total of ten dorms, and next year you’ll be living in one of them with three other roommates. And you better learn to like them because they're the only ones you're going to get. Now, if you’ll follow me, we’re going to have a tour of the inside so you can get an idea of where you might be living for the next seven years. Girls, follow Stewart and MacDuff into the ladies' dormitory, boys, follow Lupin and me. And *don't* try and sneak off. If you do, we'll know."

The kids all eagerly followed, and Regulus stopped to hold the door open while ushering them inside. Remus made to do the same, but drew to a halt when he felt a gentle tug on the back of his jacket. Turning around, he found one of the boys had hung back behind the rest and was watching him with an anxious expression. His name tag read, *Milton.*

Already feeling sorry for the kid, Remus knelt down.

“Feeling okay there, mate?”

Rather than answer, the boy glanced around nervously and gestured for Remus to come even closer. “The other man said we’d have to share a room,” he murmured.

“Yeah, you’ll have roommates, but no more than three," Remus said, counting each off on a finger. "I was nervous too when I first came, but my roomies ended up being pretty cool. Reckon you’ll like it eventually. And if anyone gives you any trouble, you can always talk to Professor McGonagall. She’s pretty nice, I'm sure she'll help you out.”

This didn’t seem to make Milton feel any better. He continued fretting with his fingers, and finally leaned in to whisper in Remus’ ear.

“What do you do if you still wet the bed?”

“You… oh.” Remus cleared his throat. "Milton, do you mind if I go get my friend Regulus? 'Cause he's *really* good at dealing with stuff like this..."

* * *

Later that evening...

Sirius’ plan had worked, it seemed. With the entire Great Hall smelling of chicken faeces, the whole of the secondary student body was shuffled into the church pews for their final assembly. The crowd seemed rowdier than usual, though most of it was chalked up to the anticipation of summer holidays. Remus couldn’t help but think that they’d also had something to do with the open secret currently rushing from student to student, but that was no one else's business really.

Upset that their precious sanctum of supplication was being bombarded so late in the day, the priests insisted on holding a short service before McGonagall was able to take her place behind the podium. Unlike normal mass, no one had bothered taking roll-call, and so therefore no one would be noticing the four missing boys from room 4A. Rather, Remus got to watch from his hiding spot on the organ balcony, peering through the gaps in the railing while his heart thundered restlessly in his ears.

Th-thump! Th-thump! Th-thump!

Was this what it would feel like—being on stage in front of hundreds —no, *thousands* of people? Maybe not, considering the entire thing was a prank and they weren’t even supposed to *be* there... Bleeding christ—he wished he hadn’t let Sirius talk him into wearing makeup, and that he’d told Lottie to buzz off when she’d started layering those

curlers in his hair. They'd just left him looking like Bob Dylan, and not even the cool weed-smoking Bob Dylan from his electric days. More like the hippie turned born-again Christian—*ugh!* And where did Mary even get these *slacks?!* They were leather, at least a foot too short around the ankles, and were so tight he was sure his bits would fall off come the end of the night.

Glancing back over the railing, Remus was positive.

He was going to throw up.

“I think I’m gonna throw up,” he whispered to James, who was hunkered down next to him, clinging to his guitar for dear life.

James shook his head furiously. He was also wearing trousers two sizes too tight, but that was because they belonged to Sirius. His gelled-up do had returned from the summer prior, though now it was longer and the frantic curls looked about three seconds from bursting free.

“N-Nah, s’good, we’ll be jus’ f-fine,” he stuttered. “W-We jus’ hang tight for S-Sirius’ signal and… Oh god, I’m gonna throw up too.”

“Do us a favour and don’t vomit over the balcony,” Peter murmured, appearing from behind them and almost making Remus jump. Throwing himself down next to James, Peter squinted to get a look at the crowd down below.

“Are Bobby and the lads in place then?” James asked, busy flapping the collar of his jacket. He wasn’t even wearing a shirt beneath—Sirius had convinced him that if Jimmy Page could go shirtless in a bedazzled suit jacket, so could James Potter.

“Yep,” Peter answered, “they know their cues. Should be a real *blast.”* He chuckled at the pun, before calmly stretching out his neck. Like the rest of them, Peter wasn’t exactly dressed for the usual sneaking or pranking either. He’d refused any eyeliner, but Lottie had somehow swindled him into wearing one of her blinding gold lamé shirts. Remus didn’t say it, but he looked a bit like a walking Christmas tree topper.

“Do you think people will actually cheer for us?” Peter asked.

“Forget cheering—we’ll be lucky if they don’t throw rotten tomatoes,” James yammered nervously. “How are you so damn calm anyway?”

“I did some breathing exercises before the show.”

Remus began to laugh, and then covered his mouth to stifle it.

“Breathing exercises, right…” James peeled his hands away from the guitar neck and flexed his fingers. “Oh god… What if I forget all the notes? What if I forget the *words?!”*

“Then Sirius'll remember enough for all of us," Peter reassured him. "Stop worrying, Potter. We’ve been playing this song for weeks, way longer than we’ve been planning this.”

“But what if everything gets all jumbled up in my head? What if Sirius can’t even make it up here in time?”

“Then we play until he does,” Remus interjected quietly. All of the fears James was just now realising felt like old hat to him—of course they were bound to forget something, but wasn’t that just one of the many woes of live music?

Fuck, this was so insane.

“How much longer?” He asked, inevitably growing antsy again. Down below, McGonagall had just finished congratulating all the students who’d made top marks on their A-Levels. Remus’ name had been called, though he hadn’t been around to stand up and receive the applause. Suspicious.

James checked his watch. “Should be any second now. Sirius said to start near the end—when McGonagall starts thanking everybody.”

Remus crawled forward slightly, peering through the railing’s bars to get a look at the backs of all of their fellow peers’ heads. Their Headmistress still stood behind her podium at the front of the church, with all the priests and choir kids lined up behind her. Beyond that stood the covered-up statue of Jesus, its white sheet completely still and inconspicuous. If Remus were to tilt his head *just* right, he would be able to make out the large music amp they’d hidden behind the church’s altar for a certain someone’s grand entrance. They knew from the beginning that they'd only have time for the one song before Bobby's grand finale, which was probably for the best anyway. With the way James' hands were trembling, Remus worried they'd barely get through the first verse.

Busy squinting to see if he could get a glimpse of the white sheet moving, Remus had just managed to spot the girls when a head turned

and he found himself making solid eye contact with Davey Gudgeon through the bars of the mezzanine.

“Oh shite!” He yelped, pulling back to face his friends; “Davey just looked right at me. He totally knows we’re up here.”

“Yeah, a‘course he knows, James told the entire football team,” Peter said.

“No, I didn’t,” James whispered back.

“You said you did!”

“I told them about the camp-out, not this. I thought that that’s what we’d agreed upon?”

“Well, I told the prefects,” Remus baulked.

"You did? Moony!"

"Only a few! Sirius said to make sure everyone knew to head down to the field after...”

“You really didn’t tell people about the concert?” Peter asked James.

“No! Did you…?”

Peter cringed slightly. “Uh… yeah. I may have told some people.”

James gaped at him; “How many?”

“Erm… many…”

“Oh, Wormy…”

“Too late to turn back now,” Remus said, peering through the balcony railing once more. The longer he watched, the more kids began to turn their heads. It was like a falling row of dominoes—one would turn to whisper in their neighbour’s ear and then suddenly a fresh pair of eyes would snap back toward the balcony. Some even waved. Remus couldn’t decide whether it made him more nervous or less.

I hope you know what you're doing Sirius...

“Well, Black may not be here, but that don’t mean we can’t cheers to each other,” James said, pulling a small flask from his back pocket and popping the top. “Good luck, lads,” he said, before taking a swig

and passing it along to Peter.

“To not choking on stage,” Peter said, raising the flask and taking a swig. “Eugh—fuck, James, you know I hate bourbon.”

"It was all that was left after last night."

Peter handed the bottle to Remus, who paused long enough to swish the booze around and raise it for a quiet toast. “To hopefully getting paid instead of punished for this one day.”

“Here, here!”

James shushed them, and Remus grinned as he tipped the flask back. The alcohol had only just hit his tongue when his gaze passed over the front of the church and he made eye contact with one of the teachers. It was Sheila. She smiled at him—*right* at him—and then raised one finger to her mouth in a silent *shh* .

Remus spat bourbon everywhere.

“EUUGH—!”

James slammed one hand down over Peter’s mouth to stifle his moan of disgust, while using the other to gently smother Remus as he coughed and sputtered.

"Oh my god, was that vomit?” Peter groaned, peeling James' hand away. “Try giving us a bit ‘a warning before you spew everywhere.”

“S—Sorry,” Remus wheezed, trying his best to swallow the rest of his coughs.

“Here, take another sip,” James instructed, holding the flask to Remus’ mouth himself. Remus gagged heavily as it went down, but afterwards he was able to breathe again.

“Guys… I think that—*ahem*… Sheila—”

James grabbed him by the shoulder. “Hold that thought, Moons. I think McGonagall’s finally finishing up!”

They all craned their heads to get a look, and Remus found that James was right. Far below, Professor McGonagall was wiping beneath her eyes and clapping her hands together fondly.

“And I want each and every one of you to know how proud we are of

you. You are truly a force to behold. And thank you so much to everyone who—”

Suddenly, a short whistle-screeched echoed from the back of the church, cutting off the headmistress mid-speech and making everyone jump. It was Bobby—or one of Bobby's lads—setting off the tiny whistle-cracker that was to be their cue. The end was upon them, the curtains had been raised;

Their coordinated attack had begun.

“That’s the signal!” Peter cried, already making a mad dash toward his drum kit. Remus and James did the same, scrambling for their guitars and rushing to plug them into the amps. The moment they did, a reverb echoed around the church like thunder, making everyone jump in their pews for a second time. Heads snapped skyward—even those who'd been in on it were surprised.

What in god's name—

“This is it, Pete,” James tittered, stepping up in front of his microphone and covering it with his fist. “S’all you mate!”

Peter, who was normally the first one to be shaking in his boots during any prank, had somehow come alive. He was literally vibrating with excitement, swinging his drum sticks around and clashing a single symbol loud enough to turn every head in the room. From his place on their makeshift stage, Remus now had a full view of every priest, teacher, and student in the house. They all gaped back at him, some more disturbed than others, but there was no stopping it. It was a waterfall, and they were going over.

Peter leaned into his microphone; *“ONE—TWO—THREE—FOUR—!”*

Just like that they were off to the races. Peter began his drum intro all on his own, a high-intensity fill that seemed to get faster and faster the longer it went on. Kids stood up from their pews to get a better look—teachers covered their mouths in shock, but nothing compared to the moment that Sirius’ voice came shooting through the speakers at the front of the church.

"Are you ready, James?”

James leaned into his mic; *“Uh-huh.”*

“Remus?”

“Yeah.”

"Pete?”

“Okay!”

“Alright fellas… let’s GOOOOOO!”

In one deft move, the sheet that had been covering the busted statue of Jesus for nearly half of term was ripped away, revealing a single leather-clad, makeup wearing, nail polish adorned, Sirius Black.

He sprung off of the statue like a trained gymnast, bubbling with all the energy he’d been so desperately keeping under wraps throughout the entire service. People screamed when they saw him, to cheer or to condemn; Sirius didn’t care. He had a microphone in one hand, attached to the longest audio cord they could find in the AV room, and he swung it around like it was a trophy. No one else had dared make a move toward him so far—they were too stunned to touch—and Sirius bobbed his head and whirled around the altar like it was a stage made with him in mind.

And when he sang?

Glorious.

“Oh, it’s been getting so hard, living with the things you do to me…"

Remus couldn't believe it. It didn't matter if he could barely feel his fingers, their plan was working. It was bloody *working!*

"—My dreams are getting so strange, I’d like to tell you everything I see…”

Sirius flashed a smile and one of the girls near the front screamed, throwing her arms in the air as if she could reach out and touch him. By then one of the priests had broken free from his horror-stricken trance and shot forward, attempting to reach the star-streaked boy as he danced around the altar.

“Oh, I see a man in the back as a matter of fact—" Sirius pointed at Professor Bilshin; *"his eyes were as red as the sun! And the girl in the corner—lets no one ignore her,”* then Ms. Hooch, blowing her a kiss; *“ 'Cause she thinks she’s the passionate one!*

"OHHH YEAH!”

“Mr. Black! Mr. Black!” McGonagall began to cry out, flapping her

arms wildly as she flung herself to her feet. Undeterred, Sirius streaked away, skirting around the far end of the pew until his microphone cord had pulled all the way taunt.

“—And the music was soothing! And they all started grooving!"

“MR. BLACK!”

"—YEAH-YEAH-YEAH-YEAH!”

It was a ballroom blitz. Like flying, Sirius had launched himself over the back of the first pew, only to land straight in the laps of his peers. Hands grabbed him—hauled him to his feet—and a second later he was up again, racing down toward the aisle, straight for their headmistress. The room moved with him—McGonagall had no choice! When Sirius fell into her, she caught him suddenly in her arms and the split-second of disarray allowed Sirius to plant a firm kiss directly on the headmistress's cheek.

The church was a wildfire.

Everywhere they chanted;

“BALLROOM BLITZ! BALLROOM BLITZ! BALLROOM BLITZ!”

He must've stunned her with his candor, as when Sirius stood up to take his place out front again, Professor McGonagall did not stop him. A priest tried to lunge, but Sirius only fell back to be instantly swallowed by the crowd. Kids whooped as he ultimately abandoned the microphone and began racing down the middle aisle toward the balcony’s staircase. Then they swarmed the aisle after him, blocking the way of his pursuers.

As the crowd came apart down below, Remus spared a glance to look down at himself; his fingers were buzzing—flying across the strings of his bass guitar as though the song's rhythm was a second heartbeat. Next to him, James was absolutely wigging out; he swung across their make-shift stage, not with Sirius' grace but his own rabid desire. He shredded that electric guitar, and when it was time to sing again and Sirius was nowhere to be found, James leaned into his mic to dazzle them with a voice of his own.

Remus wondered what colours he saw.

“—Ohh, I softly call you over. Then you appear, there’s nothing left of you…”

And then, grabbing the microphone tightly, James began to howl;

“And the man in the back is ready to crack, as he raises his hands to the sky! And the girl in the corner is everyone’s mourner—” James pointed and Remus just knew it was at Lily; *“She could kill you with a wink of her eye!”*

“OHHHHH YEAH!”

Sirius had burst up at the top of the stairs right on cue, fresh mic in hand and a look on his face that was higher than any drug.

“And the band started leaving—‘cause they all stopped breathing!”

Coming together in the centre of the stage, James and Sirius began to wail into the same microphone. *“*

And the man at the back said, ‘Everyone attack’—and it turned into a ballroom blitz! And the girl in the corner said, ‘Boy I want to warn you—it’ll turn into a ballroom blitz’!

"BALLROOM BLITZ!”

The pair blew apart as if electrified and Remus took over completely, the weight of his bass notes vibrating the very floor beneath them. Down below it was as if the entire church was inhaling all at once, just waiting for the beat to drop again. No teacher had managed to get close to the balcony—there were too many students in the way. When he looked up, heart beating out of his chest, Remus spotted Lily and the rest of the girls standing on top of the pews, screaming and hollering like all the rest. Just beyond them was Barty, looking utterly stupefied, and—*THERE!* It was Trish—riding the shoulders of a very stressed out Regulus.

How she convinced him, Remus had no idea.

“OHHHHH YEAH!”

“It was like lightning—"

LIGHTNING!

"Everybody was frightening—"

FRIGHTENING

"And the music was soothing, and they all started grooving!"

YEAAAAH! YEAH-YEAH-YEAH-YEAH!

"Fucking go, Pete, GO!" James screamed, striking his chords as Sirius took front of stage again, clapping a tambourine in time with the beat. The crowd followed, and the clapping became a thunderstorm. Poor Professor McGonagall had all but given up reaching them—too caught between the sea of romping bodies to even make it through to the stairs. Though, Remus barely noticed;

He was too busy waiting for the **real** boom.

"It's—It's a ballroom blitz!"

One.

"It's—It's a ballroom blitz!"

Two.

"It's—It's a ballroom blitz!"

Three!

"YEAHHHH—it's a ballroom blitz!"

And then off it went.

BOOM!

BOOM—B—B—B—BOOOOM!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The screams were deafening. They drowned out all sound of the music, so loud that the noise shocked even the four Marauders up on their stage. They dropped their instruments in an instant and convened at centre-stage while kids and teachers began to scatter. The shock—and maybe fear—was obviously very real, but none of them would've ever risked their friends' safety for a gag. The firecrackers were only going off behind them, at the front of the church that had already been expertly vacated thanks to the most spectacular distraction Hawkings School had ever seen. No one was in any real danger, but as little Bobby Johnson and his friends of would-be pranksters continued to let off the cheekiest explosives they could cook up in the tenth year science classroom, Remus looked over the church and knew that they'd won.

“We love you, Hawkings!” Sirius shouted into the mike. *"We will never forget you... honestly. Never."*

He dropped the microphone with another boom, and just like that, began pushing Remus in the direction of the balcony stairs. It was easy enough to throw themselves into the chaos going on down below,and after a strategically planned separation—in which James and Peter went left and he and Sirius went right—Remus found himself by the row of church offices, where they could conveniently make a sharp left and sneak straight out the back doors.

“HOLY SHIT!” Sirius shouted the moment they fell out onto the grass; *“HOLY SHIT!”*

“I KNOW!” Remus screamed back, still trembling with euphoria. They were alone, and so he grabbed Sirius by either cheek and pulled him in for a single victory kiss. After that they were falling into each other, already losing their heads with laughter.

“Did you see, Bilshin’s face?!” Remus howled.

“He was nothing—you should’ve seen Snape!” Sirius replied.

“I can’t believe that worked!”

“Me neither!”

“Man—I totally fucked up the bridge!”

“Are you joking? Not even! I forgot the lyrics ten seconds in—pretty sure I just shouted nonsense up there!”

“Oh my god—what if I just threw up right now? ‘Cause I think I’m gonna throw up!”

“HA—I already did!”

Remus grappled Sirius into another fierce hug. *Yeah, this was it. He could definitely do this forever.*

“Where the fuck are Prongs and Wormtail?” Sirius demanded after, while peeking around the side of the church. “They were supposed to meet us—*AHH!”*

Sirius leapt backward as Sheila Buchanan swept around the side of the building, arms already crossed over her chest. Behind her, they could still hear the flurry of kids pouring out of the church. The fireworks

had long since ran out, and Remus hoped Bobby and the others had escaped unscathed. Even if they hadn't, he was too preoccupied worrying over the look of severe rage on Sheila's face to be of much help.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" She demanded. "Any idea?!"

"Yeah, we've just made history, Sheils," said Sirius, completely brazen.

"Did you, now? And would you happen to know if anyone got hurt while you were off making history?"

"The firecrackers were at the front of the church," Remus insisted. "You all were at the back—"

"Yes! Watching you! You and that insane—I mean, that stunt was just... And *you!* Oh, you boys! *You* are in so much…" She took a breath; *"In so much*—oh hell, I can't even be angry!"

With a great sigh, Sheila pressed a hand to her forehead, grinning as though she were in pain. Across from her, Remus and Sirius shared a look of disbelief.

"You two idiots," she moaned. "What were you thinking pulling a stunt like that on your *last day?"*

Slowly, the disbelief turned to relief. And Remus finally let out a breath. He was sure he'd never seen Sirius so proud.

"It's *because* it's our last day, Sheils! Had to do something big, didn't we?"

"You certainly covered 'big'! I mean, Jesus F. Chopin… *Please* just tell me that you're finished now?"

"Almost," Remus winced, happily; "We did tell everyone in our year that we're camping out on the football pitch tonight, but that's more an event… than a prank…" He stopped because she was squinting at him very harshly, but Sirius just threw an arm around his shoulders.

"So what'd you think? You're our music teacher and you just watched the whole show—we were pretty great, huh? That's your legacy—think we really have a shot of making it one day?"

She opened her mouth, then smiled and shook her head hopelessly.

“I feel I should hand over my teaching license just for saying this… but yes, you boys were pretty good. Doesn’t mean you won’t be punished, though.”

“Are you going to let McGonagall expel us?” Sirius sniggered. “Because the main idea was that she can’t expel what she can’t find.”

“I should, shouldn’t I? It’s what any other sane teacher would do.”

“But you just said you’d hand over your license, so…?”

Sheila gave them both a very hard look. “You’ll have to clean it up.”

“We will!” Remus nodded.

“All of it! The instruments, the explosives, the Christ on a cross—”

“You can count on us, Sheils,” Sirius said, giving her the two-finger salute. “It’s just… Do you mind if I change first? These leather pants are giving me a major front-wedgie.”

Remus cringed a bit, but Sheila only began to laugh. And then she did something Remus would not have expected in a million years following a prank—she reached out and hugged both of them.

“I’m going to miss you boys dearly,” she said. “Perhaps this isn’t the proper moment, but I am *so* proud of you.”

Remus spared a glance at Sirius over his godmother’s shoulder, and the look Sirius gave him was almost weepy. He smiled, shyly, and they both hugged her back.

“Now off with you,” Sheila ordered, sniffling slightly as she released them. “Enjoy your last day.”

Remus peeked back into the church. “But I thought you wanted us to clean—”

She flapped her hands at him. “Go before I give you a real detention!”

“You heard the lady, Moons,” Sirius declared, taking his arm and dragging him backward. They kept going, until Sirius came to another stop and whirled around. He was holding Remus’ hand now, and Sheila didn’t even blink.

“Hey, Sheils! Seeing as you and Moony are practically related now, will we be seeing you around the holidays?”

Remus pinched him—embarrassed—but Sheila only smiled.

“Goodbye, Sirius Black," she said. "I cannot wait to see all the things you will accomplish."

They turned from her then, waving their goodbyes, and as they cut across the church's back garden, Remus kept hold of Sirius' hand and gave it a little squeeze.

Me neither.

* * *

Remus did not remember paying much attention to the sky as a kid. He’d always been able to see the stars from the estate, and though their twinklings got harder to see the further he went into the city, he never once missed them.

But he would miss these stars.

They floated by like a blue river, juxtaposed to the daunting black background that made up the rest of space. It made Remus feel small, but in a good way. The night that fell over Hawkings was so vast; there was no horizon, not really, there was only sky and that place where sky gave way to treetop and blissful rolling hill. In an effort to keep things as obviously secret as possible, they’d turned off the stadium lights all save one and left the night sky alight with all its many constellations. He could’ve counted forever and still not named them all; but if the stars were to count back, then they would’ve found several hundred students, all mulling around each other on soft green turf and living out what would be their final days of youth.

“Here, Remus, in case you get cold.”

Lily knelt down next to him on the grass and draped a crochet blanket over his middle. It was June, so of course it wasn’t cold, but Lily would always be Lily.

“Do you reckon you and James will get married someday?” He asked.

She cocked her head, then gave him a funny look that was probably well deserved.

“Maybe. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Oh, Remus." She scooted closer, until she was lying by his side. She took his arm as well, and let her head rest against his shoulder. "Don't worry. I'm pretty sure everyone's feeling a bit contemplative tonight."

"Suppose lying under the stars will do that to you."

She giggled, then; "Oh, look! Leprechaun cloud."

The party grew more rambunctious as more and more kids began to trickle down from the dorms, toting blankets and belongings and otherwise acting very excited. Some groups had chosen to set up camp on the football stands, but most took to the field and ended up scattered, waving their torches through the air like hundreds of little fireflies.

After lying with him for a while, Lily had gotten up to rejoin her circle of girlfriends, who were all sitting together and passing a thermos of sherry between themselves. Moira had joined them as well, and beyond that, James, Sirius, and Peter were kicking a football around with several other lads in their year. Remus was mostly content to watch. The pitch was full of friend groups just like theirs, with not a teacher in sight; girls huddled together to swap secrets, boys winning and losing to each other in dare games and arm-wrestling. He caught glimpses of kids attempting handstands or else dancing around with jump ropes and hula hoops, others with midnight picnics spread about the grass. There was a girl knitting, a boy with his French horn, kids blowing smoke rings, passing bottles, making daisy chains, stargazing. He saw a pair of bicycles, a tent, a girl lovingly reading her copy of *Jane Eyre* aloud, several mattresses, and a… a goat?

Okay, that one was unexpected.

Remus turned over onto his stomach, squinting dubiously, but the goat was real—standing several feet away and quietly munching on the grass, entirely minding its own business.

“Wonder where that handsome devil came from,” Sirius said, grinning at the look on Remus’ face as he slid in next to him.

“Could you have had anything to do with it?” Remus mused.

“Me? Nah.”

“Right."

“I’m serious! ... Heh. Pretty sure some of the tenth years busted him out for the night. Feels good—knowing that we’re leaving a legacy behind.”

“Because the time capsule wasn't enough.”

Sirius’ face split with a grin. “Speaking of that..." He began rooting around the pockets of his jacket, pulling out a lighter, his cigarettes, Mary’s eyeliner pen which he definitely had no intention of returning. Suddenly suspicious, Remus sat up on the grass.

“Is this another prank? I'm not saving you from Sheila this time.”

"I'll have you know that Sheila's love for me 'saved me from Sheila'," Sirius scoffed. "But here, since you asked…”

With a mischievous look, Sirius plunged his hand into his back pocket and pulled out a tape. Instantly Remus was appalled.

"You git, is this our demo?"

"No," Sirius replied staunchly; “That I left for whoever we are in twenty years. It's too shitty to listen to now, so if you're done accosting me, take a better look."

He handed him the tape, and Remus turned it over in his hands. Across the front was a label, bearing the words; *Marauders and Co., 1978*.

"It’s the tape we made with the girls," Sirius said softly. "You know, the one with all our favourite songs."

"You mean you didn't bury it?"

"Oh, I buried it, alright. *After* I had one of the lads in the AV club make us a copy. Even got him to mix up the order for a bit of fun. Now it's one big surprise..."

Remus scoffed. "You sneaky bastard. You told the rest of us we weren't allowed to listen to it."

"So? Maybe that makes me a liar, but aren't we all liars in love?"

Remus clutched the tape tightly, and then held it to his heart. “What songs did everyone choose?”

“Dunno, I haven't listened to it yet. But if you're that curious, we could

always play it now.”

Looking sly again, Sirius jutted his head toward the stands on the far side of the field, and to the press box containing the controls to the stadium’s entire speaker system.

“No…" Remus started; "No, you’re mental. With everyone else here?"

"They seemed to like it well enough last time," Sirius sneered. Then he sighed wistfully, taking the tape back and holding it up to admire. "Though, I suppose we could always just throw it in the bin... Wait twenty years to listen to it, until we've all forgotten what our favourite songs even were... Your choice, really. But if it was me? Well, I always tend to think that nights like these are better with a bit of music.”

“You dick.”

They smirked at each other for a while, and Sirius pointed toward the press box again.

"Come on, Moony. I already checked, the door ain't even locked..."

Before Remus could give in, James' voice called out;

“Oi, Sirius! Lupin! Come over here.”

Exchanging a glance, Sirius tucked the tape back into his trouser pocket and together they meandered over to their friends. Just as they reached them, Marlene threw herself over James, taking him down to the grass in a single solid heap.

"Give-them-to-me!" She shouted, furiously scrambling for whatever James was holding in his hand. Unfortunately for her, Sirius didn't miss a beat. He swept toward James, who naturally opened his palm and let him take it. Lottie and Mary whooped, laughing while Sirius took a graceful bow and Marlene raised her fist at him.

"Black, you give those back," she said, still pinning James face-down in the grass with her other hand.

"But what are they?" Sirius pondered, holding up what appeared to be a cardboard box no bigger than a matchbook.

"They're—*ugh*—smelling salts," James grunted. "McKinnon lifted them from the medical tent during the tournament.”

"I did not!" With a huff, Marlene gave up trying to bury James' head in

the dirt and got to her feet to dust herself off. "I was helping clean up the first-aid tent after the game and they fell out of the kits. I picked them up for safe-keeping and just forgot to give them back, that's all."

"Likely story," heckled Mary.

"And just why would I steal smelling salts?"

"For the rush," Sirius grinned, opening the tiny box and taking out one of the glass capsules.

"Don't," Marlene warned. "They're not toys."

"Sure, strictly speaking."

"They smell awful."

"Only for a second." Satisfied, Sirius tossed a second vial at James, who grinned as he caught it out of the air. Lily gaped at him, whipping her torch around.

"You aren't actually going to sniff that, are you?"

"Why not? I've always wanted to try it," James said. "Hooch once had to use it on one of the lads after he ran head-first into the goal-post. He was a beast after—said it was the best rush he'd ever had."

Lily threw her hands up hopelessly, while Mary and Lottie began to chant; *"Do it! Do it! Do it!"*

"There's one more vial," Sirius declared, holding it out on offer. "Moons?"

"I'm good, thanks," Remus said, pulling out a cigarette.

"Wormy?"

“Nah, I choose life,” Peter scoffed, slumped down on the grass next to Moira.

Mary and Lottie's chant carried, and suddenly other voices from nearby groups had joined in; *"DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!"*

"They don't even know what they're cheering for," Marlene huffed, as James and Sirius sniggered wickedly.

“So how do we do this?” Sirius asked. "Break it with your teeth?"

“Do *not* put that in your mouth!” Lily screeched. “Honestly, you’re both such idiots—hasn’t anyone told you that you don’t have to attempt *every* stupid idea that comes into your thick heads?”

“But then how would we ever have evolution, Daisy?” James laughed. “You’re supposed to hold it under your nose and break it with your fingers. Like this.”

Following James’ lead, Sirius held the little tube beneath his nose and tried pinching it. “Bugger. Can’t get it.”

“Yeah, tough thing,” James agreed. “Oh hold on, I think you’re supposed to crush this part right—*EUGH!”*

It was as though James’ entire body had turned to jelly. He wobbled for a second, his eyes rolling backward as he flopped down to his knees on the grass. He wasn’t exactly choking, but the noises he made were like listening to a dead fish as it flopped on the shore of a lake.

“Siri—*neugh—Sirrr-us, don’t do it—”*

James began coughing horribly while other kids crowded around, laughing and cheering for him. This, of course, only fed Sirius' desire to do it himself.

“Don't be such a pansy, Potter,” he laughed, still trying to break the vial beneath his nostrils. "It can't really be that bad—*EOH GAUD!”*

The gagging came next, and suddenly Sirius had fallen back on his arse like a dead weight. As he fell into James, both of them flopping back and forth miserably, Lily and Marlene jumped up and gave them a chorusing round of "I told you so's".

"O-Oh my god," James warbled, “I think I just smelled in triple-dee."

“It’s 3D, you moron,” Peter said, finally succeeding in making all of the girls laugh.

Then Davey Gudgeon appeared behind Remus and crowed straight into his ear-drum; "Gee, what's wrong with them?"

Annoyed, Remus shrugged and handed Davey the remaining vial of smelling salts as he took a pull on his cigarette. A few moments later, there was a little snap and Davey had joined James and Sirius on the ground.

"I think that counts as poisoning, Remington."

He turned around. "You gonna rat on me, MacDuff?"

"Not today." Smirking, Trish stole his half-smoked cigarette and began rooting through her own pocket. "Got something for you."

"Right. My 'gift'."

"Just a wee one." She winked, then gestured for him to hold out his palm. Into it, she dropped a small stone with a hole in its middle.

"Your hag stone," he said in awe.

" '*Gloine nan druidh*'," Trish corrected. "To keep away yer nightmares. And fur a bit o' extra luck."

Remus closed his hand around the stone, still warm from her pocket. "Thanks, Trish."

"I'm gonna miss you, ye bloody giant. Send me a ticket tae one o' yer shows, promise I'll bring a better present."

"Deal."

He was half sure she was going to punch him again, that was until Barty Crouch had called her name.

"Fucking hell, MacDuff! You bloody coming or not? Just 'cause you're it, don't mean you can skive off!"

"Ach, yer maw!" Trish hollered back. "Get your knickers out o' a twist, lollyhead, I'll just be a second."

The insult made Barty scoff, and he turned around to his friends, Regulus and Yaxley, arms waving at her as if he meant to say *'you see?'*

"Don't mind them," Trish said to Remus. "They wantae play tiggy in the trees. Wouldn't happen tae have a spare torch, would ya?"

He gave her his, and she slapped him hard—but fondly—on the chest.

"See ya around, Loonarny! And you—best run, ya fucking bawbags!"

She set off after them, giving another war-cry loud enough to spook Barty and the others back into the trees. It was dark, and Remus couldn't be entirely sure, but he hoped that the look he saw on

Regulus' face was a smile.

Tapping out another cigarette, Remus went to collect his blanket and shuffled back over to Lily, who was sitting at the end of the girls' row.

"Where's Sirius?" He asked.

“Guess."

Turns out he didn't have to. The music came first, shooting out the vast speaker system and filling the entire stadium with a sharp reverb. The song was not forgiving—a blast of noise that made everyone jump. There were no firecrackers this time, no live band bursting forth from beneath the legs of a seven foot-tall Jesus statue, and yet that didn't stop the kids from cheering. It was a Blondie song, which Remus only knew when he watched Marlene leap to her feet.

"He didn't!" She screeched. "He wouldn't!"

But then he did.

Up above, Sirius and James burst out of the press box and started rushing back down the stands again while the speakers played "X Offender" at full volume. Kids, who no doubt, had been waiting for this very moment, began to point and whoop for them. The pair made it to the ground at a tie and rushed back to their friends, Sirius falling down before Remus and half-tackling him round the middle.

“Whaddya think, Moons?!”

"I think..."

'I know you wouldn't go—
You'd watch my heart burst,
Then you'd step in!'

"... I think you're amazing."

Sirius beamed at him, and was very suddenly accosted by Marlene. "You!" She cried, happily. "You stole this album from me."

"Think again, McKinnon!"

She wheeled back, turning to the other girls as realisation dawned on her face. Lily and the others still hadn't seemed to catch on, but James was grinning like the cat who caught the cream. All around, kids were dancing—having fun! And when the song changed and became a

heavy blue-rock, James thrust a finger at Remus.

"Yours!" He cried. "This one's yours, right?"

"Not mine!" Remus laughed.

'Well, come on! Come on! Come on! Come on!'

Lottie screamed. *Actually* screamed.

"It's the tape!" She hollered. "It's my song!"

Sirius clapped his hands together. Janis Joplin was singing to them, and the girls were in disbelief.

'—But what I'm gonna show you, baby, that a woman can be tough!
I want you to come on! Come on! Come on! Come on and TAKE IT!
Take another little piece of my heart now, baby!'

Sirius looked up at Remus.

"Moons, I'm so happy."

Oh… how badly Remus wanted to kiss him just then.

It really was their tape. Disjointed, moody, eclectic, and as odd a mix as they were. Take eight different people, with eight different personalities, and one was bound to get something interesting. First it was Marlene, then Janis Joplin for Lottie—and then a Who song started and everyone once again pointed fingers at Remus.

"I-It's not mine!" He bleated, almost embarrassed.

"It's mine!" Peter declared, standing up proudly. "You guys think Moony's the only one with good taste?"

It was flooring. James leapt up to pat Peter on the back, and together he and Sirius strummed air instruments while Moira and the girls did their best to sing along. Remus might've joined in—he should've, really—but it was harder when he realised which song Peter had chosen.

Won't Get Fooled Again...

Remus shrugged it off. It was merely a good song, surely Peter didn't

mean anything by it...

'Pick up my guitar and play,
Just like yesterday!
Then I'll get on my knees and pray...
We don't get fooled again!'

Mary's song came just as quickly after that anyway. And as expected, it was ABBA—though not just any ABBA... As the song began to play, Remus recalled an old memory;

Send off your grandma with 'Hasta Mañana' and I guarantee there won't be a dry eye in the room.

There was truly an ABBA song for everything.

'Hasta mañana, say we'll meet again,
I can't do without you...
Time to forget, send me a letter—
Say you forgive, the sooner the better!
Hasta mañana, baby!
Hasta mañana, until then...'

"You bitch," Marlene moaned, wiping her face furiously as tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. Mary hugged her, and they rocked gently along with the song until its very end.

"Who's song is next?" Lily asked, poking Sirius anxiously. He shrugged, then glanced up at Remus, who was sitting with his arms around Sirius' waist.

"Dunno. Got the lad who helped me tape it over to mix up all the songs. Why, what'd you pick, Evans?"

Lily covered her mouth, a blush rising in her cheeks. "I didn't think everyone would hear it."

Sirius launched upright, nearly bashing Remus in the chin.

"Now I'm intrigued!"

He needn't be; as it turned out, James and Lily were next.

An old married couple before their time, the two of them had unknowingly dedicated their own choices to each other in one final show of serendipity. Without ever being sure she'd hear it, James had picked a Mamas and Papas' song, just because he knew how much Lily loved them. And then after, it turned out that Lily had gone with a Kinks' song, James' own favourite.

Everyone began to laugh when they'd realised what had happened, but then James invited his girlfriend to dance and it didn't even matter. It was still dark, but Remus was pretty sure he'd watched James whisper the song lyrics into Lily's ear as they swayed.

'As long as I gaze on,
Waterloo sunset,
I am in paradise…'

"Hope those two are still together in twenty years," Sirius mused, watching them whisper sickeningly sweet nothings into each other's ear. "Otherwise it's going to make playing this tape again miiiiiighty awkward."

Remus squeezed him tight. "I'm sure they will be."

As the Kinks song faded, Sirius turned over in Remus' lap to peer up at him.

"I have a confession. I asked Georgie to put my song last."

Remus raised a brow. "You're saying George actually agreed to help you?"

"Well, this was before we lost him his job as football commentator, of course."

"Oh, 'course."

"You know what this means though, right?" Sirius cooed. "You're up next, Moons."

He was—he *is*—and Remus couldn't have been happier. Because when that song started, all the stars above couldn't have rivalled the ones in Sirius' eyes.

I...

I will be king...

And you...

You will be queen...

Though nothing will drive them away...

We can beat them, just for one day...

We can be ***heroes***, just for one day.

His friends grinned. His friends cried out. His friends were there.

And Sirius was his.

"I knew it," Sirius gasped, pushing away from Remus and standing on shaky legs. "I FUCKING KNEW IT! *You like Bowie, you son of a bitch!"*

"Maybe I just like you!" Remus called back.

' 'Cause we're lovers, and that is a fact,
Yes we're lovers, and that is that...'

Sirius ran a hand through his dark hair. He covered his mouth to hide that breathless-Sirius smile. It didn't work. But then he looked at James—at all their friends and the kids who sat amongst them—and promptly turned and began walking away. Remus stared after him, bewildered. Surely he hadn't made a mistake?

Sirius stopped and spun around again.

"Well...? Aren't you coming?"

Oh.

Oh yes, please.

Marlene reached out and kissed his hand as he stood, and just like that, Remus Lupin was running.

Sirius made him work for it too. They tore across the field, toward the

base of the stands, where he watched as Sirius dove beneath and disappeared out of sight. Remus followed, naturally, and felt the power of Bowie's song as it made the beams and bolts tremble with sound.

'I, I can remember—'

Hands grabbed him, his back met metal and he felt his touch in the dark.

'Standing, by the wall!'

"Got you."

'And the guns shot above our heads!'

"You already have me."

'And we kissed—'

"I love you," Remus said, against his mouth, his lips, his tongue.

'As though nothing could fall...'

Sirius said it back.

We can be Heroes.

We can be Heroes.

We can be Heroes.

Just for one day.

Maybe to some, kissing alone in the dark where no one could see would be a shame. But the fact was that he could never be ashamed of loving Sirius Black. Loving him was as easy as breathing.

"Moons."

Remus kissed him.

"Moony."

He kissed him again.

"Moony... Moony, the song's over."

Remus raised his head. The song *was* over, and Sirius' had taken its place.

'Mamaaa, just killed a man,
Put a gun against his head;
Pulled my trigger, now he's dead...'

Still breathless, Remus blinked at him in the dark.

"You fucking loser."

Sirius burst out laughing.

"How could I not?"

How, indeed.

They returned to their friends eventually, weaving across the field and watching the other kids. It was shocking; they knew it! They all knew the song! Arms wrapped around others, heads turned to the sky, they screamed it!

" I'm just a poor boy nobody loves me—

"HE'S JUST A POOR BOY FROM A POOR FAMILY!

"SPARE HIM HIS LIFE FROM THIS MONSTROSITY!"

Remus had never wished so badly for a video camera. They had made it back to their friends, where the girls were belting back and forth to one another. And as the song rose and rose and rose, Remus watched as Marlene set a football down in front of James.

Oh mama mia, mama mia—

Mama mia, LET ME GO!

Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me...

For me...

FOR MEEEEEEEEE—!

James kicked, and the ball slammed against the nearest stadium light with a burst of sparks.

It was mayhem.

It was magic.

It was rock and roll.

James fell into Peter and Peter fell into James and the whole crowd was singing with them. This was what they wanted, Remus knew, to affect so many people the same way they were affected. To cast a spell and see it come to life.

And afterwards, when the tempo slowed and the song soothed, they all made their own wish. For Remus, it was to stay this way forever.

* * *

They played the tape twice more that night, and each time they enjoyed it more. Kids danced, kids sang, kids lost their minds.

And they made their memories.

Later, when the songs had ended and the world fell still again, Remus turned to Sirius beneath the stars and took his hand. Distantly he could hear the sounds of James and Lily as they muttered lovely things to one another. Mary was humming, Marlene was grumbling at her humming, Lottie kept asking if they could hear the crickets, and dear Peter was singing 'mama mia' in his sleep.

"Are you alright?" Sirius whispered, gazing at him in the dark. "You look... nervous."

Remus shook his head. "I'm happy."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." *But;* "Everything's ending now, isn't it? It's all going away... Or, we're going away."

"To London."

"Yes. To London." *But;* "I'm as old as Tomny was when I left and now it's all over. You know, I used to think that was all I wanted, but now it's here and I'm already forgetting things. Maybe I'm not ready for it all to end."

Sirius leaned up on one arm, his black hair falling down over his face like a curtain.

"What are you talking about, Moony? This isn't the end."

"Then what is it?"

"It's the beginning."

Oh...

Well, I suppose you're right.

“I have one more surprise," Sirius said.

“Is it a good surprise?”

He reached up and softly pushed a curl from Remus' forehead. “I think so.”

“And what is your good surprise then?”

“I found it. I found our flat.”

“You did?”

“Mhm. Three bedrooms, in Shepherd's Bush. I already rang the old lady that listed the advert. It’s ours, nearly. Just gotta sign the papers.”

“It sounds perfect.”

“Too good to be true, actually." Sirius laughed. "Probably be completely manky inside."

"Probably."

"Still... Do you want to go with me?”

“Yes," Remus said, drawing Sirius toward him and kissing his soft lips. "Anywhere with you.”

Any way the wind blows...

Overhead, the stars watched and wished they were them.

Chapter End Notes

Songs featured in this chapter (a lot): "Ballroom Blitz" by Sweet (1973), "X Offender" by Blondie (1976), "Piece of My Heart" by Janis Joplin (1969), "Won't Get Fooled Again" by the Who (1971),

"Hasta Mañana" by ABBA (1974), "Waterloo Sunset" by the Kinks (1967), "Heroes" by David Bowie (1977), & finally, "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen (1975).

Author's Note:
This has been an incredible journey so far! I don't think I had any idea when I started writing this fic almost two years ago that it would balloon to something of this magnitude. Some of you have quite literally grown up alongside these characters, and I think that it's so amazing that I, in turn, got to share in a small part of each of your lives. Thank you for growing with me, thank you for learning with me, and thank you for loving these characters as much as I have. I can't say what's in store for them just yet, but trust that it'll be every bit as loving and thrilling as their time at school was. Those days might be behind us now, but there's so much more to come.

For those who are still unaware, the future of the fic is as follows:
There will be two (2) parts = Part 1 (Cadence) that covers September 1975 - Spring 1979 and Part 2 (Untitled), which will cover Summer 1979 - Winter 1999 + an epilogue.
We still have nine more chapters of Part 1 to go, and that will cover the band's 'gap year' and initial starter-dom. After the completion of part 1, I plan to go on a longer hiatus to begin writing part 2, but I will have more on that as we get nearer to the end of this fic.

Can't wait to start on the rest of this journey with all of you,
xoxo
- mot

Chapter 97: #43 Knoxbridge Lane

Chapter Summary

You're a starfucker, starfucker, starfucker, starfucker, star!

Chapter Notes

TW: Brief mention of suicide by hanging—in reference to war-induced PTSD.

Oh my god, mot actually posted a chapter early???? must be witchcraft. (or a terrible fucking sleep schedule, you decide)

Anyway, it's the start of a new era! Our **gap year!!** *Pause for dramatic effect 👀*

I have no promises for gap year, it's pure chaos. It started out as a much smaller thing, then naturally grew in chaos (and size asfjk) the deeper in I got. In fact, I'm barely finished, so if there's some inaccuracies, I hope to be able to catch them later.

You can find the playlist for this gap year HERE!

For now, on with the show!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This will be an everlasting love,
This will be the one I've waited for;
This will be the first time anyone has loved me,

I'm so glad you found me in time,
And I'm so glad that you've rectified my mind;
This will be an everlasting love for me…

- "This Will Be" Natalie Cole, 1975

They moved in at the beginning of July. It was a two story London maisonette in the middle of Shepherd's Bush that overlooked a busy street filled with shops and greengrocers. It would've been too small if it weren't for the attic that'd been converted into a small bedroom and toilet. That space would become their sanctuary; their little piece of

the pie.

Their very first home.

It was the corner flat—Remus smacked Sirius the first time he called it a 'townhouse'—leaving them with just a single set of neighbours to their left, which suited them just fine, what with all the noise they were bound to make. There had been no asking price listed on the advert Sirius had shown him and so Remus had been sceptical, but it was a decent area, and as wonderful as the Potters had been to them, there was only so long he could stand free-loading before he ended up renting some seedy guest house in South London.

"You're lucky you caught my ad when you did," said the landlady, as she showed them around the ground floor. "I was going to divvy it up into separate flats, but I bloody hate dealing with contractors."

"We'll need the space anyway," replied Sirius, as he ran his fingers along the faded wallpaper in the front entryway. The landlady meandered after them keenly. She appeared glamorous, with long, painted eyelashes and a waist nearly the same size as her neck. The advert had been listed to a "Margaret" but when they'd arrived she'd introduced herself as “Peggy”. She seemed very pleased indeed when Sirius reached out to kiss her hand—even more so when he'd flashed that dishy grin at her. Remus thought the act a bit superfluous, but anything to get a roof over their heads.

“My third husband, Paul, tried to have the entire thing gutted last year,” Peggy went on. “Only got as far as the floors before he croaked, but everything’s been freshly painted."

"I can see that," Remus said, picking at a half-inch nail sticking out of the kitchen doorway that'd been painted over in a rather foul shade of beige. Peggy kept close on their heels, smoking a cigarette and looking them up and down as if she were still trying to decide whether or not they were wasting her time. Perhaps she doubted their ability to pay, judging them for their age and choice of dress like any wary forty-something with an unresolved bone to pick with the world.

"I’m looking to get at least one-forty for it," she said, pointedly.

"That's kind of steep."

"Market's facing a rent shortage, you know."

"Yeah, has been since 1965."

Sirius elbowed him. The flat was perfect, enough space for all of them and their instruments and wasn't even completely manky. Best to not bottle it.

“So you’re firm on the price?” Remus asked, testing the waters.

“Price’s firm.”

He glanced around, wondering what their odds were of being scammed. Not that he knew anything about buying a home. The walls were high—much higher than the ones back at Tomny's place. There were no water marks on the ceiling either, and all the lights worked.

“Does it get cold in the winter?”

“Oh, no. It’s all central heating ‘round here nowadays,” Peggy said. “Fridge’s been replaced too. I’m willing to let out to students but I’ll need at least three months rent upfront. Plus a deposit for anything you might break.”

"And how much is that?"

She eyed Sirius' heavy boots. "Ninety pounds."

"That's more than half a month's rent!"

"It's a proper sought-after area, you know."

Turning back from the main windows, Sirius gave her a winning smile. "Don't worry, Peggy, I'd say ninety's more than fair."

It must've surprised her, as she nodded dubiously and pulled the blue-wrapped Vogue cigarette from her lips. As Sirius flounced toward the open kitchen, Remus replaced him by the front windows and peered outside. Down below, the main thoroughfare dragged by, noisy and alight with life. It was only a three minute walk to get to the Central Line, and they’d passed a corner shop and two separate newsstands on their way over. There was a grocer’s across the street too, as well as an off-licence and a post office. Everything they needed, right within reach.

As Remus was busy watching an old woman hobble up the street with a yappy Yorkshire Terrier on a lead ahead of her, Peggy came up behind him with two fingers still primly poised around her cigarette.

"He mentioned you were looking for space," she pondered, blowing

smoke from her cherry-red lips. "Space for what?"

So she was suspicious then. Or rather, she hadn't stopped being so.

"There's five of us actually. We're looking for somewhere to rent together."

"All of you men?"

"Four guys, plus our friend Lily."

"Lucky girl." She took another drag, and Remus couldn't decide if she were being sarcastic. “What’d you say you kids did again?”

Now she was veering dangerously close to the truth. When they'd returned from school, Monty had warned them how tough it would be to find somewhere in the city with enough space for five *plus* a rock band, but at least they all had one thing going for them now.

Real jobs.

“Sirius works the evening shift at a pub,” Remus answered truthfully, “and I’ve got managed a gig over on Denmark Street. Our friend Pete works for his dad, and the other—James, he's got a job lined up as a server. We’re not bums.”

“Or students, apparently?”

“Uh, sort of… Took a gap year.”

“He’s just being metaphorical, Peg!” The cry came from Sirius as he threw himself back down the staircase and rounded into the living room. He had his hands on his hips as he proudly announced; "We happen to have our own band."

Remus was instantly horrified. Peggy's eyes had gone narrow with sudden suspicion, and he imagined her next move would be to put them out on the pavement like the guilty dogs they were. He’d begged Sirius not to bring up the band, especially not after every other place they'd looked at had fallen through the moment the landlords heard of their less-than-reputable career intentions. No one liked a noisy neighbour, and four boys with guitars and amplifiers didn’t exactly scream ‘trustworthy tenants’.

Still, Sirius was stubborn. He took a stance of complete transparency—screw any crotchety old fools! If they were going to complain anyway,

might as well get it out of the way early. Remus just wished he'd stick a sock in it until they'd signed the bloody lease.

"We won't be a bother," he reassured the landlady. "We're looking for another space to practise, even. Like a—a garage! This'd just be somewhere to lay our heads at night."

"My second husband was in a band," Peggy said sourly. "Useless bastard. Never brought in a penny. Then he up and died of a heart attack at thirty-seven."

Sirius gave her a smug smile. "Well, we're only eighteen."

Would his suffering end if he simply threw himself out the window, Remus wondered? Luckily for him there was no need. A hint of a smile traced the corner of her mouth, and Peggy hid it with another deep draw of her cigarette.

"You any good then, boy?" She asked Sirius.

"Better than good. We're *the best."*

"Play anywhere I'd know?"

"Not yet."

"Then how could you possibly know that you're the best?"

"Because we're mental," Sirius smirked. "And mental makes art."

"We're good tenants!" Remus yelped, rounding Peggy to get between her and his menace of a boyfriend. "Won't give you any trouble… I swear it."

Peggy exhaled, the tart aroma of her cigarette drifting across the room toward them. The purse in her lips told Remus that she wasn't entirely convinced, but that she was at least willing to play along.

"I happen to own the place next door as well," she told them. "For the most part, I'm a bit of a night owl. I don't mind staying up as long as my mornings are quiet. I like going out, but I love a nice lie-in twice as much. And you're cute, all things considered."

The two of them shared a hesitant glance while Peggy took another drag, burning the cig down to its filter.

"There's a basement beneath this one," she said, tapping her heel on

the wood floors. “It’s unfinished, but it’s got cement walls, so I reckon it'd be quiet enough. I’d be taking a risk renting to you, but if you can come up with the full three months beforehand, and you're willing to double that tenancy deposit, then I might just be tempted to give you a go.”

Sirius’ eyes widened. “No shit—for real?”

“Mm.” The landlady pulled out a silver cigarette tin, tapping her ash into the corner and sticking the leftover stub inside. “The world needs more artists, Mr. Black. And I say, let ‘em come.”

“Holy—cheers, Peg!”

Remus smacked him for being overly familiar, but Peggy was already pointing at them like a threat.

“I’m still firm on the rent though. You miss one month and that's it—you’re out on your rear.”

“You don’t gotta worry about that,” Sirius swore, “we’re all in. Even got the cash now if you really want.”

She smiled faintly, and snapped the tin shut, returning it to the pocket of her impossibly-tight jeans.

“Then it looks like we have a deal.”

Afterwards Peggy left them to fetch the paper work, and just like that, they were newly-born renters selling their souls to capitalism. Remus did a turn about the room, imagining what it would look like lived-in. A bookshelf here, Sirius’ stereo there, Peter's artwork and a few of Lily's favourite plants…

“A whole fucking house—I can’t believe it!” Sirius called. He was in the kitchen, opening and closing every cupboard like he might find a secret world hidden inside. He’d just darted across to the fridge when he hollered; “We should celebrate!”

“Got that bottle of jack back at the Potters',” Remus said.

Sirius let the fridge fall shut, and then rushed back into the empty living room. He launched himself into Remus, who caught him, and turned his face up.

“Moons,” he whispered, only for them; “We’re home.”

Home.

Remus had never thought the word could sound so good.

That was four months ago now, but Remus could still remember their first night in the flat like it was yesterday. It'd rained, and Sirius had opened the window to listen to its gentle city thrum. They were lying on a bare mattress in the converted attic of their new flat. Peggy hadn't been lying—the bedroom *was* a walk-up, with only a single set of narrow stairs and a door that shrieked on its hinges every time it was opened, but they'd chosen it for the privacy. It was a small room, less than half the size of their old dorm room, with an attached toilet made up of powder blue tiles and a single grey sink. And it was all theirs.

"Shall we find ourselves some seashells to go with?" Sirius had said, very snidely. "Perhaps a fuzzy rug for a shower mat?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

They'd forwent the seashells, and the rest of the room they'd filled sparsely; a wardrobe with nicks in the varnish that they'd picked up from a car boot sale, a set of on-offer night tables, and an atrocious rug that smelled faintly of wet dog. It was rubbish, all of it, but it was *theirs!*

The bed was the only thing they'd sprung for. Even after all those years at school, Sirius didn't like the idea of sleeping on a mattress that had been used by someone else. Barely an hour after they'd gotten the keys, they'd gone on down to Bensons for Beds together and picked one out. They'd earned themselves a few dubious looks from the sales clerks, but Remus found he didn't care all that much. The poor sods worked on commission and wouldn't dare risk losing a sale, even if the customers were a pair of questionable-looking teenagers.

Yes, it had rained—enough to turn the air hot and sticky, but Remus had been hardly bothered. He was too busy lying next to his love, composing another song in his head. The words came together like puzzle pieces, in the slow rubato of their new home.

Of all the bad things I did,
The best of them was you;
Of all the sad things we hid,
The worst of them, we saw through,

And if I had three wishes,
I wouldn't ask for a dime;
I'd weave myself a symphony,
Begging for you, yourself, and time…

He'd thought about writing it down, but everything they owned was still boxed up by the front door, so instead he filed the words away. Even if he somehow forgot them, he'd remember them eventually. They weren't going anywhere; they were home.

"Whatchu thinkin' about, Moons?"

Remus turned his head back, to where Sirius was lying, hugging him from behind. His mouth was tame, but his eyes were smiling.

"How happy I am," he told him. "And how much I love you."

"Aw… you poof."

Now it was October, and each of them had found their own way to settle into city life. Thanks to his dad's connections, James had managed to snag a job at waiting tables at some posh hotel in Marylebone. The gig was a straight shot along the metro line and the pay was well worth it, so James couldn't have cared less that he was waiting on the same sort of people they'd been going to school with their entire lives. Often he would tack an extra half hour onto his commute if it meant he could escort Lily to her classes at the college.

Peter was doing well enough too. He'd moved into the single room just off the kitchen, while James and Lily had taken the second floor bedroom for themselves. Moira had been by to visit a few times, having settled on attending a women's university in Stratford. Without a set of classes of his own to distract him, Peter's father had insisted he come work at the publishing house. Mostly it sounded like complete drivel, but there were some perks.

"Guess who they're putting on page three of tomorrow's paper," Peter called, as he trudged across the flat's entryway that evening, ripping off his tie.

"Who?" James answered, busy fixing himself and Lily a cup of tea.

"Lovely *Linda."*

Peter slapped the newspaper down onto the kitchen table and they all

crowded around to get a look at glamour model Linda Lusardi in her page three headshot, sans shirt.

“Dad’s trying to keep up with ‘The Sun’,” Peter said. “Says naked girls are about all people willing to pay for these days.”

“He’s right about that,” Sirius snorted. “Blimey, just get a look at those nipples. Could poke an eye out, don'tcha think, Potter?”

Next to him, James just stared on dumbly. “I dunno… She looks sorta… nice. Like she's a... nice girl.”

Sirius gave Remus a look that said ‘get a load of this sucker’ and just then Lily strode into the kitchen, arms raised as she gathered her hair into a ponytail at the top of her head.

“What're you guys looking at?” She asked, mumbling around the hair bobble between her teeth.

“Nothing!” James yelped, snatching the paper up from the table.

Not stupid enough to ignore the obvious ploy, Lily let her hair drop and ripped the elastic from her mouth as she crossed the room toward them.

“Hand it over.”

They did, only because they were all afraid of the consequences should they refuse, and Lily scoffed before unceremoniously stuffing the paper into the kitchen bin.

“Demeaning!” Was all she hissed at first. “It’s demeaning to women, and utterly priggish—*sexist!*—behaviour!”

“Evans, I hate to break it to you, but you live with four blokes now,” Sirius shrugged haplessly. “Bound to be a few sexy prigs mixed in. Admiring naked women is in our nature.”

Peter gave him a look. “Aren’t you gay?”

“ ‘Aren’t you gay?’” Sirius mimicked, flicking him in the forehead. “Idiot.”

As far as sexy/sexist prigs went, the four of them did pretty well with an added girl in the mix. Not that she was going to put up with being treated like a maid. It came as quite a shock when Lily found out that none of them knew how to properly clean a toilet, but by week two

she'd assigned all the tasks that'd needed doing, and the rest of them made quick to comply. While Remus, James, and Peter handled the more frivolous chores such as emptying the bin and covering the weekly shop, Lily and Sirius had made up an unlikely team of their own. The kitchen became their territory, and there they argued about what suppers to make and how long they could keep a potato once it'd sprouted.

"I knew you could cook a little, but I had no idea you were actually *good* at it," Remus said once, when he'd come downstairs and caught Sirius making a cottage pie in the middle of the day.

"I used to spend a lot of time in the manor kitchens," he shrugged. "It was the only place Mum wouldn't bother to go looking for me, and I enjoyed hearing the cooks mouth off when she wasn't around. Guess I just picked up a few things."

"The cooking or the mouthing off?"

Sirius smirked. It nearly made Remus blush.

"I feel like I'm always learning new things about you," he said.

"Suppose that's what keeps it exciting."

Now he was *surely* blushing.

"Here, budge up. I wanna help."

Yes, they'd all settled in nicely. It had taken until Lily had arrived for them to spring for any real dinnerware—they'd spent the first week eating porridge from mugs and sipping cider straight from the bottle—but her influence and womanly touch had set them straight quick enough. Work and band practice came neck-and-neck as far as priorities went, but none of them felt like skiving off. The basement set-up they had going was perfect, and every day they were sounding better and better. Remus didn't even think about the estate anymore, and though Tomny was still stuck in Ipswich, he'd return eventually, once the frozen docks and cold weather had properly chased him back home.

Yes, in just a few short months, the flat at number forty-three, Knoxbridge Road had become their oasis, and every day Remus lived within its walls, he felt more and more invincible.

* * *

Saturday 21st October 1978

It was warm for October. Remus could feel the sun slightly singeing the back of his neck. He didn't mind so much; Sirius liked counting the freckles.

"You seem well," Sandra told him, while sampling her cappuccino with prime, little sips. "Healthy. Happy, too."

"I am," he answered.

"You are?"

"Yes."

She seemed to let out a breath of relief. They were sitting amongst a cafe's outdoor patio along Mayfair; not his idea, but hers. Sandra had tried insisting that he order something, but Remus had graciously declined and was instead lounging casually in the patio chair, legs crossed at the ankles. He had a shift soon anyway, and had only agreed to meet on the condition that she did not "mother". Sandra seemed to find this agreeable enough, and so far had managed to avoid all mention of Lyall, interjecting with only the occasional tidbit about Giles or the dogs.

"You're not at the Potters' anymore," she recounted, "where is it you're living now?"

"Shepherd's Bush. Been there since July."

"That's a nice area. And you're living with friends, are you?"

"Mhm, yeah. We split the rent, but Sirius has his uncle's inheritance so he covered most of the costs up front."

"You mean it's just the two of you?"

He shook his head, not really interested in sharing many details, and she began tracing the edge of her teacup. Feeling awkward, Remus checked his watch. He was due at the shop in a half-hour. It was still enough time to make it even if he walked, but before he could make an excuse and slink away, Sandra jumped back in.

“Get this—a new litter of pups were born last week! Zenyatta’s third. Such a lovely girl, she did so well.”

“That’s good. Suspect dad’ll be retiring her soon then. Sent out to pasture and all that.”

He meant it lightly, but the words made Sandra’s smile vanish, and Remus instantly wished he could take them back.

“I was only joking. If there’s anyone he does right by, it’s his dogs, innit.”

“Your father still worries about you as well, Remus,” Sandra said, after a long pause. “He worries about whether you’re taking proper care of yourself.”

“Dunno why he’d bother, s’not like he’s ever worried before.”

“You know that’s not true.”

Remus said nothing, for once not interested in the usual argument. Sandra leaned forward in her chair. He knew straight away what she wanted; it was the only reason she'd asked to meet him in the first place. To pry.

“I think you should visit. Have a little chat with him, that’s all. No arguing, no judgement, and I promise neither of us will mention school either. Just tea. Would you consider coming home for tea?”

It's not my home. The thought was bitter with pride, and so rather than answer, Remus looked off to his left where a young mum was sitting, sipping her coffee and reading a book. She had a pram next to her, and whenever the baby began to fuss, she’d simply reach out and rock and carriage a bit. She didn’t even glance at the kid, but the act itself was care enough.

“Sandy, do you know who Keith Moon is?”

She perked up, as though she thought he might finally impose some sort of willingness to make peace with Lyall.

“I’m afraid not. Is he a friend of yours?”

Remus smiled to himself. “He was one of the best drummers in the world. And he died last month.”

“Oh, well that’s too bad.”

“My mother would’ve known who he was—*is*. She didn’t know much, but she would’a known that.”

Sandra set her teacup down, and Remus felt the clink of its glass like a stern reprimand.

“Remus, this isn't about you and me,” she began. “You’re going off on your own now, and that is so dearly exciting, but we still worry. We worry if you’re eating enough—sleeping enough. You’re only eighteen, that’s still very young to be taking on the entire world on your own.”

“I'm not on my own. I’ve got my friends. We take care of each other—always have. Now is there anything else I'm forgetting? Something left to worry about? Because if not, I have somewhere to be.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” Sandra nodded; “I don’t mean to chase you off. I know I promised not to bother you with fretting... But I have something for you actually. Thought you might want it, now that you’re moved out on your own.”

She reached for her bag and withdrew a small parcel swathed in tissue paper.

“Your father had it framed,” she said as she passed it over. “He wanted you to have it.”

Remus stared at the gift, suddenly nervous. He thought he should decline, but she pressed it into his hands anyway. When he unwrapped it, he found the smiling image of his mum staring back at him. She was younger, sitting on the floor of the estate’s parlour and bouncing a baby Remus on her knee. She seemed bigger than he remembered—not small like a teenager, nor frail from age and sickness—instead fuller in the cheeks and hips. There was no colour to the image, but even in black and white, she looked *warm.* A whole woman.

Remus covered the photo with the tissue paper, and then tucked it into the large outer pocket of his coat.

“That’s nice,” he murmured. “Thanks.”

“I thought it was such a darling photo. You and Hope.”

Remus nodded stiffly, before reaching into his inside pocket and pulling out his wallet. He left a tenner on the table, more than enough for Sandra’s cappuccino, and stood.

“Oh, now what are you doing that for?” Sandra tutted immediately, trying to hand him back the note.

“It’s fine. Tea’s on me today.”

“But you didn’t even order anything!”

“Can’t I buy my step-mother a drink every now and then?”

She softened at that—*step-mother,* Remus had never said it in front of her before—and he took the opportunity to tuck away his wallet and stand up from the table.

“Better scat now. Don’t want to be late for work.”

Sandra quickly perked up in her chair. “You’ve gotten a job then? That’s fantastic! Where at?”

Remus stepped past the table, buttoning up his coat. He suddenly felt more playful.

“Job—what job? Didn't you know, Sandy, I’m only a good-for-nothing musician.”

It boggled her for a moment, then he heard her laugh, hopelessly, and that was the last Remus saw of her for a good, long while.

As he walked, he counted the hours in his head. One eight-hour shift at the music shop, and then two hours until they’d be on stage. Not a literal stage—more like a slight raised platform corner of the pub Sirius had gotten a job in. They’d all been lucky to get something, what with the way English businesses were shutting down left and right and centre. It felt as though if a factory weren’t closing, then its workers were going on strike, lobbying for more pay and better working conditions. The autoplant Ted had worked in since he was seventeen had just shut its doors, leaving him and three hundred other men without a job to feed their families. When he’d heard, Sirius had gone over to Islington to visit, but according to him neither Ted nor Andy had been all that worried. *There will be more jobs,* she’d told Sirius, *and more chances to be sacked from those too!*

They’d only ever met once, but Remus admired Andy and Ted. Young parents, just trying to make their own way and love each other. It was more than he could say for most people.

As he walked, the city moved about him, full of life and also its usual

misery. He passed a man sleeping in a doorway, with a sign by his feet saying "will work for meals". His coat was ragged, having seen too many winters, and his boots clung to the bottom of his feet like cardboard. Silently, Remus rooted around in his pocket for the bit of spare change there, and left the coins in the tin can set out by the man's feet before carrying on. Around him the air smelt like the sea, but also not—a salty scent more akin to the brackish water of the Thames. There was a woman sitting on a bench, letting her terrier lick from a takeout box while she flipped through the paper. A cop was barking at a pair of kids who flew past him on their bicycles, pulling faces and shouting things like "fascist pig" and "tory tart". Every time he got close they'd speed off, before circling back around like baby-faced piranhas. They probably didn't have a clue what it was they were saying, it was mere words on a loop. It felt like summertime.

The shop where Remus worked was on Denmark Street, otherwise known as Britain's very own "Tin Pan Alley". Less than a decade before, music-makers and lovers alike used to flock to the street in search of the next best thing. They crowded into the various shops, buying and peddling their trade. The windows remained adorned in everything from records to mandolins, to costly electric guitars and dingy old fuzz boxes. But that was only half the fun.

Up above, overlooking the pavement like gods themselves, there were various flats where music publishers and studio-owners had once run the promised land from right behind their own office desks. All day they flapped their coattails and entertained the best in the business; Stones, Hendrix, Kinks, Sabbath, Bowie—they'd all been there, recording their demos that would go on to become life-altering albums. The street had declined much in recent years due to a boom in big studio tech, but a few of the more stubborn shops had stuck around down below, peddling their wares to the average passer-by. It was disheartening to know that he'd missed the prime days of such rock and roll, but Remus always made sure to count the windows on his way to work, as if he might one day catch a glimpse of someone special peering back at him.

"Hasn't your mummy ever told you it's not polite to stare? Perhaps you should start singing. Then they might open their windows, thinking you're a pretty bird."

"Or an air-raid siren." Remus turned his gaze ahead, toward the pavement outside of his shop where she was waiting for him. "Hey, Cas."

“Hey, handsome,” she grinned. “Come here often?”

“Only to see you, love.”

Dorcas—or Cas, as Remus knew her—laughed as he cut between the pair of tables sitting in front of the cafe next door. Her beaded earrings caught the sun and glittered as she pressed a hand to his chest in mock fondness. She was dressed in typical form—a Stylistics t-shirt slashed high above her waist and jeans low enough to show off her entire midriff. She had the music shop’s A-board sign balanced against one hip, and several albums meant for restocking on the other, which Remus took from her on approach. She muttered a thanks, before pulling her long brown locs onto one shoulder and flapping a hand to ward off some of the heat.

“Decent day so far?” He asked, as she straightened out the shop sign.

“Would be, if Phil could get his head outta his arse for five minutes.”

"I've never known a manager to be that flexible."

"Ha! Me neither."

Behind them, a group of young teens still in their school uniforms were busy digging around the albums in the fifty-pence bins.

“I better not catch any ‘a you stuffing none of those into your bags again,” Dorcas warned. “I know you’re good for it, ya posh public school brats.”

The kids all gave her a dirty look and quickly shuffled into the shop, the doorbell twinkling after them. She glared a moment longer, then waved Remus over to the messy bins teetered high with cheap, on-offer singles and old albums that no one ever wanted but were in a constant state of disorder regardless.

“C’mon then, stud. You’re already late, might as well help me with this.”

Remus objected; “I have another five minutes before my shift starts,” but ambled over to the bins with her anyway.

“How was your morning?” Dorcas asked, fanning herself with a tattered copy of *The Yardbirds* while she went through sections T to Z. She had a necklace around her neck bearing the Star of David, which she played with in her free hand.

“Fine. Saw my step-mum for a while. Not much else. How’s the shop been so far?"

“Bit slow for a Saturday, to be honest. Had a few people coming and going, plus that weird guy with the parrot came by again. But Phil keeps riding my arse about getting that leftover stock out. I'm pretty sure he's a robot, but I've yet to find the bloody off switch.”

“Dunno why he's so insistent,” Remus grumbled. “It’s all German synth. And what do they have? Kraftwerk.”

“Mm… Reckon you’ll be sad you missed him actually.”

“Who—Phil? Please tell me he died.”

“I wish. Guess again.”

“The parrot guy?”

“No! … Well, maybe. I like it when the parrot tells other customers to piss off. But there was someone else! He came by to take a look at that Les Paul Special hanging behind the counter. But oh—you probably wouldn’t know him…”

Remus nudged her, too curious. “Come on, Cas, don’t leave me in suspense. Who was it?”

“Oh, you know… just someone named 'Ronson'. You know, white guy—plays guitar—got Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane on speed dial.”

Remus’ jaw dropped, and Dorcas gave him a cheeky look.

“You mean, *Mick* Ronson?" He warbled. "As in the Mick Ronson that produced 'Transformer'? The guy who toured with Lou Reed and Bob Dylan—the guitarist who helped shape Bowie’s entire career?! *You mean that Mick Ronson?!”*

“Yeah, that’s the one, ya anorak.”

“And you’re just telling me this *NOW?”*

“He’s long gone already!” Dorcas laughed. “You’re the one who didn’t want to work early mornings.”

Remus covered his face and groaned. “Man, Sirius is gonna go mental. Like shit—Mick fucking Ronson, how cool is that!?”

Suddenly someone was clearing their throat pointedly and they both looked up to find their manager, Phil, standing in the shop's doorway. Remus wished he could say that Phil was an alright guy, but really he was just a dick. A true music snob without the added benefit of any taste, and a mullet that looked more like he'd taken the tail off a dog and stapled it to the back of his head. Most days Phil was so intolerable that it was all Remus could do not to strangle him with an amp cable. He would've quit on the first day, had the job not had a few obvious perks.

"Hey there, cats and kittens," the manager drawled; "Mind helping me out inside and—oh, I dunno—doing your job?"

"You said you wanted the bins reorganised," Dorcas said, dropping *Yardbirds* back into its slot.

"Yes—to *you.* Not him! Now let's get a move-on, lover boy. Those 1968 Martins won't re-string themselves."

As Phil turned and marched back inside, Remus tossed a glance at Dorcas, who rolled her eyes indifferently and turned back to the stacks and stacks of albums.

"I need all of these done before your lunch break," Phil ordered, after he'd led Remus to the back of the shop, where no less than a dozen guitars were waiting, each stacked up on top of one another like dominos. "Need 'em restrung, and don't forget to check the bleedin' necks. A few of them have raised bridges too—oh, and change out the pickguards on this one, this one—and that Yamaha! I don't like looking at the scratches."

As Phil blabbered, Remus stopped to pick up the guitar in front. A beautiful Gibson J-45.

"You sure you want me to change this one out?" He asked. "I think it looks fine as is."

"I didn't ask you for your opinion, Lupin, I asked you to fix 'em! Just got the whole stock in from some estate and I wanna have them ready for sale by tomorrow, so chop-chop—hop to it! Gotta love it when those decrepit old collectors start pushing up daisies."

The door chimed as more customers filed in, and while Phil left him to upsell some dad out buying his kid his first guitar, Remus huffed and took a seat behind the repair counter. Next to him sat Bo, an old repairman who'd been working at the shop since it was managed by

Phil's father. Remus liked Bo. He was chatty about himself but rarely pried, and had the wildest stories of all sorts of musicians that'd come into the shop over the years. He'd once told Remus that he'd been around when Denmark Street was just a lane, and while it was surely an exaggeration; the things Bo had to have seen in his hayday—*blimey*.

"Don't mind 'im," Bo said, half bent over a stack of pickups he was rewiring; "He's been cheesed off ever since Ronson came in looking for that Les Paul. Said the neck had a slight bend in it. Now everything's gotta be checked twice-over."

"You saw Ronson too, then I take it?"

"Ya snooze, ya lose, kid."

Remus sighed, and Bo pat him fondly on the arm as he turned the guitar over.

"I dunno what he's on about, the neck's fine."

"Already told him as much," Bo nodded.

"Fucking Phil… Guess he would've blamed you for the Les Paul."

"Nah, we didn't touch that guitar, and 'sides, I know Ronson. Did some custom work for him a few years back. I think Phil's just crumbling under the pressure. Has been ever since his father retired."

"Does crumbling also make you a dick?"

"Sometimes."

As Bo dropped his magnifying glasses back down over his nose, Remus turned to his work for the day. He wasn't really sure how he'd ended up in repairs and services, but when Phil had given him the job back in September, he would've been willing to sweep the pavement outside, just so long as he could hang out where the music was.

The music, he told himself, as he picked up the perfectly good Gibson and began clipping its strings; *Do it for the music.*

"Hey, kid," Bo grunted, "want to learn how to replace the frets on this old strat?"

Remus glanced up, to where Phil was arguing with a guy over the price of a second-hand Telecaster. He'd barely finished the

conversation before he was spinning around and harping at a young boy who was testing out one of the other guitars.

“No, no, no! You don’t play ‘Stairway to Heaven’ in here, don’t you know any shop etiquette?!”

Remus shook his head. “Don’t you think our fearless leader will have a fit if we don’t finish everything else first?”

“Maybe,” Bo shrugged, “but he can’t afford to sack me. So what’ll it be?”

Remus smiled. He really liked Bo.

“Yeah, go on.”

Bo was a patient teacher, and over the months he’d spent working beside him at the repair counter, Remus had gotten to know him quite well. He reminded him of Giles, who also tended to gab when he worked. Bo told him all about his childhood growing up as a black kid in Hackney; how he and his four brothers had all slept in the same five by five room, how his mother supported them by washing and mending other people's clothes, how he’d had his first drink at eleven, and kissed his first lady at thirteen.

“And you wanna know what? Twelve years later, I married ‘er,” he’d bragged. “And I’ll be damned if she ain’t still the finest fox I’d ever done seen.”

Bo’s father had been a veteran of the Great War, and then a drunk afterwards. Used to beat his mother, but then when his older brother Joseph—*“Jo and Bo we’s used to be.”*—had gotten old enough, he started beating back until they’d kicked the evil man out altogether. And then when Bo was just eighteen, the world went to war with itself for the second time.

“Egypt,” he’d said. “They’d shipped me on out to Egypt. I tried telling ‘em, I’m not that sort ‘a African, mate, but they’s wouldn’t have it. At fourteen I'd already learned to drive thanks to this Italian mate who lived in our building—name was Tomasso. He had this little coupe he'd brought over from Valle D'Aosta. Then when the war started, they interned Tomasso at the Isle of Man and repossessed his coupe for the metal. By then I was already off-continent. All day I’d drive them big officers around in my little buggy, choking on dust. But it wasn’t all bad, got to play cards with the boys in the evening, and Cairo was a handsome enough city, 'least before the Jerrys came.”

Remus knew the story well enough by now. After his base in Cairo had been captured, Bo had spent three years in a POW camp until Hitler put a gun in his mouth and the subsequent liberation allowed him to return home to his sweetheart and pop out a couple of kids. As it turned out, both of his younger brothers had been conscripted after him, though only he and Joseph had returned. Then in ‘47 Joseph hung himself in their childhood bedroom and 'Jo and Bo' had become just ‘Bo.’

“Jo was the musician, not me,” Bo said, as he traced his worn fingers over the neck of a beautiful Les Paul Custom. “I just tuned the strings for him.”

Whenever things eventually circled back around to Joseph, Bo tended to filter off. He never went into much detail, which Remus appreciated, but he was always very pragmatic. Said he quit smoking while interned because it was either trade your Red Cross tobacco rations to the Germans for a few raw potatoes or starve to death. Hadn’t touched a cigarette since. Remus had tried to relate to him, but Lyall had never been to war, and though he’d never met his paternal grandfather, he knew he’d managed to avoid being drafted when his own father sent him to Belfast for "business".

But Giles had been to war. He’d come of age in the middle of it all, and as the son of a factory worker, had nothing to keep him from conscription. When he was eighteen they’d shipped him off to France, and when he was twenty, Singapore, because the wound wasn’t already deep enough. Giles rarely talked about it, but Remus knew that he’d lost people too; an older brother and friends he’d grown up with in South London. It was an experience Remus would never know, so long as the world kept its shit together, and—reminisce of his days in the End, or perhaps because he was desperate to relate to someone *real* in his new environment—Remus lied to Bo about it anyway.

Just once.

“My—er... My dad did a tour in France, actually.”

“Ah, nasty business that. What’s he do now?”

“He’s a driver.”

“Good for ‘im.”

Old habits die hard, as they say.

Remus never brought up Giles or his service again after that. He felt guilty for lying, and it'd been too easy. Bo talked to him like a person—like Lee and the rest of the boys before they'd found out. He had no idea what sort of person his real dad was or how much money he made, and as far as Bo was concerned, they were the same, save maybe their age and the colour of their skin. It was that belonging again; the legacy of that miserable little boy who'd so desperately wanted to belong.

The best thing about Bo though—he did not dwell. Naturally chatty, he jumped from topic to topic with little care, and that almost always meant there was something to learn. The old expert seemed to know everything there was to know about guitars, recording, and music, though he'd never set foot on stage himself. Any and all dreadful managers aside, Remus enjoyed the work, and learning from Bo was a definite upside. His other coworkers were generally likeable as well, but he worked most often with Dorcas, who'd been hired just a few months before he had and was still a bit of a mystery. All he knew about her was that she liked music enough to put up with Phil's bitching and that she was a part of some sort of local activist club that met half a dozen times a week and organised events like sit-ins and demonstrations outside local council meetings. She never deigned to mention any more than that, which Remus supposed was fair, considering he'd shared so little about himself. So far he'd resisted telling everyone apart from Bo that he was in a band—though it was more like he didn't want to jinx it.

"There, make sure it's in there nice and snug," Bo said, observing Remus as he hammered the final metal fret into place.

"Well, well," Dorcas mused, appearing and leaning over the counter to get a look; "Ain't you just a regular dab hand."

"He's a natural," Bo complimented, while checking over his work. "Yup, looks about ready for strings now."

They both stood by and watched Remus restring the guitar, and afterwards Remus held it across his lap and played a quick cord to ensure everything was properly in tune. It was, and he was rewarded with an impressed clap from Dorcas.

"You gonna finally admit to me that you can play thing that too?" She teased. "Or do you only know how to play funky bass lines that no one else ever gets to hear?"

“Play it?!" Bo exclaimed. "Shit, how about he finally admits to more than just—”

“Thanks, Bo,” Remus cut-in, “but I think this is yours?”

Bo took the mallet as Remus offered it and snatched the guitar back with a knowing look before getting up from the repair bench to return it to his hook on the wall. As he did, Phil appeared from around the corner and threw his arms up.

“Oi, Grace Jones, your shift’s not over for another half-hour and I ain’t paying ya to disco with the lads. Get back on the floor!”

“I’ll be right there,” Dorcas called, before rolling her eyes in Remus’ direction. “Fucking prick. Ugh, I’ll see you later.”

He waved to her as she split, and then felt a nudge from behind as Bo returned to his stool.

“Nice girl, that Dorcas. Knows her stuff too.”

“Yeah, she does.”

“So have you asked her out on the town yet?”

“What?” Remus baulked. “No! I’m not—I mean, she’s great and all, but she’s—”

“Got bigger balls on her than you?”

“Thanks for that." Suddenly Remus felt like hitting himself over the head with the mallet. “We’re just pretty different, her and I. 'Sides, I doubt she’d be interested in me anyway.”

Bo shrugged and returned to his collection of mis-wired pickups. “Try telling her about that band of yours. Young kids like you should be bragging about tosh like that. Maybe you ain’t looking for a girlfriend, but another fan—even a friend? Couldn’t hurt.”

Remus wasn’t so sure about that, he’d had more than enough people get the wrong idea after he played it friendly, and wasn’t looking for another storm. Good thing Dorcas came with more surprises than he’d bargained for. Remus was behind the front counter when her shift had finished, busy ringing up a set of strings for a young guy. He couldn’t have been more than sixteen, but he was staring at Remus with all the scrutiny of an old woman.

“Okay, so for the nickel strings… that’ll be two quid, mate.”

“Hey… don’t you play at the Shoestring?”

Remus blinked.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I remember you now!” The guy started. “I’ve seen you! You're Marauders—you do covers. Me and my mates watched you play there last week. Heh—the Shoestring’s the only place that’ll serve us juice under the table before six.”

“Oh. Right… er—yeah. S’my band…” Remus cleared his throat awkwardly, but the boy didn't seem to notice.

“You guys are good," he grinned. "We wanna do that someday—play in the pubs. What sort ‘a kit you got?”

“Uhm… s’a Teisco BS-36 but—”

“Right! The Teisco. My first set was a Teisco Del Rey too, actually. I’m playing on a Telecaster now, but hey, you make the Teisco sound great.”

Remus was still trying to decide if he’d been insulted when Dorcas strolled up to the counter, her jacket swung over one shoulder. The kid took a look at her and suddenly grew a bit less bold, smiling shyly as he passed the money across the counter and swiped his package of strings.

“Thanks for this,” he said. "We’ll drop by again—see you play! Rock on, mate!”

"Yeah, rock on..."

The kid flashed Remus a final wave as he left and Dorcas leaned across the counter, peering dubiously at them both.

“That was cute. What was he on about?”

“I… I think I need to upgrade my kit.”

She gave him a funny look, and then snapped her fingers toward the drawer beneath the register. “Pass me my lip balm? Just there.”

He did so, and she coated her lips in it before sticking the tube away

in her pocket. “Right, I’m off. See you tomorrow, babs.”

“Uh—hold on, Dorcas, do you actually have a sec?”

She spun back around, snapping her fingers again. “Sure, but I’ve gotta catch the train in a few so be quick about it. My cuz’s giving me the big chop tonight.”

She mimed at snipping off her locs and Remus nodded quickly. After sparing a final glance around to ensure that neither Phil or Bo was within ear-shot, he leaned over the counter toward her.

“Would you be interested in coming out with me and some mates tonight?”

Her eyes widened. “With… you?”

“Yeah.”

“Aw shit, Remus, I… Look, you’re a total dish, but I’m not really…”

“Uh?” It took a moment, but then Remus’ eyebrows shot up upon realisation. “Woah, woah—no! This isn’t—I’m not asking you out, Cas.”

“You aren’t?”

“No.”

“Christ!” Dorcas bent over at the middle, hands on her knees like she was relieved. “Oh thank Christ… Scared me there for a moment, Lupin. I dunno what I would’ve done if you were actually fucking serious.”

"Huh. Poor choice of words..."

"What's that?"

Remus shook his head, stifling a smile. “Judging by your reaction, I’m guessing vomiting all over the floor was in the cards.”

Dorcas caught the sarcasm and laughed at him again. “Don’t be offended, you just aren’t my type, is all. Now what is it you really wanted to ask me?”

“I wanted to know if you’d be interested in coming to a show. It’s out in Lambeth. Know it’s a bit of a ways, but it’s a live band.” Remus

gulped. “My… band.”

“Actually?” She straightened up then, eyes narrowing. “You stingy little shit, you never told me you were in a band. What d'you play?”

“Bass.”

“I know you play *bass,* you prat. I meant, what kind of music?”

“Oh—rock. Covers mostly right now, but we’re trying to convince the manager to let us play more of our own stuff. Like I said, the pub's out in Lambeth. It’s kind of seedy but the food ain’t all rubbish, and the beer’s decent. My—My roommate, Sirius—he works there. Can usually snag us a few pints on the cheap too.”

“I see.” She tapped her nails on the countertop, before snapping her fingers toward one of the pens next to the register. “You said tonight, yeah? Gimme the address, I’ll see if I can pop by. Lambeth don’t scare the likes ‘a me.”

“I don’t imagine much does.” Remus scribbled down the pub’s address, before handing it to her. She took it, smirking.

“Mind if I bring a friend along? It's just my boy, King. He's cool, I promise. In a band himself, even.”

“Yeah, totally. The more the merrier.”

“Aw, don’t you sound posh.” Smiling, Dorcas used the pad of her fingers to dab at the sheer balm on her lips. When she was finished she brought out a pair of dark sunglasses and set them on the bridge of her nose as she backed herself toward the shop door. “See you tonight then, Bootsy Collins,” she called. “Can’t wait for you to blow my mind in one of those cute slipovers of yours.”

“Comfortability is paramount,” Remus replied. Then just before she could go, a thought occurred to him; “Hey, Cas? Out of pure curiosity, what *is* your type?”

Dorcas lowered the sunglasses. “Blondes.” Then she raised them again and tossed him a final wave. “Toodle-oo, babes!”

* * *

They'd given themselves a year. One year to conquer an industry that got more and more saturated with every waking moment. At least they weren't hurting for money—a fact that would come back to bite them when people started asking how they could dare take up space in a coterie that'd had to fight tooth and nail just to feed itself. Back then they were still nobodies and therefore it didn't matter. They'd have to get used to the mob and their pitchforks, but that was a problem for a future marauder.

There would be the occasional upset, maybe a fight or two, but for the most part, those were the good ol' days. The patient days. They were what it meant to simply exist. *To be.* Later, Remus would look back and miss them, but that was only after he'd forgotten dreary, monotonous moments, where all they could do was labour toward the things they wanted. You see, before fame, all one wants is for everyone to know their name, but the moment it happens, there's no longer a steady being. You're no longer a nobody—you're a somebody, and somebodies never rest.

If any of them could've done it all over again, they probably would've said not to rush, but they'd given themselves a year, and a year proved to be all that was needed in the end. If they had gone back and done it differently, maybe they would've missed their shot. Maybe nothing would've ever come of 'Marauders'. No way to tell, really. In the grand scheme of things, fame was about luck, not talent, and somehow the universe had granted them enough of both.

As Remus turned the key in the lock and nudged open the flat's heavy front door, he was met with a call coming from the kitchen.

"Potter, is that you?"

"Just me, Lils."

"Oh good! Well, food's almost ready."

Humming in contentment, Remus stopped to pick up the letters that had been shoved through their post slot. Most were bills and local shop adverts, but the final envelope was different. It was a letter, labelled in tidy penmanship and addressed to him. Setting the other post aside, Remus tore open its top.

Dear Remus,

I'm so glad to hear things are going well with your new job. And your

band! How exciting… I hope Mr. Black's been keeping up with those vocal exercises. Wouldn't want him to strain his tenor before twenty.

Things are going just fine up here, though I have to say, we're two months into the term and somehow it doesn't quite feel the same. Too quiet, maybe. Every now and then I wake up with a feeling that something is going to happen, like I should be expecting smoke bombs in the teacher's lounge or rock music in church. Imagine my disappointment when the biggest excitement of my day turns out to be a bloody nose or Mr. Filch's cat getting stuck up a tree. I am happy to report that Regulus is doing very well in music, though that might not come as a much of a surprise. Sometimes I even wonder to myself if he isn't the one teaching me. He did shock me a bit when he decided not to take up the violin, and I'm sorry I can't tell you what it is that he's chosen. Apparently I've been sworn to secrecy.

Thank you again for writing to me, Remus. Being your teacher has been one of the greatest joys of my life, and now that is done, I'm grateful to be anything more. I know that you and your friends will do magnificent things, but don't forget the little ones either. And send me a photograph of your new flat. I'd like to see for myself where it is you now call home.

With love,

Sheila A. Buchanan

Remus smiled to himself. He could already picture what he would write back—*we never put smoke bombs in the teacher's lounge, though now I'm thinking it was a wasted opportunity*—but by then Lily had appeared in the entry way, holding a mason jar full of water.

"Have a good shift, did you?" She asked.

"Mhm, and your day?"

"Oh, my lectures were fine. I'm finally getting used to being on campus anyway." She smiled and handed him the jar. "Can you take this upstairs with you and water Remus? James and Peter have gone to get the van, should be back any minute."

"I'm sorry," Remus said, perplexed and tucking Sheila's letter under one arm, "but water… *Remus?"*

"The plant—the one I put in your bathroom?"

“And apparently named after me. Why?”

“Well, I already have a James, Peter, and Sirius.” She gestured to the hallway table, which was supporting a very large fern. “This is Marlene, isn’t she beautiful?”

“Stunning. And why, per-say, is she named after our very human friend?”

“I dunno. Just seemed like a Marlene.”

With a light shake of his head, Remus took the jar and began up the stairs to his and Sirius’ bedroom.

“Make sure you get changed beforehand,” Lily called after him; “The boys are gonna need help moving the equipment into the van, and Sirius is already over at the pub, working!”

“Yes, Mummy-dear, I sure will!”

He heard her huff before returning into the kitchen, but by then Remus was already one flight up. One more and he was pushing aside the creaky door leading to his bedroom. It was just after seven, and they were due to go on stage at The Shoestring at half-past eight. Plenty of time to load up Mr. Pettigrew’s van with their amps and instruments and scarf down a few precious bites of food.

After pouring the mason jar of water into the leafy plant Lily had propped up on the corner edge of their loo window, Remus set the jar aside and emptied his pocket contents onto his wardrobe hutch across the bedroom. Shrugging off his coat, he quickly found himself collapsed back on the bed, mid-evening lull hitting him hard.

Now, Remus almost always slept on the right. He wasn’t sure when it’d happened, but sometime since moving in, that spot had simply become his. Though every now and then he’d roll over and bury himself into the rumpled sheets on Sirius’ side, just to breathe him in. It was almost odd; they slept in the same bed every night, and yet the left side was just so Sirius. He did it now, curling into Sirius’ side and groaning into the pillow. Fuck a job—they should’ve just gone with Sirius’ advice and played the part of the nugatory artist living off of inheritance. They’d have certainly gotten more sleep that way. Sometimes Remus really hated being a functioning member of society.

When he could finally bring himself to move again without groaning,

Remus pressed up from the bed and peeled out of the day's clothes. He'd just pulled a fresh t-shirt over his head when Lily's voice came wailing up the stairs once more.

"REMUS! THE BOYS ARE HERE!"

"Coming!" He hollered back, tossing on his coat and shoving his wallet and keys back into his pockets. His finger jammed something hard and he hissed, only then remembering the framed photograph Sandra had given him.

Withdrawing it, his eyes scanned over the crumpled tissue paper and for a moment he considered unwrapping it and setting it upon the hutch. But then he imagined looking at it every day—and because that sucked too much, he slid it into the top drawer with his socks instead. Maybe one day he'd be able to stomach looking back on vivid memories like those, but for now, it was enough just to know that they existed at all.

Scarpering down the stairs, he found Peter and James in the kitchen, inhaling the casserole Lily had so graciously made for dinner. James looked like usual—fit without trying in a plain white t-shirt and slacks—while Peter had dressed up a bit in a wide-collared shirt and open waistcoat.

"Wotcher, Lupin!" Peter said, as Remus came in.

"Good day, lads?"

"Oh yeah," James replied, swallowing. "As my manager would say, 'the rush never ends at the Ritz'. It's mental, truly. Some big-wig parliament member came in today, chap ordered bitters and *tonic water*."

"That's actually supposed to be very good for an upset stomach," Lily interjected, pushing a plate of food in front of Remus. "Here, eat. Can't have you passing out on stage."

He took a seat at the table obediently, and began shovelling food into his mouth alongside his friends. "Everything go alright with the van?" He asked around bites.

"Yeah," Peter answered; "Though I think Dad's getting tired of lending it out. We'll probably have to get our own soon."

"I'll talk to Sirius about it."

“Sorta hate that he’s the one always footing the bill,” James grunted.

“Don’t bother,” Lily said, leaning up against the kitchen counter and bringing a cup of tea to her lips. “I think he secretly enjoys being everyone’s sugar daddy. Some more than others.” She winked at Remus, who rolled his eyes over a mouthful.

“Despite what the rest of you might think, he does *not* foot my bills."

"What about that new amp?" Asked James.

"That was his idea! Same with those pedals of yours, and Peter's new toms as well!"

James shrugged, muttering; "I don't mind having a sugar daddy."

“Honestly, you always have to have a chip on your shoulder, Moony,” Peter snorted. “Anyone else would just let themselves be spoiled, but not Moony—*nooooo.”*

They all laughed, even Remus, and Lily glanced at the clock on the wall. “Best hurry up if we’re to make it in time for a sound check.”

“Aren’t you just becoming the little band manager,” James mused, standing up to drop his plate into the sink’s soapy dishwater.

“Someone’s got to keep you lot on track,” she said, smacking him on the arse.

“Christ,” Peter grimaced. “Let the pair of ‘em move in together and all of a sudden it’s foreplay by the kitchen sink.”

“Peter!”

Remus grinned wryly, spooning his last few bites of dinner into his mouth. By the time he’d washed up and set the dishes out to dry, James and Lily were already reaching for their jackets—Peter, the keys.

“Alright,” James called, once they had carried all of the equipment up from the flat’s basement and piled it onto the curb. “Tonight’s show—scale of one to ten. I say seven. You, Pete?”

“I’m betting on a five,” Peter said, struggling with two of their biggest amps; *“Ngh*—Just feels like a five-kind of night.”

“Them's poor odds. How about you, Lupin?”

Remus considered. They'd been playing their 'rate the show' game for a while now, ever since Ray, manager of The Shoestring, had agreed to let them play a weekly gig. It was an easy way to quell the nerves, and the loser bought drinks after, no matter how bad.

"Nine."

"Whoo-hoo," James whistled. "Moony's feeling optimistic. And Moony never feels optimistic. Must mean we're in for a good night after all."

"Maybe he's just invited someone he wants to impress," Lily added, handing Remus his bass. Remus took it, carefully placing it into the back of the van.

"As a matter of fact, I did."

They all blinked at him in surprise.

"You did?"

"Just a coworker. Her name's Cas. She's cool."

"Oh my god, are you actually making friends?" Ragged James.

"Piss off."

"I think it'll be nice," Lily interjected. "The others are coming too. Marlene's got the night off and Mary's gonna head over after some rehearsal-thingy for her voice lessons. Only Lottie's a maybe, but that's just because she was supposed to take the train and see Roger."

"Can't stomach not seeing him for one weekend, can she?" Peter griped.

Lily put her hands up. "She's your sister."

When they had everything loaded up, the four of them climbed into the van and set off across the city toward the rundown district of South Bank. James drove, since they'd all agreed ages ago that he was the steadiest behind the wheel. Lily sat beside him, window down so the cool evening air could rush through her fire-red waves. It was kind of Mr. Pettigrew to lend them the van, but Sirius continuously griped about how rolling up to a concert in a van with the words 'Daily London Local' blasted on its side did little for their image. Though if he'd had it his way, they'd be carting their instruments over to gigs on the back of a motorbike.

The Shoestring Pub wasn't exactly a high-flyer's favourite hangout. Rather, it was a seedy hole in the wall lying just across the river. The location was central enough, however, meaning that plenty of locals tended to pop in after the dockyards closed up shop for the day. Normally their band only ever played on Tuesdays, which were much slower and tended to favour the more down-on-their-luck type of crowd, but the group that had held the Saturday evening slot had recently lost their drummer, leaving behind a hole in the ranks. Sirius had been quick to snap up the opportunity, and because Ray could grudgingly admit to liking him, he'd agreed to give them a shot on the condition that they made sure to name-drop the drink-of-the-day ahead of every show and, of course, agreed to play covers.

Only covers.

"Crowds like covers!" The manager had said, when he was outlining his conditions. "They can sing along to covers, and where there's singing, there's booze. It's just the way of the world, lads."

Remus still thought this was complete crap, but Ray was right; beggars couldn't really be choosers.

As James pulled up to the pub's corner, they were met with a cloud of cigarette smoke courtesy of the drifters hanging out outside.

"Remember, don't bother locking the doors," Peter grumbled. "We're taking it all with us anyway and dad says he'd rather them root through the empty glove box than break a bloody window."

Piling out of the van, they each grabbed a section of gear and carted it toward the back alley, proceeding past a drunk patron who was already passed out on the pavement. *At least*—they hoped he was passed out. Setting down Peter's bass drum, James did the honourable thing and nudged the guy with his boot. He grunted and turned over in the dirt. Yup, still alive.

"Ray!" Remus cried, wailing his fist on the metal of the pub's back door. "Ray, open up!"

A few seconds clicked by, and the door was eventually opened by a burly guy with a permanent glower plastered across his face. He was wearing his usual uniform of faded slacks and a Hawaiian shirt, the apron hanging over top stained more yellow than white.

"Playing cook tonight too, Ray?" Remus asked.

“Lonnie didn’t show up,” the manager growled. “And I thought I told you buggers to use the *front door.”*

“Last time we did that Pete got pickpocketed on his way in.”

“Happens to everyone at the Shoe. Think of it as an initiation.”

“Come on, Ray,” James complained. “Don’t make us lug it all around front again.”

He seemed about likely too, before craning his thick neck sideways and letting a friendly smile grace his lips. “Orright, but only ‘cause you brought me flowers.”

As the ‘flower’ in question, Lily giggled at the obvious attempt at flattery and squeezed in between them with Peter’s cymbals in hand.

“Thank you, Ray,” she said, as the manager stepped back to allow her inside before the rest of them. Remus went next, bowing his head in thanks and trying not to drop the pair of amps he was carrying.

"You only encourage him when you do that, you know,” Remus chaffed as he and Lily squeezed through the grimy kitchen.

“You don't know what it's like," Lily tsked. "Everyday I watch Potter get hit on by 'sweet old ladies'. One compliment from Sirius’ manager every now and then isn’t going to kill anyone.”

Remus glanced back at James, who was giving Ray a friendly clap by the door. The manager took one of the guitars from him, and even helped him carry it inside.

“No, I suppose it won’t,” Remus chuckled.

Inside, the Shoe was already busy—patrons sidling left and right with full pints in hand. The pub boasted a small platform on its right side for the entertainment to set up on, but all the equipment was self-supplied by the bands, save for a single piano in the corner that looked like it’d survived a bombing in Mile End. The lack of house speakers or amps made for a taxing set-up, but once those and Peter’s kit were organised, they really only needed to plug in and play.

“I’m gonna tell Sirius we’re here,” Remus told the others, when they’d dropped their gear beside the stage.

“Grab us a bevvy, wontcha, Moons?”

Remus gave James the two-finger salute and started back across the pub. He was about halfway when some old codger with foam in his beard and an empty glass reached out and grabbed his sleeve.

“You the new band in?”

“Part of it, yeah,” Remus flubbed.

“Good, good. Couldn’t stand those other muppets. Too much moaning into the mike. Have us a good show, will ya, boy?”

Remus just nodded along, used to the drunken spiel, and the guy finally released him long enough to reach the bar.

“A round of pints for the most kick-ass band from here to Hollywood, if you’d be so kind,” he said, leering over the side of the counter. Sirius spun around immediately, looking good in his plain white vest, despite having already worked a full shift. The velvet slacks that flared at the bottom and the leather choker around his neck were a bit much, but Remus was more interested in the fading burn scar, which peaked out proudly beneath the vest’s right-hand strap. He'd gotten so used to seeing it over the months they've been dating that it'd become like nothing to him, but Remus was glad Sirius wasn’t as conscious over it anymore.

“Don’t you sound smug,” Sirius smiled, already reaching for a set of glasses. He drew up short when he noticed what Remus was wearing —and Remus knew this, because Sirius always spoke his mind.

“Christ, what are you *wearing?”*

Remus glanced down at himself. Jeans, a plaid button-up hanging open over a Bad Company t-shirt. Normal dress for him.

“What? It’s clothes. And I think you’ll find that you’re the odd one out among this crowd. Those trousers are tighter than Mary’s.”

"That's because they are Mary's."

"You've got to be joking me."

"You wish. Wanna come kiss it?" Wickedly, Sirius smacked a hand down over one of his back pockets. Before Remus could dignify it with a response, someone had gone to the jukebox and put on the Rolling Stones.

'Baby, baby, I've been so sad since you've been gone,
Way back to New York City,
Where you do belong!'

Instantly Sirius was humming; " 'Honey, I missed your two-tone kisses —legs wrapped around me tight. If I ever get back to Fun City, girl— I'm gonna make you scream all night!'"

Tossing aside a pint glass, he reached over the bar for the front of Remus' shirt, only to have his hand batted away. But he was still singing, and might've done worse had Ray not come pushing out of the kitchen's saloon doors with a basket of chips in either hand.

“Oi, Black! Finish those orders and take a mop to the loo before you’re off, will ya?”

Sirius spun round indignantly, jerking a thumb toward the beer taps. “Can’t you get Marshall to do it? I’m on bar tonight.”

“Marshall’s gonna be covering you at the bar, now get!”

“Fine, fine,” Sirius huffed' “But listen, Ray, about what we were chatting about earlier—”

“The answer’s still no. Beers, toilet, mop—*now.”*

As the manager split off to deliver the food, Sirius turned back to Remus and rolled his eyes. “Still won’t let us play any originals, the sodding gaffer.”

“Guess he wants us to prove ourselves first. Mop that toilet to a shine and he just might let us.”

Sirius scoffed at him, and then finished filling the rest of the beers. “Right, here’s a few pints then. I’ll be over to help set up after I mop the fucking toilet.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Remus said, pulling his cigarettes from his pocket and handing them over. “You’ve worked hard, take a little break after. We got set-up covered.”

Sirius snatched up the cigarettes and smiled. “Have I ever told you how much I love you?”

“Only when you want something.” Remus took the pint and sipped it

as Sirius leaned over to take another woman's order. It was almost hot to see him behind the bar, his neck slick with sweat. He'd picked up bartending quick enough, though you'd be hard pressed to find anyone around the Shoestring who's go-to wasn't a cloudy cider or a mug of Heineken.

"Another round, Starboy!" One of the tables not far off called. Sirius pointed at them fondly in return and reached for a bottle of cheap Amaretto before catching sight of the cheeky grin on Remus' face.

"Don't."

"It's a cute nickname. You would've liked it once upon a time."

"How do you know I don't like it now? If I'm 'Starboy' then you know what that makes you, right?"

"No, but please enlighten me."

Rather than answer, Sirius smiled to himself and held a finger up as if in wait. Then he pointed to the jukebox, and the chorus of the Stones' song hit its peak.

" 'You're a starfucker, starfucker, starfucker, starfucker, star—yes you are'!"

"Har-har, very funny." Thinking it was about time he got back to the others, Remus scooped up the tray of beers and turned back toward the stage. Then in a moment of curiosity, he remembered Sheila's letter and set the tray back down again—too curious not to ask.

"Hey, did Regulus mention to you that he isn't playing the violin anymore?"

Sirius looked up from the beer he was pouring. "He's not?"

"Not in music class anyway."

"So what's he playing then?"

"Dunno, Sheila never said. But I got another letter from her today."

"Ah, and how is the amazing god-mummy?"

"She's fine, and I wish you'd stop calling her that."

Sirius shrugged, flexing those wonderful biceps as he poured another

drink. “Reg is old enough to do as he likes. I think it’s great that he’s trying new things. Bet he’d look good on an oboe.”

“How do you know it’s not something cooler? Like a guitar, maybe? *Hm?”*

“Because he's my little brother,” Sirius snorted. “Reg takes pride in *not* being cool. I’ll call him later, you’ll see. He’s probably picked something odd and foreign—like the didgeridoo.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Again, Remus picked up the tray of beers. “I’ll see you in a few.”

Sirius blew him a kiss, and then grinned at another guy already approaching the bar. “Angus! Two jack and cokes, I presume?”

Pints in hand, Remus swung back around and headed for the stage. James and Peter had the mikes and drum kit just about set up, and sometime between leaving them for Sirius, Mary and Marlene had shown up as well. No Lottie, which must’ve meant she’d travelled to Reading to visit Roger after all.

“Hey, you,” Marlene said, wrapping her arms around him the moment he’d set the drinks down. He kissed her cheek and when she pulled away, Marlene pinched his nose between two knuckles.

“You were *supposed* to call me.”

“Right!” Remus pulled his face away. “Sorry, got a bit busy. Sirius and I were up late last night working on a new song.”

“You sure that’s not all you were doing?” Mary mused from her table closest to the stage.

“What is this, national 'take the piss outta Remus day'?” Remus shook his head, then feigned a frown. “Forgive me, Cherry?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “Ended up staying late at the office anyway. Who’d have known a group of radicals would need so much fucking paperwork.”

“Does that mean you’ve been neglecting your civil duty to set any and all cop cars on fire the moment they enter your periphery?”

“Unfortunately. A zealot’s job is never done.” She smirked and reached up to finger a piece of hair that had fallen into her eyes. It’d

grown longer since she'd chopped it off before their final year, and she now wore it in a rough shag, cut short around her ears and forehead. Mary had compared it to a street dog when she'd first seen it, but somehow Remus doubted that she was the type Marlene was looking to impress nowadays. The rest of her was dressed as it usually was—oversized jacket, jeans with purposeful holes cut over the knees, heavy boots that'd likely kill a man with the right amount of blunt force trauma. Beautiful, cut-throat Cherry.

"Shall I grab you a pint?" Remus offered, but Marlene just waved him off.

"Nah, I'll go. Got a bone to pick with Black as well. I know it was him who vomited in my boots after that night out at the Roxy last week."

"If it makes you feel any better, he fell asleep that night with his head in the toilet."

"Thanks, it does. Back in a tick." She kissed him on the cheek in return and then stepped away, just in time for James to throw his amp cable at him.

"You gonna tune your own bloody guitar, or am I to do that too?"

Remus rolled his eyes, gently whipping James in the thigh with the end of the cord as he set to plugging in his amp. The Shoe's stage was without any lights, but they usually just dimmed the bar's overheads and went from there. Standing on the raised platform, he could already see the pub's patrons sizing them up, no doubt wondering whether they were going to be shit or not. As James went about adjusting the height of his microphone, and Peter quietly fussed over their impending set list, even more people began to gather; young and old squishing into the pub on the busy Saturday night.

"And how have you been?" Remus asked Mary, plucking anxiously at his D string. "Haven't seen you since you came by the flat last time."

Sitting off to the side of the stage, Mary set down the pint she'd been nursing and blew a corkscrew curl out of her eyes. "Things have been alright. Finally got myself moved out of my family's place, though Marls still refuses to come with me. She says the rent's too high. Don't know why she's got her knickers in such a twist over it though, I told her that she wouldn't have to bother with it since Daddy's already agreed to foot the bill 'til I'm out of school."

He didn't say it, but Remus had a feeling that was *exactly* why. At the

beginning of September, Mary had settled into a resplendent little flat in Bloomsbury, not five minutes from Birkbeck University where she was studying the French language and culture. Similar to Lily's UCL, Birkbeck was a subsidiary college at the University of London. The area was less posh than she was used to, but she claimed to enjoy the intellectual atmosphere, and often she and Lily were able to meet each other for lunch. She was still taking her vocal lessons on the side, but remained very much casual about them whenever anyone asked.

Unlike her best friends, Marlene had elected not to carry on to university. Instead she had left home almost immediately following the end of upper sixth and picked up casual work for most of the summer before finally settling into community outreach at some local not-for-profit. She got paid in pennies but was happy enough with the work, and far too proud to let any of them pay her way—even Mary.

“It's a breeze mostly,” Mary continued. "My professors seem right pleased with me though. A few have asked me if I'd consider studying abroad for a year in Montpellier or Paris. Wouldn't that be a sight."

"And your voice lessons? How are they going?"

"Oh, you know..." She gave him a simpering smile. "My instructor says I might have what it takes to sing Baroque. Bit naff, but it's supposed to be a compliment. If you’re ever in need of that or a bel canto singer, just let me know.”

“We might have to,” James said, strutting up behind Remus; “if Sirius doesn’t feel it necessary to show up for his own gig. Christ, where is the tosser?”

“Had to mop the toilet,” Remus said. “Told him to cop a fag after. I’d cut him some slack too, you know what this place’s loo looks like.”

James sighed, unable to argue, and Peter appeared next to him, wringing out his drumsticks nervously.

“Is it just me, or are there more people here than usual?”

Remus glanced out over the crowd again; there were certainly more than their accustomed Tuesday audience. In the time since he’d left Sirius to set up, the din had turned to a full-blown clamour, and he expected they’d have to turn up the mike and amps a few decibels just to be heard over the noise. He’d gone to do just that when a familiar face caught his eye, and Remus lit up all over.

Handing James his bass, he stepped off the stage and surged forward. His arms were up before he realised it, but Dorcas had never really struck him as a touchy-feely person. She stepped back from him just as they met up in the crowd, turning the hug into a high-five and laughing awkwardly.

“I think you’re gonna have to buy me a drink first, ya hunk.”

“Sorry!” Remus chirped, surprised by himself. *Since when did he hug people?*

“Your hair looks great,” he said, gesturing to Dorcas’ newly buzzed scalp, mostly to hide his nerves. “Hell… I can’t believe you’re here!”

Smiling, Dorcas peeled off her jacket and threw it over one shoulder. “Yeah, well, when your awkward coworker invites you out to see his band with the questionable name, you go.”

“Ouch. I never told you our name.”

“Saw it on a sign on the way in. Marauders, right? It’s—uh… questionable.”

“Suppose that’s you being kind.”

“You know it,” she smirked, before stepping back to introduce the man standing next to her. “Brought you that friend I was talking about. This here is my boy, King.”

King was a tall guy, broad shouldered, with hair as wide and fierce as Jimi Hendrix. He wore sunglasses inside, and had a single gold earring in one ear, but when Dorcas introduced him he pulled the glasses off and nodded in friendly greeting.

“It’s Kinglsey,” he said, offering Remus his hand. “But my friends call me King.”

“Thanks for coming to the show, man,” Remus said, taking it. They shook, and subsequently Dorcas nudged Kingsley in the arm.

“King’s something of a musician himself,” she boasted. “He and his band play out in New Cross every weekend, and they’ve got an evening spot at Ronnie Scott’s twice a month.”

“I know that place," Remus nodded. "Jazz club, right? Killer tunes.”

Kingsley nodded, returning his sunglasses to the bridge of his nose.

“You guys should come by sometime. See about jamming. Dee swings by all the time, mostly to mooch the free scotch. Sometimes it’s like we can’t get her to leave.”

Dorcas punched King’s arm. “Oi, not in front of the coworker.”

Remus chuckled, but it was as though a hint of some forgotten memory had trickled through to the front of his brain.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but did you say ‘Dee’?”

“It’s just a nickname,” Dorcas surmised. “Cas, Dee—call me whatever you want, can’t be arsed anyway.”

“But she’s been Dee since we were kids,” Kingsley finished. “Little Dee-Dee.”

“King, I swear to god…”

“Sorry,” Remus nodded, brushing off the strange coincidence. “It’s just a friend of mine once knew—”

“Moony!”

It was Sirius, bounding through the rabble like a spark plug on speed. He stepped past Dorcas and Kingsley and grabbed Remus by his shoulders, already steering him for the stage.

“C’mon, let’s get this show on the road before the rotten fruit starts flying.”

“Hold on, Sirius, I want to meet—”

“Sirius!”

Now it was Marlene, pushing through with a drink in either hand.

“You forgot your beer, you dickh—” she started, but then she realised who they were with, and just like that, the moment became one of those infallible instances of utter providence. Marlene looked at Dorcas, and Dorcas looked at Marlene, and both drinks hit the floor.

A cry went up instantly as the thick pub glasses clattered against the boards, spattering the ankles of a few nearby patrons. It was enough to break Marlene’s spell, as she leapt backwards and gaped over what she’d done.

“Shit! *Ooh*—I’m so sorry!” She said to Kingsley, whose flared trousers had suffered most of the fallout.

“Don’t sweat it. A little spilt juice never hurt no one.”

Despite the pardon, Marlene snagged a handful of paper napkins and dove for the floor. Sirius went to help her, muttering something about how the floor was sticky enough anyway, but it was Dorcas who got there first. She bent down next to Marlene and righted the glasses, which thankfully had not broken.

“Wow. Never thought I’d see you again, blondie,” she said. Marlene looked up at her immediately, a blush enveloping her entire face.

“You…” She laughed suddenly, and it was a bit like a sigh. “You changed your hair!”

“Uh, yeah. Just today actually.” Almost looking shy, Dorcas ran her fingers along the cropped hair at the base of her skull. “Gonna take a bit of getting used to, but I think a little change is good for us, don’t you?”

Marlene’s mouth fell open, helpless and dazzled, and from their position a few feet away, Remus and Sirius exchanged a look.

“Did you…?”

“No, no idea…”

Marlene glanced at them, and quickly popped to her feet, fisting the dirty napkins. “Guys, this is Dee. We… We met in Morocco.”

"It's actually Dorcas," Dorcas amended. "There goes my grand overseas persona."

A laugh slipped out, and Marlene quickly slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle it. Luckily for her, Sirius knew how to draw a crowd.

“Oh!” He crowed. “So *you’re* the infamous Dee?”

Dorcas rounded on Marlene. “Been talking about me, have you?”

Remus didn’t think it was possible for Marlene to blush any harder. He nudged Dorcas, partly still in disbelief himself.

“I can’t believe you never told me you went by Dee.”

“Like I said, can’t be arsed. He just called you 'Moopy', wanna explain that for me?”

"It's Moony, actually."

"Oh, 'cause that makes much more sense."

“Oi!” Ray grunted, appearing behind them all. “Practically begged me for this Saturday night spot, didn’t cha? Now are you four gonna get up there and play or not?”

“We’re going!” Sirius trilled, already pushing Remus ahead of himself. Marlene, Dorcas, and Kingsley all went over to the girls’ table, fitting in between Mary and Lily. From his spot on stage, Remus couldn’t hear what was being said, but he knew when Marlene had introduced them from the gaping looks of surprise on Mary and Lily’s faces.

“Who’s that with Marlene?” Peter asked.

“It’s Dorcas,” Remus said. "My coworker."

“Yeah, otherwise known as *‘Dee’,”* Sirius added keenly.

“Holy shit. As in…?”

“Yup. Looks like Moony’s been holding out on us.”

“We just work together,” Remus scoffed. “I had no idea she and Marlene had met before today.”

James shook head. “I’m telling ya, lads, it’s like the world’s getting smaller and smaller each day.”

“You’re right,” Sirius said, as grasped the mike; “So let’s make it a little bit bigger, hey?”

Remus looked at Sirius standing before his microphone, and could’ve kissed him. It would become a common enough feeling later on, once people had begun to chant for them rather than a stiff pint and some noise, but even then there’d be nothing he could do about it. So instead, began practising the move he’d be doing for the rest of their lives; he picked up his bass guitar, plugged it into his amp, and got ready to play his heart out.

Sirius turned to the microphone;

“Hello, everybody, nice evening so far!?”

The audience's clamour died slightly as Sirius addressed them for the first time. They all turned to get a look at the skinny kid with the microphone and velvet trousers, but Sirius wasn't the least bit shy. He worked every crowd for its last drop of enthusiasm, and tonight was no exception.

"I know you've probably realised already that we're not your regular Saturday evening entertainment," he said; "but I think you'll find we're a little more fun."

A hoot went up from Mary, and she raised her glass as several others joined her.

"This is James Potter, our lead guitarist. He could've been a lawyer like his dad, instead he's here with us ingrates. Everyone say thank you. And that there is Peter Pettigrew on drums, our resident lady-killer—just don't tell his girlfriend."

Peter slammed his bass pedal several times and Sirius saluted him humbly.

"And this here is Remus Lupin, our big bad bastard on bass."

"Very funny," Remus called, as the crowd hooted and Dorcas punctuated the moment with a primely timed wolf-whistle.

"Mhm," Sirius crooned; "I'd watch out for that one, he's got teeth."

Remus grabbed his own back-up mike; "Just introduce yourself already so we can bloody play!"

"Alright, alright. No need to get frisky, Lupin—that's the audience's job." Sirius smoothed his hair back out of his face. "My name is Sirius Black, and together we make up Marauders. Best remember that, 'cause one day your girlfriends are gonna be shouting our names."

The audience laughed, and this time a woman did call Sirius' name, just in time for him to wink and Peter to finish counting in on his sticks, and James to hit his first major riff.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen, let's go for a ride, shall we?"

From then on, Sirius had them. They'd played the same list of covers on Tuesday nights to moderate applause, but it was nothing like playing to a full house. In a room filled with cheering people, even a cow bell could sound cool—though, it might've helped that they were

playing Zeppelin.

“In the days of my youth,
I was told what it means to be a man;
Now I’ve reached that age,
I’ve tried to do all those things the best I can—”

James played from his waist, sauntering up and down the stage reminiscent of Page. Peter slammed his daddy-bought cow skins so fast he was off-tempo, but it worked for the dirty song so none of them had ever said anything. Down among the throng, Marlene and Dorcas were standing hip to shoulder, screaming the lyrics and sparing chance looks at each other whenever they could. Remus was delighted—it wasn’t hard—but if he were being honest, he was paying more attention to Sirius than anything else.

“Good times, bad times—you know I’ve had my share;
When my woman left home for a brown-eyed man—
Well, I still don’t seem to care!”

God, it was bloody distracting! Remus capitalised on his fleeting bass solo, and yet all he could see was Sirius. *Sirius!*—as he ripped the microphone from its stand and whipped it around, snagging it out of the air just before the next lyric.

“Good times, bad times—you know I’ve had my share;
When my woman left home for a brown-eyed man—
Well, I still don’t seem to care!”

Luckily for Remus, all the audience seemed to see was Sirius as well. They loved him, even the old guys who never had anything decent to say about anyone. They raised their glasses to him, then their fists, and when that wasn’t enough, they stomped their feet and sang along until God Himself had no choice but to listen as well. The Shoestring was an old building, built before the war, bombed, and built again. It didn’t have the structure to support such madness. The floor groaned and the lights flickered, and no one was a drop sober.

“Come on, South Bank,” Sirius urged; *“I wanna hear you scream!”*

Their set was forty-five minutes, and they were due for another after ten o'clock, but as their final cover came to a close, Sirius swooped in, barely finished singing.

"We should play one of our songs!" He hissed, fist over mike.

"What?" James demanded. "But Ray's already said no."

"The crowd loves us, but we could still lose 'em to beer and chips in a second! Just think of it, we got an entire set left—even if we suck, we can win 'em back then!"

"I agree with Sirius!" Peter said, chiming in from his drum kit.

"I dunno," Remus fumbled. His fingers were numb and as were his lips, though that could've just been the alcohol. "We've never sung our songs in front of anyone we didn't already know."

"No time like the present!" Sirius grinned. "All we just have to do is pick one and play it!"

"Easy for you to say, you've only got to remember the lyrics!" James said.

"I see appreciation for your lead singer knows no bounds, Potter."

"We should play 'Hail Mary'!' Peter called.

"We've just barely finished writing 'Hail Mary'!" James moaned.

"You remember the notes, don't you?"

"Well, sorta—"

Sirius smacked him on the arm. "Sorta's all we need, mate! Half the people in 'ere aren't even gonna know that it's not a cover!"

At Sirius' words, Remus looked at the audience. Most people, the girls included, were peering at them with dubious expressions. Some had already returned to their drinking, while others crowded around the base of the stage, silently urging for more. Beyond them, Ray was standing next to the bar and waving his hand next to his neck in a 'cut it' motion. He wanted them to stop—but Remus didn't want to *stop*. He was finally getting a taste of the one thing he'd wanted for so long. And now…

Now he wanted to be *maxed*.

“Pete’s right, we should do ‘Hail Mary’.”

James whirled on him. “You too?”

“Yes!” Sirius answered first, rushing the mike. “Looks like it’s your lucky day, folks—we’re gonna do one more before we break. An encore, if you will.”

A weakened cheer went up, and James fumbled to plug his guitar back in. Already sweating buckets in the sweltering room, Remus had just enough time to rip off the plaid overshirt and reveal Sirius’ Bad Company t-shirt underneath, before his friends were playing again.The song had a decent intro filled with smooth-rocking tom beats, so after they’d managed to wrestle their nerves and start, Sirius began sauntering up and down the stage, humming into the mike.

“Anyone here ever heard of a ‘hail Mary’?” He asked, grinning like a cat. “I know—anyone know what it’s like to beg for a mother?”

There was whistling, followed by exhilarated rallying. These were the slums in South Bank—all these people could afford as children was religion. Just like Tomny, a shit father was expected. It was the mother they knew to want for. And now, with James’ guitar getting faster and Peter’s drums getting louder, they begged for the noise to help them forget.

“You may not know the words to this one,” Sirius said, “but you seem like God-fearing people… I know you remember how to pray. Now—*KICK IT!”*

Sirius punctuated his cry with an actual kick, toppling several empty glasses that’d been left on the edge of the stage. Their crashing sound was instantly swallowed by a swell of raving, and by then the room’s bodies began to sway again, moved to motion by the draw of each lick. It wasn’t a masterpiece—not even their best song—but it was new and a paragon of triumph for a couple of teenage idiots without a shred of real experience between them. If anything the melody was a Zeppelin rip-off, minus the killer harmonica solos.

None of them could even play the harmonica.

Remus fucking loved it.

“I have visions of renegades,
Visions of renegades—

Scattered amongst the stars;
We're bound to see better days,
Better days—
When we've patched all our scars!"

Finally—*Finally!* It was them, their song. Playing it made Remus remember all those late nights spent writing it. Their home, their flat, every *'Man, Tomny would love this!'*

He could feel the weight of his bass teetering on his shoulder, propped up against his thigh. Every vibration of the strings, the shake of the floors and the walls. It was the best high, and when he looked out onto his friends—Lily with her arms around Mary, Marlene undoubtedly stuck close to Dorcas—he never wanted to come back down.

"Hollywood took all my money,
Yeah, we've fallen from grace;
Am I rich in someone else's memories,
A statue stuck in place?
Hail mary, me oh my—
String me up, so I might get high!"

Sirius didn't sing—he belted. And by the second and third verse, the crowd was screaming it back at them.

"HAIL MARY, ME OH MY—STRING ME UP SO I MIGHT GET HIGH!"

"HAIL MARY, ME OH MY—STRING ME UP SO I MIGHT GET HIGH!"

It's 1978.

They're one year away from the catalyst of modern pop culture—the Walkman.

Petrol is 75p a gallon, cigarettes cost less than a bottle of paracetamol.

Sweden moves to ban aerosols to aid in the fight against an enemy no one can see or touch.

Olivia Newton-John and the Bee Gees dominate the radio and the infamous Sex Pistols break up not three months after the release of their first and only album.

Punk rock is giving way to ‘new wave’, a fancy avant-garde name for music made by anyone under the age of twenty-two.

Cost of living is up eight percent, and they’re on the brink of Thatcherism and war with every known labour union from Dunnet Head to Guernsey.

The Pope dies, then dies again. It’s a holy disaster. Not that any of them were paying attention.

They were eighteen.

Rock ‘n’ roll was God.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, British Newspapers did used to publish topless women in regular newspapers in an attempt to sell more copies. They called them 'Page 3 girls' and Linda Lusardi was a popular glamour model in the 70s and 80s.
A 'fuzz box' is an electronic device used to alter a sound of a guitar. Also called a pedal, depending on the type.
'Anorak' is someone with an obsessive love for something. Mostly synonymous with 'nerd'.
Dorcas calls Remus 'Bootsy Collins' which is a reference to the American bass player who was popular alongside singers like James Brown in the 1970s.
A 'slipover' is a sweater vest.
The song Sirius sings along to the jukebox is "Star Star" by the Rolling Stones, 1973.

I wrote the 'Hail Mary' lyrics myself.

OH MY GOD—we're actually in it now, lads! First chapter of gap year, and we only got eight left! Gap year passes more "quickly" than the others (obviously, lol) but I've a lot packed in, so don't you worry. Our boys are just learning how to navigate the world, and there will be a few wins and losses before they get it sorted.

Chapter 98: Boyhood Made Redundant

Chapter Summary

Surprise, Remus!

Chapter Notes

Look, I do NOT remember this chapter being so long, but I'm also a little rusty after a month away, so please let me know if you see any mistakes I can correct.

CW: for some homophobic language (name calling) and generally not-so-nice language courtesy of a few not-so-nice thugs. Also, drug use (alcohol and cocaine) and blood (everyone lives, calm down, pfft.)

See 'end notes' for list of songs in this chapter if you'd like to queue them xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What's your name?
Who's your daddy?
Is he rich like me?
Has he taken any time to show you what you need to live?

(Tell it to me slowly)
Tell you what;
(I really wanna know)
It's the time of the season for loving…

- "Time of the Season" The Zombies, 1968

After their stunt playing "Hail Mary" at the Shoestring, Remus had been sure Ray would've sacked them. He'd been clear—cover songs only. From a business perspective it wasn't unreasonable. Covers were easy, covers were safe. Covers didn't turn people off or cause them to look elsewhere for their drink and swill. Ray had taken a chance on them, Sirius especially. They were in the middle of a job crisis and Sirius Black looked about as rough as a prima ballerina when compared to the pub's usual crowd. However luckily, it seemed as though Sirius' centre-stage impudence had paid off. Rather than

making them redundant altogether, Ray had flipped the script again when he'd not only granted permission for them to play their own songs going forward, but also declared the Marauders as the Shoestring's resident Saturday night band.

"I'm real stupid to offer this tah' ya," the manager grunted, after the bar had closed and they were finished wrapping up their gear for the night. "Ya never feckin' listen, and you play like a bunch 'a pansies to boot."

"That's 'cause you've only been letting us play Neil fucking Young!" Sirius objected. "Come on, Ray, let us show you what *we* can do. The crowd loved it, and we've almost got enough songs for an entire album now, all we need is a place to play 'em!"

"You don't even need to pay us!" James chimed in. "We'll do it just for the exposure."

Peter looked up from his pint; "You mean you guys have been getting paid?"

None of them knew it, but Ray had made the decision to give them the Saturday spot before Sirius had even finished belting the final line to "Hail Mary". Though not having to shell out any cash on a prime night gig was certainly a quick way to seal the deal.

That evening they'd driven back to Shepherd's Bush in Mr. Pettigrew's van, windows down and radio blaring. It was freezing out, but not even the North Wind himself could have touched them. They'd just been granted the one thing all new bands craved, short of a record deal—their first pub residency.

"FUCK YEAH! ROCK 'N' ROLL!" Sirius bellowed, leaning past Lily to scream out the front seat's open window while his hair whipped wildly around his face. In his haste to join in the celebration, James veered a bit too far to the right and quickly swung the Newspaper van back into the correct lane while a series of honks echoed from behind them.

"UP YOURS!" Sirius shouted, bestowing several vulgar gestures upon the neighbouring car until Lily had hauled him back inside by his collar and rolled up the window.

"Come on, Sirius, let's not lose our heads all at once now," she cautioned, despite the hopeless grin on her face.

“If not now, then when? Come on, Evans, I knew playing that song was a good idea!” Sirius cried, furiously drumming his palms on the back of James' seat.

“I still can’t believe he gave us the fucking residency,” Peter agreed, lying on his back on the floor of the van, one of Remus' spliffs tucked between two fingers. Remus sat across from him in the tight space, his knees forced up against his chest as he kept himself busy with a cigarette of his own. It was celebratory. Though better at containing it than Sirius, the constant thrumming in the centre of his chest was clear evidence that his elation was through the roof. A few hours ago he'd been looking at his friends with only a pipe dream in mind. Now they had a chance—a real *chance!* The success of their own songs meant that it wasn't just dreams anymore. Instead it marked their first step.

"You're mental, you know," he told Sirius, as James steered the van across Waterloo Bridge.

"You're just jealous you didn't have the balls to suggest it first. Just admit it was a good idea."

“I suppose one of your harebrained stunts was bound to pay off sometime."

“Yeah, that's right,” Sirius grinned; “Just you wait. First stop, Shoestring-on-the-Thames. Then we're off. Madison Square Garden'll be screaming our names in no time.”

As Peter snickered and Sirius took the chance to steal his spliff, Lily gave a yawn and turned around in her front seat.

“Glad to see you’re being pragmatic.”

“Pragmatic-smagmatic! Give us a few years. We only need like... four."

"Only four?!" Yelped James.

"Pfft—yeah! We could sell out Madison Square Garden in four years. It took Led Zeppelin five."

"Yes, and they're *Led Zeppelin*," Remus pointed out.

As if ready to prove him wrong right then and there, Sirius swung himself up from the van's only bench seat, accidentally slamming his head into Peter's crash cymbal as it teetered overhead. As his friends

laughed, Sirius punched the cymbal indignantly and tossed Peter back his spliff.

"Fucking twats—We could do it! You think we couldn't? *Bloody*—Yes's just played four back-to-back shows in the place. If those geezers can fill the room, so can we!"

"You forget that we've played about ten shows in a room of only fifty people," said Peter. "Plus we don't even have *one* album—we don't even have a real demo."

"So let's get one! We've been saving for it, after all. Don't tell me you assholes have spent all your money on booze and women."

"Don't look at us," called James, car headlamps reflected in his glasses. "Everyone knows Moony's the real ladies' man."

"They come whether he wants them to or not," Lily giggled.

"Yeah, working at that music shop—bet he's got a lineup of girls just waiting for him to take them out," Peter added, unhelpfully. Remus scoffed at all of them, already bringing his cigarette back to his lips.

Sirius got there first.

Knocking his hand away, Sirius manoeuvred himself over one of their bulky amps with all the grace of an alley cat, not stopping until he'd slid either leg across Remus' waist and straddled his lap.

"Too bad," he mumbled, leaning in until Remus could feel Sirius' breath against his own mouth; "They're gonna have to get in line."

That was three weeks ago now. Since then, they'd played at the Shoestring as often as they could, basking in the limelight any time Ray allowed them to commandeer the stage. The rest of their days were spent at work, or else down in the basement, where they plucked and beat away at tired licks until they were either perfect or one of them eventually cried mercy. Eager to wow his newfound audience, Sirius had surprised all of them by purchasing a black upright Steinway piano off an elderly neighbour just up the lane. They'd risked a few toes getting the thing out of the old woman's flat and it was worn and in desperate need of a tune-up, but it'd come to them cheaply so none of them could complain. It took some warming up to, but eventually Sirius was rattling songs off the thing like as well as any ex-virtuoso. In the days that'd followed, he and James penned a number of new songs, adding melodies to Remus' lyrics—even the

really horrible ones, which Remus wrote anyway because their inspiration was infectious. He liked watching Sirius work, he'd decided. As wonderful as it was to love him, their partnership with the band was something else entirely.

“There,” Sirius said, as he slapped a set of sheet music down over Peter's snare drum. “I think the intro should accent the beat more. You know, like the triplets in ‘Good Times, Bad Times’. A straight eight-beat is fine if you wanna be like everyone else, but we’re not everyone else, now are we?”

“Look mate, you’re saying a lotta words, but I just want it to sound cool,” Peter shrugged.

“Great, then all you have to do is play it like it's written.”

Peter did so, with no small amount of ease, and when he’d finished Sirius slapped him on the back, wearing a grin the size of a dinner plate.

“Amazing!” James exclaimed. “Prime stuff for a demo, I'll wager.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Sirius urged. “What we need is to cut ourselves a real demo so that we can finally say goodbye to these bloody day jobs. I’m tired of scraping gum off of bar stools every night. We’re a rock band, and rock stars do not have day jobs. They have jobs they did *before* they were famous.”

“Sure, whatever, but first we’re gonna need studio space,” Peter chimed in. “And we’ve been looking, remember? No one'll give us the time of day.”

“Oi, what about that place near your work, Moony?” James called. “Regent or whatever.”

Remus looked up from his song book, almost stunned to silence by his friend’s blitheness.

“We cannot just *walk* into Regent Sound and demand they give us a studio. You… You need to know somebody! And then that somebody’s gotta know someone else and that ‘else’ better be George fucking Martin and half the bloody Beach Boys, otherwise we ain’t getting in.”

“Half of the Beach Boys, huh?” Sirius mused. He slumped back on the piano bench with a disinterested shrug. “Whatever. This is London—capital of the rock revolution. There’s bound to be some whacked-out

nutcase willing to take us in. Just needs a bit of finessing. You'll see."

"Right," Remus replied. "On the subject of work… Didn't you say that you had a shift today, Prongs? It's almost four."

"Oh shit!" James hissed, practically tripping over on himself to get free of his guitar strap. "My manager's gonna kill me if I'm late again. Pete, you said you were gonna visit Moira, yeah? Think you can drop me off on the way?"

"Fine," Peter sighed, setting his sticks aside.

"Ace, thanks! Just let me grab my coat."

As James made a mad-dash for the basement's stairs, Peter, who was clearly in less of a rush, untucked from the kit and took a moment to stretch.

"Haven't seen Moira around much lately," Remus said. "You know you can invite her to a show, right?"

"I know," he replied sharply. "But a place like the Shoestring isn't really her scene."

"Well, I could've told you that," Sirius snorted. Pausing only long enough to roll his eyes, Peter eventually headed for the stairs, leaving them on their own. The basement door was an exterior entrance and let out onto the pavement, which meant they could hear the street noise until a heavy *swoosh* and *whump* of the door left them in silence again. Watching as Sirius dabbled his hands against the piano keys, Remus rubbed at the back of his neck.

"You should really stop ragging on him. You know he doesn't like it."

"Eh, it's good for him," Sirius said, as he stood and slowly drifted over to the sofa Remus was sitting on. The flat's last tenants had left it behind, and despite the fact that there was no telling how many people had gotten their end away on its thread-bare surface, they couldn't be arsed to get rid of it. It was a perfectly good piece of furniture, and they were still boys. A couch was a couch.

"I give it six months," Sirius went on, slumping across the sofa cushions with his head in Remus' lap. "The minute we get this whole enterprise off the ground, Thurnberg's gonna finally realise she's not interested in having a rock star for a boyfriend and bail."

“Or—Pete’s gonna get so pissed off he leaves the band, and then you’ll be out a drummer right before your first album records.”

“So you think we're gonna have an album in six months?"

“You’re such a dick.”

Sirius smirked devilishly, turning over to paw at the songbook Remus was half sitting on. “Shall we start on those lyrics of yours from the other day? I've no plans.”

“Wonderful. Unfortunately I do."

"What? With who?"

"Marlene. We're going to the cinema later. You can come too if you'd like."

"And spend the rest of my day playing third wheel to you and your ex-girlfriend? No thanks, I know how you two are."

"Come on, you wouldn't be playing third wheel. Mary's coming too."

"Not Dorcas?"

Remus shrugged. "Dunno. Marlene didn't say."

"Are the two of them not dating already?"

"I thought they were, but Dorcas is pretty tight-lipped at work. Last time I asked she said they were still getting to know each other—you know, in London. But Lily told me that Mary told her that Marlene's been staying over at Dorcas' place nearly every other night. Reckon it's only a matter of time now."

"Well," Sirius purred, as he pressed one hand to the centre of Remus' chest and slowly eased him backward along the couch; "I suppose we can just grill McKinnon today then."

It was that look.

The mischievous little smile Sirius got whenever he wanted something. It was dangerous, that look. If only for the fact that it made Remus want and crave such unholy things.

Urged on by the tug in his gut and the delight in Sirius' expression, Remus let Sirius fall over top of him until they were crammed chest to

chest between the couch cushions. Sirius kissed him for a long while, until his tongue had found that place along the top of his mouth that turned every limb to jelly. When they came apart again Remus took either hand and used them to brush Sirius' long hair out of his face. His eyes were a glassy blue, like smoke at night, and he smiled while tracing a line across the hollow of Remus' cheek with just one finger. Upstairs, Remus could hear a phone ringing.

"I need that demo," Sirius murmured, running his finger upward to trace a path between each of Remus' freckles. "I can't stop imagining how it'll look."

"The studio."

"No, not the studio."

"The shows?"

"Nope."

"Then what?"

Sirius bit his lip, leaning in until they were nose to nose; "How good you're going to look on the inside of that album cover."

Remus breathed in and felt the air in every inch of his lungs—rising like anticipation. Without wasting any more time, he pressed forward, clasping Sirius around the jaw and neck as their mouths moved together in perfect tandem. Another second and he felt a hand in his hair as Sirius tugged him downwards, flush against him. They kissed deeply, without any of the hesitation that had used to follow them while they were at school. They were in their own home now; here they could kiss openly, at all hours should they feel the need. And Remus *needed.*

"Here—fuck, hurry up," Sirius urged, hastily pulling at the hem of Remus' shirt. They'd just started to get it off when the sound of the basement door scraping along the top of the stairs flooded the room, followed by an obnoxious shout from none other than James.

"Sirius! Oi, Sirius!"

"I swear, one day I'm going to kill the bastard," Sirius growled.

"Not if I beat you to it," Remus murmured, already chasing his lips for another kiss. Sirius gave it to him, dipping his chilly fingers below the

waistband of Remus' jeans to scrape his nails along his pelvis. Remus' mouth dropped open as a reaction, and Sirius seized the opportunity to press one thumb inside, flattening it against his tongue. The pressure held for only a second until Remus had wrapped his lips around it, sucking in deeply while clutching tightly to Sirius' wrist. The gesture had Sirius biting his lip again, the fingers of his other hand slipping deeper beneath Remus' waistband as they slowly rocked against one another.

"Yooooo-hoooo, Sirius? I know you're down there, ya nob. Come on, Pete's waiting and there's a phone call for you."

Huffing, Sirius ripped his thumb from Remus' mouth and turned to shout at the stairs;

“We're busy, Potter—TAKE A BLOODY MESSAGE!”

“You sure? It’s Regulus...”

Face already scrunching up, Sirius dropped his head back toward the ceiling with a groan. Suddenly finding himself trying not to laugh, Remus pulled his shirt back down and wiped a thumb across the corner of his mouth.

“You should probably take that. 'Sides, he never calls first. We can always pick this up later.”

"You said we're going out later," Sirius complained. He might've given in to kissing him once more if not for the steady stream of irritated honks that'd followed.

"Damn it, Potter—"

“Shall I tell Regulus you're too busy doing the rumpy-pumpy with Moony to take his call then, or are you coming?”

“YEAH, I’M COMING! ... Coming to bash your head in.”

Another laugh, then; *"You hear that Pete? I think they're shagging again.”*

“Not on the drum set!”

The basement door fell shut with a clang, and Sirius gradually clambered off the couch and out of Remus' lap. After a bit more grumbling (in which Sirius stopped to mess with the tuning of James' guitar) they eventually made their way upstairs to an empty flat.

James had been kind enough to leave the phone off the hook for them, and as Remus made himself busy by clearing yesterday's dishes from the living room, Sirius pulled a stool over to the kitchen nook and gave Regulus a not-so-impressed hello.

“Dunno know what you’re worrying for," he mumbled later, absentmindedly picking at a scab along his knuckles; "s’just your A-Levels. I passed ‘em all with flying… *I did! All of them!* … Yeah, yeah, but you know Loughty’s full of shit anyway… Mhm… yeah… Tell Barty to kiss my arse. Don't let him start thinking that just because we got a few hundred miles between us now that I couldn't kick his ass... *I could!"*

As Sirius chatted away, Remus dropped the dishes in the sink and then came up from behind, kissing his neck and whispering in his ear.

“Gonna take a shower.”

“Mm.”

“You could join me after… if you wanted.”

Sirius looked up very quickly, but already Remus only shrugged innocently.

“Sirius? Sirius, are you still there?”

“Uh… yeah!” Sirius fumbled, switching the phone to the other ear. “Sorry, what was I saying? Oh, right—have you given any more thought to coming out here for the holidays then?”

“No,” Remus overheard Regulus scoff. *“Unlike some, not all of us dream of being disowned.”*

“Why not? Disownment is fun. Disownment gets you a flat in the middle of London filled with sexy bitches.”

Sirius eyed him cheekily, and Remus flashed a single smug wave before kissing the back of his hair and finally letting go. Swinging out into the hall, he took the stairs slowly, Sirius’ voice following him up.

“How's Sheila? You know you can tell me what it is you’re playing, right? … C’mon... Is it a guitar? … Hm… Clarinet? You have the look of a clarinet for sure… *Oi, it’s a compliment!”*

Remus smiled to himself. He wasn’t sure what the odds were of

Regulus accepting Sirius' invitation to come stay for Christmas, but he hoped for both their sakes that he'd come around eventually.

Emerging onto the top floor that made up his and Sirius' bedroom and adjoining bath, Remus reached behind his head and stripped himself of his t-shirt, dropping it in the laundry bin behind the bathroom door. After testing the water (it always took longer for the water to get warm on the top floor) he hopped into the shower and pulled the curtain shut. The bath itself was a tiny thing, decorated with mismatched blue and yellow tiles. He had to tilt the shower head all the way forward just to get it to spray him at chin-level, but he wasn't exactly paying attention to shower height restrictions when he and Sirius had signed the lease. He spent most of his time in the shower eagerly anticipating Sirius' appearance, but when twenty minutes had passed and his boyfriend still had not shown, Remus shut off the taps and reluctantly stepped out.

Donning a pair of winceyette pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt, he made his way back downstairs, rubbing a damp towel over his hair.

"You really left me hanging there, Pads. What, suddenly not interested in shower sex?" Remus said as he emerged on the landing. "Had to whack one out on my own—"

He'd pulled the towel from his head just in time to catch Sirius sniggering into his palm. He was across the living room, sitting on the sofa with a coffee tray laid out before him, but he was not alone.

Remus felt his breath leave him instantly.

"Tom?"

"Might want to be careful, Lu," Tomny grinned. "Don't want to slip on the tile."

He was just the same as Remus remembered. Sandy haired, with wide shoulders and a slight upward tug at each corner of the mouth, indicative of how much time he spent smiling. He had a toothpick tucked between his teeth that he tucked behind one ear as he stood up from the sofa. He looked good, Remus realised—healthy even. No longer a haggard boy, his ruddy cheeks had been traded for sun-kissed dimples and a workman's tan. He was thicker in the chest and arms now too, no doubt earned from several months working those busy ports. But he looked happy. He looked *good.*

"Tom, you're... You're here."

"What?" Tomny drawled. "Not happy to see me?"

Remus glanced to Sirius, who met his gaze with one knuckle leaning against his bottom lip. His eyebrows rose into his hair, then his mouth; *Go on, you fool.*

An exhale left Remus all at once. "God." *It's been too long.* "I fucking missed you."

Tomny smiled, and just like that Remus had abandoned his towel and was rushing headlong toward his friend. Those strong arms caught him easily, and when Tomny clapped him round the back Remus felt it in his ribcage. Another hand came up, cradling the back of his head. Over Tomny's shoulder, Remus could see Sirius lounging back on the sofa and looking well-pleased.

“He came by while you were in the shower,” he said. “Thought it only best to invite the old dog inside.”

" 'Old dog', he says," Tomny chuckled, drawing away. Up close, Remus could see the whites of his eyes, clear and no longer reddened with fatigue. “He's been a gracious host, I should mention," he said, squeezing Remus by the shoulder. In answer, Sirius raised his coffee mug, while Remus tried his best to sort out what was happening.

“When did you get back into London?” He demanded; “And why didn’t you call first?”

“Oh, like you always did?” Tomny snorted, before flicked Remus on the forehead fondly. “Only got back into town last week, thought I’d make it a surprise. You did give me the address, ya remember?”

“Yes, but…” Remus held his forehead, feeling warm and buzzy all over. “Sorry, it’s just—you’re actually here!”

“Yeah, we’ve been over that bit.”

"You're in our flat."

"How times have changed." Tomny pet his hair, more heavy-handed than Sirius, and sighed wistfully. "Got some stuff to tell ya. It's good news."

"Really? Well, what is it?"

Before Tomny could start, Sirius stood up from the sofa, taking his and

Tomny's empty coffee cups in hand. “On that note, I think I’m gonna pop out to the shops for a bit.”

Remus faltered. "Sirius—"

"Don't worry," Sirius replied, waving him off. He carried both mugs into the kitchen and set them in the sink. By the time he'd made his way out, bound for the front door, Tomny was nodding his head appreciatively.

"Thanks for the coffee, Sirius Black."

"Anytime, Thonas Armstrong."

The two shared a look Remus couldn't interpret, and finally Sirius turned away to lift his jacket off the rack by the door. Excusing himself for a moment, Remus left Tomny in the living room and followed Sirius to the front door.

“You don’t have to go, you know.”

“I know." Sirius reached for his boots, tugging them on. "But you haven’t seen each other in months. I’d just be in the way.”

“You’re never in the way.”

Straightening up, Sirius fiddled with his jacket collar for a moment, and finally pulled Remus in by the neck to kiss him tenderly. “Enjoy yourself,” he said after, their foreheads touching. “I’m gonna hit the shops, see if I can’t find that new Clash record. And I'll pick up some beers to replace the ones you drank.”

"Marlene and Mary are gonna be by later."

"Then I'll come back later."

“Okay." Remus smiled, softly. "Can you grab some sugar while you're at it? We’re out.”

Sirius pinched him, and after Remus had drawn away, he turned and opened the front door.

“Here’s hoping you didn’t waste all of the hot water. Think I’d like to have myself a shower when I get back.”

Remus didn’t miss the subtle innuendo, but by then Sirius was already gone, front door falling shut behind him. When he made his way back

into the living room, Remus found Tomny standing by the bookshelves, squinting at the different covers.

“These all yours, I’m guessing?”

“Not all,” Remus echoed. “Some are Lily’s… or Sirius’.”

“He read lots too?”

“Sometimes, but he’s more picky.”

"And the others?"

"James can't sit still long enough to focus on a page. Peter... Well, Peter paints."

Tomny nodded approvingly, moving on to stare appraisingly at one of Lily's plants; a Christmas cactus she'd lovingly named 'Mary'. Watching him, Remus suddenly felt nervous. Tomny was in his flat, *his home*. It’d never happened before... It wasn’t as though he were suddenly worried about the nicks in the furniture, or that suspicious stain on the corner of the rug—after all, Tomny's flat had never exactly been tidy—but he wanted to impress him. He wanted Tomny to know that he’d done well for himself, and that he was happy and healthy too.

“You said you got back into town last week?" Remus asked, gingerly licking his lips. "What's kept you 'til now?”

“I’m a busy man. Hedge fund won’t run itself.” Smirking, Tomny came away from the bookshelf to join Remus on the sofa. “This s’a nice place. Nice neighbourhood. Didn’t even have to check my pockets on the way over.”

“Sirius found it. Used some of the money his uncle left him for the deposit. We all split the rent.”

"You working then?"

Remus nodded. "At a music shop over near Soho."

"Right." Tomny gestured playfully toward the stacks of records piled up around the stereo. “And your band? How're things going?”

“S'great!" Remus replied, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. "We actually just got a residency out in South Bank right now—means we play there every week. It’s a local pub. You should drop by sometime, see us play. Bet you'd like it.”

“Bet I would.”

“You said you had something to tell me?" Remus asked, suddenly more nervous about all the talk had been of him. "Is it to do with Ipswich?"

Tomny licked his lips pensively. "It... started there, I s'pose."

"You're not going back there, are you?"

"What? Nah, don't worry. Couldn't pay me to go back to smelling like fish all day."

"Were the docks really that bad?"

"Nah, I'm just whinging." Tomny shook his head. "We mostly handled cargo, used to get boxes from countries I hadn't even heard of. A dock’s a dock, but I finally got paid summick reasonable down there, innit. Legal work even. You'd be proud, I managed to save up a bit too.”

“Save up for what?”

Tomny considered, drumming his hands lightly on his thighs. “Looking to get my driving licence actually. See about getting a car after that. I keep telling myself I’d go out and visit Doss on his little farm—his girl’s up the duff again."

"Again?"

"Yeah, but her dad's passed now so Doss's taken over everything. Bet he's going mental, what with another baby on the way and only a wife and sheep to talk to. I just reckoned that if I go out and visit enough, he'll name the baby after me.”

"Piss off," Remus snorted. "You don't want a fucking baby named after you. That's like... Well, s'like one step away from a bloody godfather."

Tomny's expression shifted, like thinly-veiled surprise, but it was gone a second later as he slumped back into the sofa with a hapless shrug. "I don't think being a godfather would be all that bad," he said, once again leaving Remus astonished.

"Shut up! Since when have you given two shits about children? No, I tell you, who are you and what have you done with Tomny?"

"I'm still the same ol' me, ya cheeky fucker. I'm jus' saying—a baby?

Now that's like... gotta be some sort of miracle."

"If a baby's a miracle then a fart's a sign from the Almighty."

"So you have no interest?"

Remus scoffed; "Say some barmy idiot does name you godfather to their child—what happens if they just up and kick the bucket? Are *you* gonna raise 'em?"

Tomny crossed his arms. "You saying I couldn't do it?"

"No, I'm saying why the hell would you want to?"

Tomny didn't answer. Instead he turned his head to face the kitchen, the tendons of his neck strained with unease.

"Lu, I have something to tell you."

He was leaning forward to look Tomny in the eye when he realised it, and instantly Remus was abhorred.

"No," he moaned. "Please say you didn't do it."

Tomny spun around; "Now Lu, I—"

"Doss asked you to be godfather, didn't he? And you fucking went and said yes."

"Wha—? No!"

"You big idiot, Tom! Doss' parents are dead, and now according to you, so are his girl's. What happens if something happens to them? You're roped in for life now. Supporting a baby and a candy habit at the same can't be good for anyone's formative year—"

"Will you just fucking shut up?" Tomny snapped. "Doss didn't ask me to be the kid's godfather—I'm trying to tell you that I met someone!"

Remus felt like he'd been punched in the throat. For a while, no words came.

"Y... You...?"

"Her name's Skylar. She's living wiv' me, back at the flat now."

"She... *Skylar...*"

As if taking his stunned yammering as permission to continue, Tomny sat himself up on the couch and reached forward until he'd placed a hand over Remus' forearm. Remus watched it from far away, feeling foolish. There had always been a train of girls that followed Tomny, especially when they were younger. He was as handsome as handsome came, even compared to those who'd grown up west of Aldgate. Much to the other boys' chagrin, he had even managed to catch the eye of a few upmarket girls over the years; but the shock of hearing that he'd gotten serious—that someone else had moved in with him? It rattled that empty space in the middle of Remus' chest, the one that'd been missing its matching piece for a while.

“We's met when I was over in Felixstowe," Tomny explained, smiling in what was probably supposed to be encouragement. "She was working at one of the pubs and we sorta... got on. She’s a nice girl—think you’d like ‘er.”

Like her? How could I ever like her, she’s not—

Remus stifled the thought.

“So, she… She likes you?” He tried. *Tried.*

"What, like it's so hard?” Tomny grinned, squeezing Remus' arm as a comfort. "I'm only taking the piss," he said. "But yeah, she likes me. When we met she’d never even been further than Ipswich… but she ain’t thick! Lush enough to be in the pictures, innit.”

He’s bragging, Remus thought; *He’s bragging because he’s proud of her.*

Maybe that was what stung the most. He’d always known that Tomny would move on and find someone else, but the hole in his chest still rang hollow. It stung. Ached. Over a year it’d been, and though he'd forgotten some things, the memory was still raw. He still missed Tonya.

"And, uh, Lu...? There's one more thing."

Remus looked down again, at the hand Tomny kept clasped around his wrist. His grip was even tighter now, as though letting go might mean an escape. It was then that Remus finally grasped what Tomny had been trying to tell him all along.

Oh no.

“It's Skylar."

Please, he silently begged; *Please, please don't say it.*

"She's preg—"

"God-FUCKING-dammit, Tomny!"

Remus threw himself up from the sofa instantly, about ready to run the length of the room. Maybe the entire flat. When that didn't happen he put his head in his hands and squeezed, hoping it might wake him up from the horrible nightmare he was having, or at least pop his eardrums so he wouldn't have to hear any more. It was insanity. Tomny—*with a kid?!*

"You've got to be joking me!" Remus cried. "PREGNANT?! You went and got a girl *pregnant?* Are you insane?!"

Tomny quickly scooted to the edge of the sofa, holding out an arm as if he could calm him. "Hold on there, Lu. This wasn't exactly planned, orright?"

"Yeah, that's pretty fucking clear! Honestly, how hard is it to use a fucking condom?!"

"Fancy that. I'm 'ere having a kid, and yet yer the one losing his shit."

"Of course I'm losing it—you're not responsible enough to be a father!"

"Shit, thanks for that."

"You're not *old* enough!"

"Not according to biology."

"And what the hell would you know about biology, huh?" Remus spat. "I mean, christ—how long have you even known the girl?"

"We met when I got into Felixstowe."

"That's less than five months, you lunatic!"

"Wow—really? Didn't realise that, since I'm clearly too thick to count!"

"CLEARLY!"

Tomny scowled then, falling back into the sofa cushions with a nasty

scoff. “Whatever. Keep barking yer head off if it makes you feel better, but there ain’t nothing left for you to shout about that I ain’t already said to meself. The baby’s coming, Lu."

"Okay, so why're you here?" Remus demanded. "Why are you with me and not home with her—picking out bassinets and rubbing her feet?"

“Reckon it’s cause yer important to me,” Tomny shouted. “You fuckin’ knob!”

It took the wind out of his sails considerably, though Remus had always been a poor fighter when it came to his friends. He felt his anger crumble away, replaced by the guilt of lashing out so badly. Tomny clearly needed someone, and he’d come to him. Remus should’ve been grateful.

“Have you told anyone else?” He asked, face hot with shame.

“No,” Tomny replied, no longer looking at him. “Just you. I wanted you to hear it from me. I wanted... Well, guess it don't matter now.”

He'd ruined it then. Utterly fucking bollixed. Looking at Tomny, Remus was reminded of all the reasons why he never wanted to be a parent. After so many years of friendship, he'd just figured they were the same.

Slowly, Remus eased himself back down onto the sofa.

"I'm sorry."

Tomny grunted.

“I am. You said she…" *Ugh.* "So how far along…?”

Tomny spoke into his hand; “Baby’s due in April.”

“Oh... Shit.”

“Whaddya think,” Tomny murmured; "Girl or boy? Betting on a boy meself, but I hope s’a girl… Yeah, a girl would be nice.”

Remus hung his head. He wished he'd had something to drink, but Sirius wasn’t back with the beers yet—*thank fuck*—and so he settled for the pack of cigarettes he or one of the others must have left lying atop of the stereo. After fitting one between his teeth, he turned to Tomny and offered him his own. It took a second, but eventually Tomny turned back to him, accepting the cigarette as well as the

flame Remus offered to light it. Only when the air was thick with familiar smoke, did Remus feel himself begin to ease. The fight had left him, though now he felt a bit like crying. Frustration, he realised.

“I used to think I was the one keeping you on your toes."

“You were," said Tomny glumly. "Pretty sure I have heart problems thanks to you.”

“Nah, that’ll be all the snow.”

Tomny shrugged, unable to argue.

Thumbing the cigarette filter, Remus took a deep breath. “I don’t see you for almost a year, and then you show up and drop this fucking bomb on me.”

A chuckle. “Nah, it was a bomb for me. For you... more like one 'a them cherry bombs Seesaw used to cook up in his dad's garage. He's got a job now. Working up in the Midlands in some mine."

Remus forced a smile, but it fell a second later when he turned to face Tomny for answers.

“But I thought you didn’t want kids.”

Now, Tomny turned to look at him.

“Now when did I ever say that?”

Despite expecting it, the question still caught Remus off guard.

"I just thought that..."

A beat passed, as Tomny nodded like he understood. "You're half right," he confessed, reaching forward to tap his cigarette along the ashtray sitting on the coffee table. “Maybe I didn’t picture it happening like this, but never? Nah. 'Sides, how else would I avenge them if not this way?"

"I don't understand," Remus replied; "Avenge who?"

"Us. Kids like us, anyway. Kids who—who grew up without a sod's chance in hell, because their parents had already given up."

It felt good to hear Tomny speak about them as though they were the same, but the guilt was already too heavy. Lee had made it clear the

last time he'd seen him; *we are not the same.*

"Tom, you know you and I didn't grow up the same. Me? I don't have any right to complain. Not when you—"

"I ain't talking about fucking money," Tomny sighed. "Money may make the world go 'round, but it ain't what makes you a good dad, or a good mum. Now I know the odds aren't exactly stacked in my favour, but I figure that if I'm willing to try, then at least my kid won't be starting from nothin'. That they... Well, that they'll be better off than me."

It was an admirable thing, one that—if he were being honest—made Remus' heart twinge with envy.

"You're right," he breathed, almost a whisper. "They won't have nothing, not if they have you. You're worth more than..." Remus trailed off then, and picked up the only way he knew how; "You're my best friend, Tom. My brother."

It was as though all the anger and apprehension left Tomny all at once. His shoulders slumped, and after a sigh of relief, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Remus in comfort. "Oh, how I missed ya, Lu," he said, rotating between clapping and rubbing Remus' back. "I'm gon' make this work, you'll see. M'gonna get clean. No kid of mine's gonna be cleaning up after their shit-stinkin' father. And I'm gon' get my licence and join Burrin in the bookie league."

"Gambling?" Remus said over his shoulder. "You're sure that's legal?"

"Legal enough, innit. Gonna be a mess for a while—the lads are gonna be straight pissed—but my kid deserves more than a dad dealing dope out the back door. I'm just so glad I've got you on my side, Lu."

"I'm always gonna be on your side, Tom."

"Good."

They held on for a while longer, simply taking it all in at their own pace. Then a thought occurred to Remus.

"Fucking wanker!" He shoved Tomny away, playfully, and then reached for his cigarettes. Grinding out the first in the ashtray, he reached for a second, and offered it to Tomny first. "What d'you think you're even playing at anyway, Doss naming his kid after you? You're having a kid of your own, bloody name *that* one after yourself."

Tomny grinned as he lit the end of his cigarette off his own lighter. “Ah," he hummed, breathing out his first puff; "but I think the world deserves a few more ‘Tomnys’, don’t chu?”

They shared another laugh, this one more genuine, and afterwards Remus bit his lip.

“Now don't go crying on me, but I just wanna say... I'm happy for you, Tom—truly. You’re going to be a great dad.”

Tomny softened then, like he’d been waiting ages just to hear those words from someone. He probably had.

“Aw," he moaned, "that's it! Come ‘ere, you!”

There was a second hug, this one much tighter than the last. As Remus struggled to keep from dropping his cigarette, he heard Tomny's words rumble happily in his ear;

"And to think, I almost asked you to be the little sprog's godfather."

Remus dropped the cigarette. It burst with orange sparks against the couch cushion before rolling off the edge and onto the floor, where it was chased by the both of them, Remus with his hands, Tomny his boot. Remus got there first, but unfortunately for him, Tomny wasn't much slower; his boot came down hard, squishing both finger and ash against the wooden floor.

"Shit, sorry!" Tomny yelped, as Remus brought a sore finger back to his mouth. He wasn't bothered; he was too distracted. And rightly so.

"Me?" Remus echoed. "You wanted me to be the godfather?"

"Well, yeah," Tomny blanched, "but now that I know how you feel about it, I wouldn't ask that—"

"You don't know how I feel."

"Uh, yeah... I think I do," Tomny said, squinting at him. "Or was your entire rant earlier just some sort of figment of my imagination? Hard sell, that. Have'na done a line in two days."

"I-I know what I said before," Remus admitted, "but what if I changed my mind?"

"You've changed your mind?"

"I dunno. You haven't asked me!"

Tomny laughed, nodding brazenly at Remus as though he couldn't decide whether he wanted to hug him a third time or bash him upside the head. Finally setting his cigarette down in the ashtray ahead of him, he scooted forward on the sofa once more, both hands clasped together in anxious enthusiasm.

"Lu, would you consider being my kid's godfather?"

"I... Well, I'll think about it."

Tomny faltered for a moment, as though he'd been expecting a different answer and had to reel his excitement back in. To his credit, the smile never disappeared, and instead he nodded at Remus in understanding. "That's fair," he said. "I didn't think you'd give me an answer straight out anyway. You just think about it then. Reckon you got about five months."

"This is a bit mental, you know," Remus told him; "I find out I have a secret godmother and my best friend asks me to become a godfather myself all in the same year."

"Sounds like to me that yer on a roll."

"Suppose that's true too."

Tomny moved on from the baby stuff faster than Remus had expected. He regaled him with everything that had happened since they'd last seen each other. From Immingham up to Sunderland and back, it'd seemed as though Tomny had scoured half of the country's entire eastern coastline. He boasted sometimes;

"The sea was nice," he said. "You ever camped out by the sea before?"

Remus shook his head. "I've never been." Aside from that time he'd driven to Dover to rescue Sirius, that was.

"Really? Well, I'll take you. We can camp out on the sand, have ourselves a fire. You gotta be careful picking the spot though, once me and the boys had a bit too much and we's woke up with the tide lapping at our ankles."

"Only you, Tom."

And sometimes he complained;

“Bloody reeked in the mornings, before the tide came in,” he would say, “but then you started work and everything else just fell to the wayside. They use these huge cranes to get the cargo on and off the ships. By the end I was operating ‘em all on my own, and my boss? He even got me connected with a guy here in the city. Said he could get me set up with another gig soon, that’ll be great, eh?”

Remus kept on nodding, listening intently but also not at all. He was so happy to see Tomny again, but he couldn't help the fact that his brain was still wheeling.

Godfather. He could hardly believe it. It was not something he'd ever aspired to be, especially at eighteen, and *especially* not after discovering that he had a godparent of his own a few short months ago.

But it was Tomny, and Tomny had asked him! He'd asked Remus because there was no one else he wanted as his family's side than him. And after all that time spent wondering if he’d have just one more summer, one more day to be near him, suddenly the idea didn’t sound so bad...

The afternoon had become an early evening by the time Tomny stood up from the sofa and said that he should be getting back. Sirius was still gone, off on whatever shopping venture, and as he saw Tomny off from the door, Remus felt a sudden surge of adrenaline. The sane part of him knew that Tomny was a man of his word, and that if he said he was back for good then he meant it; yet still, Remus couldn't help the feeling. He was afraid that if he let Tomny walk out that door now, it'd be a long time before he ever saw him again.

“Hey Lu, I think you should meet Skylar,” said Tomny as he stepped out into the damp and chilly street. Pausing on the third stair, he turned back around and pulled a toothpick from behind one ear. Remus wanted to say that he was surprised by the request, but after today, he didn't think he was capable of being shocked anymore.

"You do?"

"Yeah. Like I said, she's a nice girl. And I'd like you to meet her... If yer willing."

"I'm willing," Remus nodded. "We'll get lunch. It'll be your treat."

Tomny chuffed, and fit the toothpick into one corner of his mouth. "Yeah, orright—my treat." He turned away, scooting down the last few

steps. "I'll call ya then, princess! See if we's can't make a date around yer severely busy rock star schedule."

"I ain't a rock star yet!"

"Only a matter of time then!" Tomny called, saluting him as he walked backward toward the street. "Be seeing ya, Lu."

Remus almost let him go, but then a sharp wind came out of nowhere and licked up the back of his neck, and whatever metaphorical tightrope he'd been teetering on snapped.

"Tom?! One more thing..."

"Eh?"

"Yes."

Tomny squinted at him in the evening's dull light. "Yes, what?"

"I'll be godfather."

A car whipped past, cutting through a particularly nasty puddle and threatening to all but soak the back of Tomny's trousers. And it would've, had Tomny not already launched himself back up the stairs.

“Holy shit—Lu! I fucking love you!”

Spitting out the toothpick, Tomny slapped his hands around Remus' face and left a fat smooch on either cheek. He might’ve done more—like lift Remus' entire body up over his head in victory—had Remus not pushed him off first.

"I don't want you to think I'm making this decision on an impulse," he said.

"Who gives a shit about impulse?!" Tomny whooped, clapping him around the shoulders. “You said YES! Oh man—my sprog’s gonna be set for life!”

"You dick—"

"I love you," Tomny said, kissing him once more on the forehead, this time with an exaggerated *mwah!* "You're amazing. Bloody amazing."

Afterwards, Tomny pitched himself down the front steps, still singing Remus' praises and punching the air.

“Let’s just start with lunch,” Remus called after him. “I mean it, your treat!”

“Fucking—lunch! Yeah, orright!”

“And don’t get lost on your way home!”

"I love you! I love—*you!"*

"I..." Remus sighed. "I love you too."

He watched Tomny all the way to the corner, the kid about to be a dad, and when Remus finally shut the front door to the flat, he sagged against it. Bands, demos—now children?! What a fucking laugh his life was turning out to be.

Back in the kitchen, Remus drifted. He washed the leftover coffee mugs, dried them, and put them away. Then he scrubbed the sink, and after that he swept the floors, dusted every surface. He would’ve mopped, except they were out of detergent. Instead he dug around in the drawer, designated for miscellaneous rubbish and managed to find a can of 3-in-One to fix the squeaky hinge that had been plaguing one of the cupboards since they’d moved in. Afterwards he tested it, opening and closing the cupboard until the squeak inevitably faded. It felt slightly insane—manic—but he needed to be *doing* something. Finally Remus threw the cupboard shut; slamming the door with all of his strength. The dishes inside gave a rattle, and he swallowed the scream that was building up his throat. Tomny had only just gone, and he’d been happy for him! So why did he suddenly feel so hopeless?

Trudging back into the living room, he went first to the radio, yanking on the dial and watching as it scanned through each channel. Aside from a few comedy shows and the occasional radio personality caught mid-rave, all that was playing was the daily news summary and Radio 1’s *Top 40.* Remus tried to stomach it, but the national radio had been his enemy ever since he’d discovered that they limited decent music to John Peel’s late night sessions and Tommy Vance’s *Friday Rock Show.*

“And now it’s number thirty on—RADIO ONE, the new top forty!”

He’d turned on the radio to drown out any silence; and now to drown out the radio, Remus turned on the television. There was an advert for *Pebble Mill,* then some rubbish programme on cotton farming. With both noise-boxes going, he could hardly tell which was worse. X-Ray Spex or BBC1.

‘I know you’re antiseptic, your deodorant smells nice!’

“And now onto… Ajay P. Taylor looks at cotton—the fabric of an age.”

‘—I’d like to get to know you, but you’re deep frozen like the ice!’

The answer was that they were both intolerable. Curling in on himself, Remus tucked his head into the corner of the sofa and tried to let the noise sweep him away. Yet for all of Poly Styrene’s incessant bleating, he could not stop thinking about Tomny, Skylar, and the baby. Imagining the three of them living in the flat he'd once lived in with Tonya felt a lot like how it’d been to think of Sandra living at the estate. But that was stupid of course, since Sandra was his step-mother and had no babies and Tonya had only been his best friend’s girlfriend.

Remus punched the sofa cushion—*Dammit!* It was pathetic. Tomny had caught him by surprise, but how could this be such a problem? It wasn’t as though Remus was the one who’d run the girl up the pole. So why did it hurt so badly?

‘He’s a germ free adolescent,
Cleanliness is her obsession—
Cleans her teeth ten times a day,
Scrub away, scrub away, scrub awayyyyy!’

Curse the Queen Mother and her fucking BeeBeeCee.

There was a clatter as the front door opened, and Remus was on his feet in a second. He swung out into the hall, Sirius’ name already forming between his lips, but rather than his boyfriend, he found three girls making their way inside, nearly tripping over one another to get their shoes off.

“Hiya, Remus,” Mary said, shrugging out of a fabulous leather trench. “What’s all that noise now?”

“Nothing,” he flubbed. “I was… cleaning. Kitchen needed a scrub.”

“Did it ever,” Lily agreed, slipping past. She brought with her a large paper bag, which she set down on the dining room table. A second later the radio clicked off, and Marlene came forward with an armful of her own, this one in the form of a cardboard box. She set it aside to greet him, kissing his cheek warmly.

“No Lottie?” Asked Remus.

“Nah. She’s skipped town again to see Roger.” Marlene looked him in the eye then, and he knew she was reading his expression like a picture book. “Are you alright?”

“Fine. Had a long day.”

“Me too,” Mary interjected. “I swear this bitch of a professor at the conservatory has it in for me. Keeps singling me out in Diction lessons. Try telling her that ‘Rubber Baby Buggy Bumpers’ sounds vaguely dirty *one time* and it's like I’m on the bloody blacklist…”

"Mary's voice lessons aren't exactly shaping up to what she'd hoped," Marlene explained quietly.

Mary huffed; "Whatever. I'm only doing it to piss Daddy off. He's still hung up on me taking French." Without any more complaining, she flounced past the pair of them and into the living room with a box of her own. Now Remus was starting to get suspicious.

“What are those?” He asked Marlene, as she picked up her own box and carried it inside.

“Just a few things for the flat—Mary’s idea.”

“It’s just so drab in here!” Mary called, as she set her box down on the coffee table. Shrinking at the noise, she snatched up the television remote and flicked it off, clapping it into her palm as she surveyed the room. “Ugh. I knew we should’ve brought paint. This beige is simply vomit-inducing.”

“I told you, no painting. We still want our deposit back later,” Lily said, opening a third box of her own. Thankfully this one was filled with take-away.

“I thought we were going to the cinema, not redecorating,” Remus said, shutting off the radio with a flick of his hand. To him, the flat was perfect; the downstairs made up of a simple living and dining combo with wood floors and two front windows, short only a pair of curtains. Their furniture consisted of a table with six chairs, a sofa and a two-seater, along with the bookshelves, telly, and radio—plus enough albums to last them a decade. Lily’s plants had taken up most other surfaces and they’d even wrangled a dart board onto the wall that James had rescued from the local rubbish tip. Remus wasn’t sure what else there was to want.

“We’re just looking to spice the place up a bit,” Mary said, opening her box and withdrawing several plush throw-pillows. “My driver Henry will be over later with more if you’d like to help us drag them inside.”

He didn’t, only because he was in a bad mood, and so Remus plodded back over to the sofa, where he collapsed on top of Mary’s new periwinkle pillows. They didn’t match the sofa by any means, but he could already see her pulling out fabric swatches to compare.

“James is supposed to be back before five,” Lily said, while she and Marlene arranged the take-away boxes across the table. “Remus, can you go fetch Sirius?”

“Can’t. He’s gone out to the shops.”

“Oh. Any idea when he’ll be back?”

“Nope.”

“Remus, what do you think?” Mary held up her sofa swatches. “Leather or synthetic?”

He shrugged, not caring, and Mary frowned, before setting both hands on her waist.

“Oh no, you’re upset.” She tipped her head back. “Ladies, we’ve a crisis on our hands. Remus is in distress.”

“I’m not in distress,” he grumbled.

“What’s the matter?” Lily called. "Remus, what's wrong?"

“Nothing’s wrong!”

“That’s a lie,” Mary persisted. “Poor baby Remus. Having a bad day, are we?”

“Mary.” Coming forward, Marlene tossed a glare in her best friend’s direction, before gently prodding Remus’ arm. “Is there really nothing bothering you?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m totally—”

“You can tell us, you know,” Lily piped up. “Whatever it is, we won’t be upset.”

“I don’t know what you’d have to be upset about!” He snapped. “You’re not the one having the baby…”

A collective gasp went up around the room, and the girls were on him in a second—their faces pressed so close to his that Remus felt himself go cross-eyed.

“Remus, you got a girl pregnant?!”

“You cheated on Sirius?!”

“What were you THINKING?!”

“Not me!” He wailed, throwing his arms up to ward them off. “It's Tomny!”

The girls eased immediately, their expressions stunned nonetheless.

“I thought you said that he was still in Ipswich,” Lily prodded gently.

“Well, I thought he was,” Remus amended. “He came over today—said he met someone… Now I guess the girl’s pregnant.”

“Shit,” Marlene winced. “Are they gonna keep it?”

“Guess so.”

The girls exchanged a look and even began whispering to one another in hush, while Remus began bitterly picking at a hangnail on his thumb. He didn’t feel like going mental over the kitchen cupboards anymore at least, but then again, he didn’t want the girls feeling sorry for him either.

“Look, it isn't like I’m just gonna fall to... What's that look for?"

All three girls were staring at each other. Remus recognised it instantly; they were having a telepathic moment, the kind only other girls could understand. He'd seen it enough times back at school, but then he usually had one of the other lads to back him up. Now he was outnumbered.

"Mary," Lily nodded, "go get it."

With a little giggle, Mary shot across the room toward the stereo.

"Wait—what’re you doing?” Remus demanded, as the other two took his arms.

“Just come on!” Lily grinned, while she and Marlene hauled him to his feet. Across the room, Mary was rapidly flicking through the collection of LPs. When she found what she was looking for, she slipped the vinyl disc from its sheath and tossed the remaining cover across the living room with a happy shout. The cover was a diamond blue blur in the air, but Remus still understood.

Oh no...

"We know exactly what'll make you feel better, Remus," Marlene told him.

"No, please—mercy."

"This is mercy!" Lily laughed. "How can you be sad when you're dancing with your friends?"

“That's right," Mary shrieked happily, as she bent over the turntable with the record in hand; "Remember, Remus, there's an ABBA song for everything!”

“Aw, for Christ’s sake—”

"Come on, Remus, dance with us!"

"Yes, dance with us, Remus!"

He probably could’ve said no if he'd really wanted to, but they were looking at him with those big doe eyes, and the sound of Lily’s new ABBA record was already sailing out across the room from the stereo’s speakers. First the Spanish guitar, followed by rapid piano. Then the sheer embarrassment.

‘Chiquitita, tell me what’s wrong,
You’re enchained by your own sorrow;
In your eyes, there is no hope for tomorrow…’

Remus groaned, and still the girls pulled him into the middle of the living room—Marlene pushing the coffee table aside for even more space. By the next verse they were singing, and though he longed to push them away, they were smiling too big for him to bear it.

“Chiquitita, tell me the truuuuth,

I'm a shoulder you can cry on,
Yoooour best friend—I'm the one you must rely on…"

"Guys, this is *embarrassing!"*

"Just let it happen, Remus!"

"You were always sure of yourself,
Now I see you've broken a feather. "

Marlene grinned, and Remus shook his head adamantly.

"No, no—I can't!"

"Yes, you can! Dance with us, Remus!"

"Yes, Remus—dance!" Mary declared, returning to her box of treasures and pulling out a vibrant feather boa of all things. Remus thought himself safe when she wrapped it around her own neck, but then she pulled out a second. He all but gaped at her, and as the chorus began, she simply spun round and tossed it over his shoulders. Lily squealed, clearly ecstatic, and by then they were done for.

"Chiquitita, you and I knoooow!
How the heartaches come and they go—
And the scars they're leaving!
You'll be dancing once again,
And the pain will end,
You will have no time for grieving!"

They swung him about the room, feathers flying, and while Remus mourned his pride, he did not stop them. Lily held one hand, throwing it skyward, and after she swung into his chest, demanding he dip her. Remus did—and then Marlene dipped him.

"Chiquitita, you and I cryyyyy!
But the sun is still in the sky—
And shining above you!
Let me hear you sing once more,
Like you did before,

Sing a new song, Chiquitita…"

Laughter. They were laughing. It was contagious, and it went on again for an entire second verse. By the time they'd made it to the end, Remus was out of breath from letting Mary lead him around by the boa, dodging the girls' impressive swings and kicks. He tried to sit, but they pulled him in for the final verse, draping themselves across his arms and back as though their legs had all suddenly given out.

"Tryyyy once moooore, like you diiiid befooooore!
Sing a new song, Chiquititaaaa…"

Just as he was threatening to collapse under their combined weight, the girls let out a tremendous giggle and shot upright. Holding him by the boa, they spun around some more as the music slowly filtered out. Every step and skip remained on beat, even as the front door opened and the sound of James' warm tenor cut through the music.

"Evening, ladies! Guess who I ran into on the way home."

"Moony, I remembered the sugar!"

A second later, James and Sirius rounded the corner, muttering something about the smell of Chinese. They stopped on the threshold, clearly surprised by the show, and while James opened his mouth to laugh, Sirius crossed his arms and sagged sulkily against the doorway.

"No fair. Why's he always get to have all the fun?"

* * *

Later that night…

The week before, following an argument with Peter over the evening's radio channel, Remus had gone out and spent his entire paycheque on a second radio. Sirius had had no qualms—he installed the device in their own bedroom, knocking aside one of the lamps just to fit it on their bedside. Nowadays the room was almost never silent. If one of them was home, the noise was on. Blondie, the Clash, German synth —none of it mattered, so long as it kept the quiet away. And while

Remus listened to his radio, Sirius sat across the room on the cosy sofa chair they'd left in the corner, quietly plucking away at Sheila's guitar. Working at the pub had turned him into even more of a night owl, and he claimed his best work was now written alongside the burning midnight oil. Not that Remus ever minded.

Reaching over to the radio, he turned up the volume;

"—And for those folks who are just now tuning in, that was XTC with their new single 'Are You Receiving Me?'" The disc jockey droned; *"In proper news, I see the Nipple Erectors have transmogrified themselves into simply, 'The Nips'. I assume it's some sort of attempt to win over the playlist committee. This device will not—I think—work, but perhaps it will get them a few more plays on the ol' airways. Before that though, we interviewed legendary producer Gaz Spectre in our studio earlier this week. Now we bring you that brief recorded clip."*

Remus brought his cigarette to his lips, listening as the DJ's single voice became two;

"Now Gaz, we've talked for a while about your signed acts, but what about the future? Can you tell me, what is it Spectre Records is looking for in a fresh band?"

"Well, you know I ain't looking for any old act, John. Any plod off the street can pick up a guitar and play, what I'm looking for is a phenomenon. Someone who can just up on that stage, and make it their own. It's my job to make the music sell, anything less ain't worth my time."

"You heard it here first, folks—Gaz Spectre doesn't sign bands, he signs phenomena."

As the DJ switched back over from the record to live feed, Remus shook his head. Phenomena—what a load of shit.

"There's nothing I love more than getting legends in my studio seat," the DJ announced. *"Now I'm wondering, will the Nips be that phenomena Gaz is looking for? I'll leave that up to you to decide, dear listener. The Nips, 'All the Time in the World', coming at 'chu next."*

Polishing off his cigarette, Remus ground the stub into the ashtray next to the bulky radio set-up and lit another, before dropping back into his pillows. Outside, the nightly rain pattered their bedroom windows while the remnants of punk shot out from the radio speakers at a moderate volume.

‘Now it’s all over, I’m sorry baby, my brains are in my pants,
You know I’ve got my eyes on you, I’m looking for a chance!
All the time—all the time!’

A baby, he kept thinking. *Tomny is having a* fucking *baby.*

‘So lie on your back and think of England, and I’ll put my hands on you,
I’ve been dreaming on your picture, baby, creaming over you!
All the time—all the time!’

“I like this one,” Sirius said. “ ‘Cream all over you’? Now that’s modern romance.”

Setting the guitar aside, he came forward, sliding onto his side of the bed like a cat. When he was close enough to reach, Remus pulled Sirius into his chest until he was spooning him from behind.

“Did you finish your song?” He murmured.

“Nah. Couldn’t quite work out the bridge.”

“I’ll help you tomorrow.”

“Mm.” Sirius grabbed his wrist, tucking the end of Remus’ cigarette between his lips and taking a long draw. He let it go a second later, and Remus watched the smoke drift up toward the ceiling and disappear.

“Got the fright of your life today, didn’t cha?” Sirius said. Not seeing a point in hiding it, Remus had since told him everything. The others as well.

“I dunno… you turning up on my doorstep last summer might still take the cake.”

“Hey, at least I called first.”

Remus smiled, and relaxed into the pillow again. Sirius took another drag, and then left tiny smoke-caressed kisses along the inside of his wrist.

“I just thought we’d have more time,” Remus said. “You know… to be kids. Yobs. I just wanted to have fun. But he’s living in another world.

Always has."

"Just because he's growing up, doesn't mean we have to. We've still got plenty of time to be yobs."

"You'll never be a yob, Sirius."

"Now that's pure classism."

They both laughed, quietly, and Remus buried his nose in the back of Sirius' hair.

"Guess I should get over it now. How long until you figure James and Lily are up the duff?"

"Not long at all, considering we keep nicking the condoms from their toilet."

"You told me that *you* bought those!"

"It's November—practically freezing out! You really want me to pop off to Boots' every time you're feeling a little bit randy?"

Remus shook his head. "You're hopeless."

"Probably."

Behind them, the radio kept going.

' It don't really matter what you wanna say, 'cause I know that I've got—
All the time—all the time in the world to make you mine!
All the time—all the time in the world to make you mine!'

Only half-listening, Remus spared a peek downwards at Sirius. He'd stolen his cigarette now, and was smoking it quietly in the dim-lit room while Remus simply watched him, eyes trained on the trio of moles behind his ear. Just below that, the neckline of Sirius' t-shirt had been stretched badly, revealing the cut of his collarbone. Carefully, Remus let the hand he had wrapped around Sirius' middle trail downwards, until his fingers had slipped just beneath the shirt, brushing against his abdomen.

"Guess this means you're not exactly feeling tired yet," Sirius said. Remus heard the smirk in his voice.

“Are you?”

A pause for consideration, and then Sirius was flipping himself around —bringing one leg up on Remus’ other side until he was straddling him. He pushed his hair back, sucking on the end of the cigarette.

“Go on then. Take off your shirt, rock star. If you're good I'll cream all over you too.”

"Wow. How did I ever get so lucky?"

* * *

It was the following morning, a Saturday. Only hours before they’d been having mind-blowing sex to the soundtrack of X-Ray Spex, and even had a gig at the Shoestring to look forward to later that evening. Aside from that, all Remus had planned for the day was a great sack of nothing. Though apparently no one had thought to tell Peter that. He was wailing on their bedroom door in what appeared to be a varying level of distress, though all Remus did as he stirred was toss a pillow across the room in objection.

“Lupin! Black! Fucking Christ… wake up already, got something to tell you!”

As their friend kept hammering away, Remus blinked awake to the feel of Sirius’ forearm draped across his bare chest. He then received a swift elbow to the gut as Sirius used said arm to push himself up into a sitting position.

“Ugh… Fuck off, Pettigrew!” He barked, stifling a yawn.

“You fuck off! It’s past nine and some of us have jobs to get to, so do us all a favour and get your ruddy arses down here so we can explain.”

“Who died?” Remus called, peering over at Sirius. “Better not have been anyone we know.”

“I hope it was my mother.”

Remus smacked him. “Stupid.”

“No one died,” Peter huffed. *“But my dad said we're not allowed to use the van anymore."*

"What? Why?"

"If you come downstairs maybe I'll tell you… And don't forget your trousers this time!"

"Fine, we're bloody coming," Sirius grumbled. "And don't tell me what to do with my trousers!"

There was some grumbling, and then finally silence as Peter's footsteps retreated back down the creaky staircase. Listening to him go, Remus yawned himself and stretched back into the sheets. It'd been far too hot in the room the night before, even for November, (though that was probably their fault) and so they'd slept with the window cracked. Now the noise of traffic seeped into the room along with the midday sun, which cascaded through the curtains they'd forgotten to close and highlighted every muscle along Sirius' pale back. He glanced back just in time to catch Remus staring, and then fell back into the pillows with a graceful *fwump!*

"Since when did Peter Pettigrew start getting so mouthy?"

"Peter's always been mouthy," Remus replied. "You just gotta shut up every once in a while to hear him."

Sirius opened one eye to glare at him, and then cracked a smile. "Aw Moons, I think you were drooling in your sleep again."

He touched one finger to the corner of Remus' mouth and Remus quickly knocked his hand away.

"You snore."

"I do *not.*"

"Mhm. You snore like Mary."

"I'm going to tell her you said that. See if she won't claw your pretty eyes out for me."

Remus snorted and pulled back the covers, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He was naked save only his pants, though he hardly had to worry about that anymore. It was almost funny to think about; only a year before and he and Sirius had been playing hide-and-seek in their own dorm room. Dancing around James and Peter so as to keep their relationship from being discovered. And now there they were, sleeping starkers in a bed they shared. Bliss, actually.

“And just where do you think you're going?” Sirius hummed, wrapping his arms around Remus from behind. He left several kisses along his shoulder, slowly making his way up the side of Remus’ neck, and then to his ear.

“We’ve places to be, apparently,” Remus said, already looking around for his shirt. Undeterred, Sirius caught his jaw and tilted his head back a second later, giving himself further access to Remus’ neck and throat.

“Mhmm… let the tossers wait a bit longer… kay?”

They did, but not any longer than necessary.

“Right, so what’s this about not having the van anymore?” Sirius called as they emerged on the downstairs landing. He was still pulling his shirt down over his head, but James and the others were already dressed, busy shoving pieces of toast into their mouths. Lily had about half a dozen textbooks open on the kitchen table, but she still waved good morning as they came in and offered Remus a cup of coffee.

“Dad called,” Peter said, attempting to fix his tie in the hall mirror. He never got it quite right. “He said that they’re expanding the printer’s workshop into a second location and they need the extra car to cart the supplies back and forth.”

“But we’ve got a gig tonight. What are we gonna do without it?”

“Marlene said she might know someone we can borrow off of,” Lily said, handing Remus his coffee. “But it’s not a for sure.”

“Guess we’re taking it on the tube,” Remus sighed. It was a sarcastic quip at best. No way they’d be able to lug all of the amps and instruments over to South Bank on foot. They’d probably be mugged before they even made it across the river.

“We could just cancel,” Peter said, having given up on the tie. “It’s only one gig.”

“No way!” Sirius whipped his head around to look at each of them. “I work at the Shoe, I know how it goes! Ray's old Saturday night group have already found themselves a new drummer now they're looking to get their spot back. We give it up and they could sweep our residency right out from under us like we did them.”

Peter sighed in relief as Lily came to his rescue, righting his tie and

kissing him on the cheek. Afterwards he rounded on Sirius again, looking a lot like a bank teller in navy and white.

“Do you have any other suggestions then? Or maybe you’ve been keeping a four-wheeler tucked up in that bedroom of yours that none of us know about?”

“We can get one!” Sirius snapped. “There’s that used car lot over in Acton. I’ve got some leftover cash from buying the flat, we’ll just pick out some old banger that still runs—easy-peasy!”

“Except the gig’s tonight and meanwhile we’ve all got work,” James said, replacing Peter in front of the mirror and trying desperately to coax all of his hair into the same direction. He looked very smart in his waiter's uniform, but the untameable Potter locks had never quite fit the look.

“Not Moony!” Sirius rushed over to him, smacking Remus on the back fondly and nearly upsetting the cup of steaming coffee. “Moony’s got the day off—he can go! I’m sure he can pick out something reasonable.”

Remus frowned. “You’re going to make me go on my own?”

“Aw, what? Is *wittle* Moony afraid of the big, bad car salesmen?”

“I’ll go with you, Remus,” Lily offered. “My class today got rescheduled, so I was just going to do some light revision anyway."

"That's light?" James asked, glancing at the stack of texts.

Lily ignored him; "Come on, Remus, why don’t the two of us go spend Black’s not-so-hard-earned cash?”

Remus smiled at her, and Sirius clapped his hands together in approval.

“There then. Evans and Moony’ll go, and then you two’ll be back just in time to help ‘em shove the gear into our new set ‘a wheels.”

James shrugged, finding no fault in the plan, while Peter picked up his suit jacket and started for the door.

“I would’ve liked to go,” Peter frowned. “We all have our licences now, after all.”

“You can design the logo that goes on the side,” Sirius said, patting

Peter on the arm in consolation.

Once James had kissed Lily goodbye, he and Peter gathered the rest of their things and left for the day. Sirius was out not long after, having picked up a double shift at the pub. As Remus saw him off in the front entryway, Sirius passed over a thick envelope.

“It’s some of what was left over from buying the flat,” he said, reaching for his coat. “Monty suggested investing the rest, but I kept a portion for emergencies. Should be more than enough for a down payment on some beater.”

“What about the rest of the money we’ve been saving? Shouldn’t we use that?” Remus said, peeking inside to find several dozen fresh notes.

“Don’t be thick, that money’s for the demo!”

“I know, but… feels a bit bad that you should have to pay for the car too.”

Sirius waved him off. “It’s only money. Use what you’ve got, right? Just make sure it runs before you sign all the papers.”

“I *have* been driving longer than you have, you know.”

Sirius smirked. All ready to go, he kissed Remus goodbye and muttered a quick *‘Ta!’* slipping out the front door. Remus had already turned away when Sirius stuck his head back inside, grinning keenly.

“Oh, and Moons—make sure you get us something cool.”

Remus flipped him off, lovingly, and Sirius finally left. Not long after, he and Lily piled into their coats and followed.

"Think we should get some lunch on the way?" Lily asked. "I’m starving,"

Remus pulled the money envelope from his pocket. “Why not? Sirius is buying.”

They hopped the bus from the flat over to West Acton, and since there was not much for street vendors in November, popped into a local egg and chip place for a quick bite. By the time they were strolling up to ‘Harry’s Deals on Wheels’ Remus was still wiping the salt from his fingers. The lot was dressed up in a thick array of streamers and

balloons, with banners strung up everywhere that read things like ‘Sundance Special’ and ‘Ask About Our 100% Warranty!' When the salesman spotted them through the office window, he leapt out of his chair in an instant and came strutting out in a tacky pinstripe suit, rubbing his hands together like a cheat who'd just found the easiest hit of his life.

“Hellooooo there,” he crooned. “Welcome to Dan's Deals on Wheels. I'm Dan the car man, but you can just call me Dan."

"Not Harry?" Lily asked, pointing to the dealership sign.

"We're rebranding," Dan said. "Just a little change in ownership. Harry's moved on. Now is there anything I can help you young folk find?"

“We’re looking to buy," Remus said. "Second-hand, preferably.”

“Of course—*of course.* You've come to the right place for that. I'd love to help you out—you two seem like a couple ‘a nice kids. Let me guess, newlyweds?”

“Uhm, actually—”

“Yes!” Lily answered, elbowing him sharply. “And we’ve got a baby on the way so we’re looking for something sensible. Preferably within our budget.”

“Of *couuurse.* If you’d so kindly follow me, I’d love to show you this week’s sweet, sweet deals! And congratulations on the baby news, by the way. Brilliant stuff!”

With a wave that clearly meant ‘follow me’, Dan sauntered off toward the back of the lot. The pair of them rushed to keep up, and as they turned a corner into the rest of the auto yard, Remus spun on Lily, only mildly embarrassed.

“Oh, so we’re married now?” He whispered. "When were you going to tell me you were pregnant?"

Lily scoffed fondly. “Christ, Remus, have you never haggled? Just let me handle this.”

They followed the sales guy around the yard for a while, letting him prattle on about things like mileage and tire pressure. He’d just shown them their third powder-blue Ford Cortina when Lily finally piped up,

explaining that they were looking for something with more room.

“More room?” Dan echoed.

“Yes, you see Remus hopes to use it for work. He’s a plumber. Dirty work, you know.”

“Oh. Of couuuuuurse! In that case, follow me.”

“Plumber?” Remus whispered. “Now you’re just having a laugh.”

At that, Lily did indeed giggle.

They let the salesman traipse them up and down the lot for a half-hour longer, going through each van’s specs like Topps trading cards. Remus followed along, letting him spit his auto jargon, but once Dan realised he wasn’t going to get much out of him, he quickly leaned into Lily instead.

“This here Ford Transit’s in excellent condition, ma’am! Only sixty thousand miles. Did you know that ten years ago, one in three vans in Britain were a Transit. Very reliable model!”

Lily ducked her head out of the front seat. “What do you think, darling?”

Remus was standing off to the side, arms crossed with a thumbnail tucked between his teeth. Somewhere between the Ford Cortinas and five seconds ago he’d become distracted. If they’d asked, he wouldn’t have been able to tell them what the last five models had been.

“Darling? … Remus!”

“Huh?”

Lily gestured to the van. It had the words ‘Low Financing!’ painted across the windshield.

“What do you think of this one?”

“Oh. S’fine…”

Exchanging a quick glance with the dealer, Lily smiled and touched his pinstriped arm. “Dan, do you think we could have a few minutes to talk it over? I’m afraid it’s all a little overwhelming.”

Remus heard it coming; *Of cour—*

“Of course! I’ll just be inside, checking over the paperwork. Come on over when you’re ready.”

He bowed out gracefully, ever the epitome of a crook in a good suit, and once they were alone again, Lily wandered over to Remus with a knowing look on her face. She kept her arms crossed, but nudged him lightly with her hip.

“Remus…”

“It should be raining,” he murmured, glancing up at the sullen sky. “It's always raining now.”

“Alright,” Lily huffed, marching back to the Ford Transit and yanking the passenger’s side door open. “In. Now.”

“Why?”

“Just get in!”

Lily had to practically push him into the seat, but eventually Remus climbed in and sank back into the nylon upholstery. She shut the door after him, before going around to the driver side and getting in herself. The interior smelled of soot and exhaust, veiled thinly by the scent of lemon aerosol. It was nice enough, with five seats and plenty of room in the back for the band’s gear, but Remus hadn’t been thinking about the van or the band for a while now.

“You’re worrying again,” Lily said, placing both hands on the steering wheel. “Don’t deny it—I can see it on your face. So spit it out already.”

“Lils—”

“Is this about what happened with Tomny?”

Remus turned his face to the window stubbornly. He didn’t want to tell her, it was too embarrassing. How to explain that coming to a used car lot with her had reminded him so strongly of Tomny that he wanted to vomit. Even with Dan’s incessant monologue as the soundtrack, all Remus could picture was Tomny and pregnant girlfriend, sweeping up through the aisles of other beater cars, looking for the one that might one day carry their child. *It’s only money,* Sirius had said—not for Tomny. He would spend every penny he had, and it still might not be enough. He didn’t have rich parents, or dead uncles who’d left him money. He had back-breaking work and illegal

ventures and a *fucking family to raise—*

“I’m sorry, Lils.”

Lily sighed, but it was with understanding.

“I was shocked too, when you told us. Don't get me wrong, he's dead kind, but I didn’t really get the impression that Tomny was of the ‘fatherly sort’.” She twisted her hands fretfully over the wheel, and then finished with a simple shrug. “But then I sorta thought to myself, who am I to say that? He’s got so much love for you, I’ll bet he could be a great dad if he tried.”

“I don’t think I want to meet her,” he confessed. “Skylar. I said I would, but… I’m afraid I’ll hate her. Is that wrong of me?”

“No, it’s not wrong of you. He was your first love.”

Remus almost startled. He grabbed the seat rests tightly, as if the gesture could strangle the very thought out of existence.

“Tomny wasn’t—”

“Remus.”

Releasing hold of the steering wheel, Lily reached over with one hand and covered his with her own. Remus stared at it, so small and Lily-like. It almost burned.

“It’s alright,” Lily said, with a squeeze.

“I don't love Tomny. I’m in love with Sirius.”

“Not all love is the same, you silly boy. You can be *in love* with Sirius and have loved Tomny. Love isn’t some finite thing like that.”

“I dunno if Sirius would agree.”

She sighed then, smiling, and slowly pulled his knuckles up to her lips for a gentle kiss. “Hopeless, you two are. Sirius knows you love Tomny, Remus. He’s always known, and he loves you despite it. He couldn’t ever resent you for it—trust me, I know. He’s told me himself.”

“He has?”

“What, you think he and I don’t talk?”

“Well, I…” Remus cleared his throat. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Of couuurse I’m right,” Lily drawled. “I know these things. And besides, you’re already in love with me, aren’t you? You better be. After all, we are married now.”

“With a baby on the way to boot.”

“Tomny’s got nothing on us,” she grinned. “What shall we name them? I like Sophie, for a girl. Or Eleanor.”

“Eleanor’s nice,” he said, mostly to humour her.

“And for a boy?”

Remus glanced out the window at the dealership’s sign.

“Harry…?”

Lily laughed. “I like Harry.”

He laughed too then, and after Remus reached across the front seat to take Lily’s hand again.

“Dunno what I’d ever do without you, Lils.”

“Worry yourself into oblivion, probably.” She snorted once more before opening the car door and slipping out. “Now c’mon, we’ve still got a van to buy.”

Taking a second to glance around the interior, Remus followed her out. It was getting late in the afternoon, and James and Peter would be home in a few hours and probably starving for supper. Plus, Remus wanted to revamp their setlist before that evening’s show.

“There was that Econoline from earlier,” he recalled, coming around the front of the van. “Didn’t look terrible. Do you remember the price of it?”

“No, not that one. The inside had a funny smell."

"They all have a funny smell."

"Well, yes, but I think that one's leather was rotting or something.” Just then, Lily let out a sudden gasp, her arm shooting up to block Remus’ path. “There!” She cried. “That’s it—that’s the one!”

He looked up, following her gaze. The ‘one’ in question had not been on Dan’s original tour, and Remus knew why straight away. It must’ve had a half a million miles on it, rusted to all hell. Remus would’ve been surprised if the engine even turned over.

“That’s the one?” He echoed. “You're sure? It’s… Well, it’s certainly something.”

“It’s better than something,” Lily beamed; “It’s *perfect.”*

* * *

Sirius gaped. “You *didn’t.”*

“We did!”

“But why?”

“Because!” Lily clapped. “It’s wonderful! Potter, tell him how wonderful it is!”

James looked up from the basket of cables he’d just hauled out of the van’s back. “Sorry, Daisy. I told you he wouldn’t like it.”

Lily scowled lightly, before stepping forward and hugging the body of their new vehicle, though—*'new’* might've been a bit generous. It was a Volkswagen Transporter—a first generation, with dull silver hubcaps and more than enough rust decorating the door frames. They’d gotten a deal on it, considering all four tires had been flat as a balloon and the mileage was less than to be desired, but luckily Dan the car man had a 'Tom the tire guy' right up the street from the dealership. Remus had been initially hesitant to buy it, but he’d started seeing the upsides the moment they got it out onto the road. Unlike the news van, the Volkswagen had seats enough for all of them, and Remus’ head didn’t touch the ceiling when he sat up front.

“I think it’s marvellous,” Lily insisted. “Tons of bands travel like this nowadays, and now everybody’s gonna know exactly who it is whenever you pull up to one of your gigs!”

“Yeah,” Sirius hissed. “They’re gonna go, ‘here comes Marauders in their nancy-mobile.’ I mean, come on, Evans—it’s bloody purple!”

Remus had to agree with Sirius there. The colour was certainly in your

face enough; a bright electric purple with white rims. The bus's hood ornament was missing from its front, leaving behind only a faded outline of the iconic 'VW', but... it was cheap.

"Here," he said, handing Sirius the leftover cash in its envelope. "Buy yourself something nice to make up for it."

"Maybe I will," Sirius grumbled, pocketing the money. "Like a fucking Ducati. God knows we're not getting anywhere in a reasonable time while driving this thing."

With a stern grunt, Peter hopped down from the back of the van and practically shoved James' amp into Sirius' arms. "Considering it's here and we have a show to play, maybe you could help us get the rest of this gear inside and worry about your van's paint job later, hey?"

Amp in hand, Sirius spun away and stalked off, muttering words like 'bloody purple' and 'so lame' under his breath. Lily was shaking her head at him, but it was James who laughed as he shut the van's doors.

"Don't worry, he'll come around the moment he realises this van's much more conducive to shagging."

"What a keen observation, Prongs," Remus said, shouldering his guitar case.

"It's got the shag carpeting for it," Peter sniggered.

"Honestly, you boys." Huffing, Lily went after Sirius, and together they lugged the rest of their things into the pub. There they found the Shoestring's regular Saturday night hustle waiting for them, complete with several friendly welcomes. More and more regulars were starting to take notice of them these days, and with every new gabbing mouth, their odds of stumbling across that golden opportunity seemed to be creeping closer and closer. Remus knew—all it took was the right person. After all, it'd been Brian Epstein who single-handedly raised the Beatles up from underground Liverpudlian clubs to the world's stage, and all he'd done was take a cheap chance on one of their shows. Demos and deals aside, the Marauders needed their own Epstein, and the best way to find that was to make more noise than anyone else.

And if there was one thing the Marauders were good at, it was making noise.

“Busy tonight,” Remus said as he peered over the jam-packed bar.

“Some local group was having a football match just up the road. Guess they’re out and looking to drown themselves now,” Sirius explained, while plugging in his microphone. He went to the pub’s rolling piano next, which looked worse for wear but still played in tune. It always took Sirius a few minutes to psyche himself up before taking to the keys, but even he couldn’t deny the dimension it brought to their music. Songs like “Downtown Girls” just weren’t complete without it. And Sirius glowed—absolutely *glowed* when he was playing.

“Alright, come get your juice,” Ray called, appearing at the edge of the stage with a tray of drinks. They may not be getting paid for the shows, but there was never a shortage of free beer. While James and Peter rushed them, Remus held back and nudged Sirius on the arm.

"Beer, Pads?"

“Be there in a sec,” Sirius answered. “Got this tune I wanna get it down on paper before I forget it.”

Remus nodded, understanding, and watched as Sirius pulled a tiny notepad from his pocket. He was rarely without one these days. He set it on the piano’s shelf and kept the pencil tucked between his teeth as he gently tapped the piano keys. He couldn't hear it over the busy bar —doubted Sirius could either—but he knew Sirius would play it for him later if he asked.

Dropping down off the stage, Remus scooped up his gin and tonic minus the tonic and joined his friends by the girls’ usual table. Lily and Marlene were loyal and came almost every Saturday—Mary too so long as she didn’t have a date. Lottie was getting harder and harder to pin down these days. According to Lily she’d taken a leave from her secretarial program to stay with Roger in Reading, a horrible decision in Lily’s mild opinion. Remus hadn’t bothered to point out that while Lottie was living with one man fresh out of school, she was living with four. He had a feeling Lily wouldn’t have appreciated the jest anyway.

“I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn about this,” Mary was ranting. “If you’d just come and live with me then we’d have loads more fun than whatever’s going on in that bloody dosshouse.”

“It’s not a dosshouse!” Marlene countered sharply. “It’s a shared flat, no different from the boys’ place. And it’s nice. We all work together too, and downstairs there's this single mother who—”

“Your mother would have a heart attack if she saw the state of the hall toilet.”

“And an aneurysm, what’s your point?”

Mary groaned; “You’re impossible.”

Remus mostly tuned out after that. He was used to the renting debate where Marlene and Mary were concerned. For them, it was an ongoing crisis. Marlene wanted her independence and Mary wanted to keep her friend close; neither of them were wrong, just simply not in agreement.

Eventually Dorcas appeared, surprising him. She was alone today, though Remus had come to like Kingsley well enough. He was a real whizz on the sax—Regulus would’ve loved it. They’d gone down to see his group play at Ronnie Scott’s several times since meeting him, and Sirius had just about jumped at the chance to chat-up their pianist. *It's all about collaboration,* he'd told him.

“Didn’t know you were coming tonight,” Remus said, as Dorcas knocked her glass against his in lieu of a greeting.

“Why? Was I uninvited?”

“No—I only meant…” he sighed with a chuckle. “You know, you really need to stop doing that.”

"Busting your balls, you mean?" Dorcas smirked, sipping her drink. “Heads up, you’ve got a few wannabe skinhead pricks over by the bar. They’re hounding all the girls, and talking a lot ‘a shit about the band.”

Immediately Remus looked up. It wasn’t hard to pick out the group she was talking about. Those sorts tended to travel in packs, but even a few of them could be deadly enough. Tomny used to say that for every one skinhead, there were two steel-capped boots. For now, Remus counted twelve boots. They’d congregated near the large tables at the back, and were making more than half the bar’s usual noise.

“Sirius said a local match got out up the road,” he grumbled. “Must’ve come from there. They didn’t say anything to you, did they?”

She waved him off, clearly indifferent. “If I stopped to entertain the likes of every racist prick that crossed my path, I’d never get anywhere. They’re losers, don’t bother yourself.”

It didn't sit right, but even if the group seemed to be not much more than teenagers themselves, it was still early. Remus wasn't quite looking for a fight yet.

When it was finally time to take to the stage, Sirius took over with all of his usual vigour. They used to have to introduce themselves before they started, but nowadays people already knew who they were. They didn't want long-winded introductions, they just wanted to jam. So Marauders opened as they usually did; with a cover that was guaranteed to get people into the mood. This time the song they'd chosen was slightly out of their comfort zone—a funk rock number that'd been stuck in Sirius' head for days.

"Once I was a boogie singer,
Playing in a rock and roll band!
I never had no problems—yeah,
Burning down the one-night stands…"

There was the laughter—not directed at them, but rather at Sirius' ridiculous show—and that really got the rest of them going. While James wiggled his hips suggestively, Sirius sauntered up and down the tiny wood panelled stage like he owned it, dressed in a white singlet with a neckline that dipped so low it might as well have been hanging past his leather-clad waist. He reached forward into the audience for Marlene, who made a play of fainting into Dorcas' arms, while Mary leaned past her for a kiss. Sirius gave it to her, and every other girl in the room shrieked in envy. Remus didn't mind, it was all part of the gimmick.

"Yeah, they were dancing and singing—
And moving to the grooving!
And just when it hit me,
Somebody turned around and shouted—

Play that funky music, white boy!
Play that funky music riiiiight!
Play that funky music, white boy,
Lay down the boogie and play that funky music 'til you die!"

James loved the guitar solo. Not to be one-upped by Sirius and Mary, he polished it off with a kiss of his own that left Lily red from top to

bottom. *Yes,* Remus decided, after watching the way the crowd rocked and flowed to the rhythm like a single sea; *I can get behind funk.*

On the outro, Sirius played it up, thrusting his mike out to the audience. They were delighted; their singing loud enough that the speakers managed to pick up the entire room. It really was just that good.

"Play that funky music!
Play that funky music!
Play that funky music..."

Each of them were sweating by the time they'd finished, but no one noticed. It was part of the show.

"You guys really know how to rock with it," Sirius applauded into the mike. He was received by his usual cheering, the occasional friendly heckler, but today the crowd was extra rowdy. As Sirius launched into the usual spiel and preamble, he was joined by jeering voices from the back of the pub.

"Is this all the Shoe's guid fer nowadeys?" One of the teen thugs barked. "Bunch 'a sissies singing on a stage?"

"Yeah, what happened to fine drink and piss all?" Called another.

"It pissed off," Sirius drawled; "Though if you're really that interested, ladies, I hear the spritz is to die for."

More laughter went up, as it often did when Sirius got the better of his hecklers. Very rarely did these things bother him, and even rarer still did their noise ever become louder than his microphone.

"Bloody poofter… Oi, did yer mum make you that skirt?!"

"No, yours did. Turns out she's a real wiz at multitasking. Don't know many other birds who can wank a guy off while still managing to keep her lips 'round my prick the entire time!"

The guffaw grew, and though Remus was enjoying himself, he could tell Sirius was stomping on thin ice. The crowd's amusement quickly died down as the skinheads got louder—shouting obscenities until Ray was bristling behind the bar. Sirius gave it right back to them ten-fold, the microphone imbuing him with confidence, but if he kept it up

much longer, they'd probably end up getting jumped on their way home. Luckily James was often the sensible one. He stepped up to Sirius and whispered in his ear, playing his role as anti-devil's advocate. Unluckily, Sirius had already had about five beers and enjoyed getting the better of people worse than himself far too much.

"Oh, what's that, Potter? You're saying we shouldn't tell them their sisters called? That they already have dates this weekend? Damn. Looks like you're out of a shag tonight, lads!"

"Fucking ponce! Fucking shitebag!" The thugs wailed;

"I'll gut cha!"

"You and your pet ponce start high-tailin' it back to fucking Canterbury!"

"Fucking do ya in, I will! Straight batter ya!"

"All of youse!"

The room was a clamour after that, with strangers leaping to their feet to defend their house and house band. It was frightening, but not even the threats of real gangsters could deter Sirius. Drink or not, on stage he was king. He was untouchable. It didn't matter how English they were—this king never backed down from a fight.

"Wanna start throwing names, lads?" He shouted back. "Alright, why don't you try meeting us outside and see where that gets you? That is if you're done suckin' each other off behind the rubbish bins!"

Fists pounded the air in threat, each of them eager to get a piece of the mouthy boy.

"I'll break yer fucking legs, ya nasty poofter! Let's see ya try twirling around like a bloody fairy then!"

With an angry cry, Sirius charged the front of the stage. He might've gone after them too, fuelled by the drink, had James not grabbed him round the waist. As it was, all he could do was kick out like a fitful bronco as the other men handled their assailants. Still behind his kit, Peter had started up a rolling beat on his snare drum that made every pulse in the room hammer, while the girls remained off to the side of the stage, protected well-enough by the crowd but still looking nervous and uncomfortable. Deciding that he'd heard enough, Remus unstrapped his bass and jumped down from the stage. He'd crack the poor thing over the first sucker's head if need be.

“Yeah, fuck you too!” Sirius was shouting, having lost hold of his microphone. “Your mum’s seen more bell-ends than weekends, fucking wankers!”

It was chaos for a while, until Ray and a couple of the burlier guys from the kitchens came out wielding field hockey sticks. They waved them at the skinheads but never actually got close enough to take a whack, that would mean retaliation.

“Get out of my pub! Get the fuck outta my pub!” Ray was screaming. “Go—GO! Fucking beat it, before I call the cops on all ‘a you sorry excuses for men!”

There was more yelling, but the room had come together with Ray as its figurehead. Eventually the thugs were ejected by a group of working men, already hardened by years of dealing with smart-assed hooligans just like them, but not before the group’s ringleader had turned and pointed directly in Sirius’ direction.

“I’ll be lookin’ out for you, queenie!” He hissed. “I’ll kick yer fucking head in!”

“Oh yeah?! Well, up yours, shitebag!”

There was hooting—for Sirius or the promise of a fight, Remus wasn’t sure—but the men left, and finally everyone inside could pause for a much needed breath. It took several minutes for the crowd to settle, and by then Ray had stormed the base of the stage and grabbed hold of Sirius’ pant leg, furiously shaking him back and forth like an idiot of a rag-doll.

“My pub!” He barked. “My bar! Whatchu think you’re on about, hey?!”

High off of his own idiotic show of bravery, Sirius swallowed an obvious smile and looked out over the crowd, which was hanging on every word. Most were probably still hoping to catch a glimpse of their promised violence, but savagery or no, they couldn’t look away. They were starved of him.

Sirius grabbed the mike.

“Rock and roll, am I right, fellas?”

For a moment there was nothing, and then—just like that—they all lost their minds. The crowd cheered until Ray had no choice but to

release them. They wanted more—of Sirius or the violence, it didn't matter. People simply mobbed closer, until the stage was surrounded and Lily and the others had to fight just to remain nearby. Women, men—all of them wanting a piece of London's newest and stupidest rock band.

On all accounts, it was their best show yet. They reopened with a Black Sabbath cover, because it was loud and the crowd wanted to be heard. The floor shook along with the thump of the bass, and James was a powerhouse on his guitar. Sirius didn't just sing, he belted, and for the first time, Remus could see people sing along to more than just the covers. Their own songs were starting to catch on, and hearing the lyrics in that tiny pub on the Thames, Remus imagined what it might be like to hear them sung by a crowd of thousands.

Glorious, probably.

"I still think you're absolutely mental—going after those guys like you did," Mary said after, as they were climbing off stage with their entire upper-bodies soaked in sweat. "They're like cue balls with teeth. If they wanted to, they could've snapped you in half."

"I thought it was hot," Dorcas retorted. "If not also completely stupid."

"It was hot, wasn't it?" Sirius teased, attempting to sling an arm around her. Dorcas dodged it, but Sirius recovered easily when she handed him a fresh beer instead. Heart still racing from the set, Remus thought he might just pass out if he didn't get out of the sweltering room.

"I'm gonna step out for a bit," he told Marlene. "Fancy a fag?"

"Yeah, be out in a sec," she replied, slipping away to join the rest by the bar.

Making his way outside, Remus pulled his cigarettes from his pocket while he set to joining the pub's usual nightly rabble. The usual regulars stopped to congratulate him on the set and a couple even offered to buy him a drink or two. He humbly rain-checked, content to just stand back and have his cig, and it was a relaxing enough break until a loud bout of obnoxious jeering caught his attention. Glancing down the pavement, he managed to spot the same jerks from earlier all crowded around each other outside the pub's corner entrance. Apparently Ray's threat was enough to get them out of the bar, but not gone completely. The thugs were smoking and generally doing piss-all, but every time a pub patron accidentally stumbled too close

they got the same nasty treatment as the band had. Girls were whistled at and taunted, while anyone deemed too old or ugly to shag were abused with various obscenities. It made Remus' blood boil.

Now, now, his foul little voice said; *What would Tomny do?*

Nothing, he's too busy shopping for nappies and baby bassinets.

But what would the old *Tomny do? Those fuckers came after your mates.*

Yeah... they did.

They did! And you know the rules—no one comes after our mates. Maybe it's time to pull up your sleeves after all, nancy-boy.

Despite the chill, Remus did just that. It could've been the beer, or the joint he'd smoked on the ride over, but all of a sudden, all he wanted was a good fight. An excuse to vent his anger. He felt ashamed for not coming to Sirius' defense, and angrier still for reasons he couldn't quite place.

Weaving his way through the crowd of smoke and people, Remus stopped only when he was standing a few feet behind the first burly sack of shit that had shouted at them earlier. The group was yammering on about something, but Remus didn't bother to eavesdrop. Instead he flicked his cigarette butt away and tapped their main antagoniser sharply on the shoulder. He spun round immediately, looking up at Remus as though he were a very tall piece of gum he'd just scraped off the bottom of his shoe. He already had a shining bruise on the top of his cheek, which Remus could only assume made him feel very tough.

"Whaddaya want?" The bruiser grunted.

"You were inside earlier."

"Yeah."

"Wasn't a question."

The skinhead scoffed; "You got sumffin' you wan' say to me, pansy-shit?"

"Only that I remember you. You and your mates said some nasty things about my band. And my friends."

"Oh yeah? And whatchu gon' do about it, ya fuckin' pillow muncher?"

“Nothing. But I think you owe us an apology.”

The look the guy gave him was incredulous. Too bad Remus was pretty sure he couldn’t have spelt ‘incredulous’ to save his balls.

“I’ll tell ya,” he spat, “you fuck off right now, mate, before I put your head through this ‘ere brick wall.”

Remus smirked lightly. By now they’d amassed a small crowd of onlookers. He knew that the tussle from before wasn’t already forgiven, but that didn't mean that the crowd wasn't looking forward to seeing him get trounced by a bunch of teenage skinheads.

“You're right, s'my bad,” Remus amended. “I’ll go. Before I do though, mind if I pinch a fag, mate?”

“Nah, I ain’t telling ya again—fuck off!”

Remus raised his hands in surrender, but just then one of the other skinheads stepped forward, face wrinkled with a look of mischievous delight.

“I’ll allow it,” he said. “ ‘ere. You sure got a pair on ya, don’t chu? For a skinny poofter…”

He plucked the cigarette he’d been keeping behind his ear and offered it to Remus, much to the chagrin of his friends. Remus accepted, and then turned back to the first dosser, eyebrow raised.

“Got a light?”

Either to save face or because he was looking forward to beating the shit out of him afterwards, the thug acquiesced and handed Remus a metal lighter. As Remus lit the cigarette, he leaned in with a nasty look on his face.

“Hey, since we’re mates an’ all now, think you could hook me up with one ‘a them girlfriends ‘a yers? Usually I’d go for the ginger, but that fucking queen singing on stage weren’t half bad either!”

It was practically an invitation. While the others howled in laughter, Remus flicked the zippo shut and held it out. He smiled—his whole face—and when the guy went to take the lighter back, he dropped it between his feet.

“Whoops.”

“Fucking prick, whadda ya think yer—”

Remus drew a hand back—and drove it straight toward the bruiser’s nose. There was a crunch, then a very noisy grunt, as the guy flew backwards into his friends. They caught him—barely—but it was enough to ignite the feud. Instantly Remus was surrounded, but he knew where he was. The Shoestring was a rough crowd, and most of its patrons were just as itching for a fight as the rest of them.

It became a brawl in less than five seconds. Fists were flying, and Remus caught more than one of them upside the head. He got in several fine shots on the bruiser, who—despite being barrel-armed and thick in the chest—was at least a head shorter. All Remus had to do was pull back in time to avoid his shots and bring his fist up in an arc the way Tomny had taught him when he was twelve.

Punch and dodge, Lu! And watch them elbows—deadly they are!

He wasn’t sure where the memory had come from; he could barely recall it over the swarm, but the moment he did, the thought began to slip away. Like that inevitable stone beneath water.

“JUST WHAT DO YOU THINK YER DOIN’?!”

It was Ray. With a field hockey stick clutched in one hand, he grabbed Remus by the collar of his shirt and hauled him backwards—out of the fray built of clubbed boots and back toward the pub doors where his friends were waiting for him. They caught him, and Remus found himself hauled back inside the Shoestring before he could blink. A crowd had formed around the doors, but James and Sirius pushed right through them to where Lily was waiting with a rag in hand. She forced it up under his nose, practically sucker-punching him herself, and Remus pulled away, wincing, before realising that he really was bleeding from both nostrils. It smarted a bit, the rag, but not enough that his nose was broken.

“Christ, Moony! Are you trying to get yourself stabbed?” Sirius gasped.

“No,” he said through the scratchy fabric, “I leave the stabbings for Mondays through Thursdays, obviously.”

“Check his shirt, just in case,” Peter shrilled, gesturing downwards to a small tear in Remus’ t-shirt. Sirius was on him in a second, yanking it up to reveal a small slice in his abdomen. It wasn’t anything serious—a surface wound at best—but it was clearly a slash from a blade.

“You fucking idiot!” Lily wailed after. *“You—You absolute bollocking imbecile!”*

“What she said!” Sirius cried. Unable to help it, Remus smirked into the rag. He could hardly feel his injuries, and he’d only sort of been knifed. As far as he could tell, he was *up*.

“Rock and roll, am I right, lads?”

They all stared at him, before finally breaking down into little fits of their own. Even James had tears in his eyes from laughter, and Peter howled so hard he stumbled into a table and knocked over several glasses. Only Lily didn’t seem to find it funny, though that was to be expected.

Ray got everything handled eventually, and allowed Remus to remain despite the fight and his better judgement. They still had one last set to do before the night was over, but his hockey stick combined with the crowd of loyal pub-goers had been enough to drive the thugs away. No need to even ring the bobbies. Which was good, considered Remus was only half sure the Shoestring had a valid liquor licence at all.

“You’re trying to ruin your nose again, I know it,” Lily chastised, as she drew a wet napkin across Remus’ face to get the blood off. “You should know that the NHS doesn’t cover nose jobs.”

“What do I need the NHS for when I've got you to snap it back into place for me?"

She smacked his thigh, and then turned back to the bar top to grab the bag of ice as Sirius handed it to her. “Stupid boy.”

“That’s me.” Remus ran his tongue across his upper lip, tasting copper, and then glanced sideways to find Sirius staring at him, a bottle of gin in one hand. “Shall I fetch you a camera?”

“I’m trying to decide if it was attractive watching you lose that fight, or pathetic.”

“I didn't lose. It was a draw."

"That's what losers say."

"And? Have you decided?"

At that, Sirius didn't say anything. He simply smirked and leaned over the counter, rolling his tongue in Remus' ear. "If only Jillian Stewart could see you now," he said. "She'd have jumped your bones leagues ago. As it is, I'm already holding back."

"Clearly," Lily snapped, reminding them of her presence. Remus snorted then, which hurt his nose, and Sirius followed it up with another scandalous purr, silenced only by Mary's arrival.

"That's quite enough of *that,"* she said, perching herself on the bar stool on Remus' other side. She snapped her fingers and Sirius poured her a shot of Haig, along with one for Remus. "I can't believe it. A girl leaves to go to the lav one time and she misses all the action."

Having finished tying off the ice bag, Lily pressed it against Remus' face and made him yelp. *"Fuck*—ow? ... Thanks for that, Lils."

"It's your own fault. Idiot."

Remus turned to Mary. "Where's Marlene?"

"She left," Mary replied, polishing off her shot and swiftly raising her fingers into singular air quotes; "With *'Dee'*. Didn't even stick around to watch your rousing show of masculine foolishness."

"Don't be jealous just 'cause McKinnon's getting some tonight and you're not," Sirius said. Mary rolled her eyes, and just then James and Peter came to join them, having collected their leftover pints from the table near the stage.

"Think you're gonna be fit to go on stage again, hey Rocky?" James asked, passing Remus his half-empty pint. "Or should we let you go a few more rounds with Ray first?"

Remus took the drink, finishing it in a single go, along with the shot Sirius had poured him.

"How 'bout you try putting 'em up, Potter?" He retorted after, wiping his mouth.

"Oh yeah?"

James cackled as he raised his fists, jokingly sending several shots toward Remus' busted face. Remus retaliated with his left hand, still holding the ice against his mouth and nose with the other, and eventually Sirius and Peter had joined in, leaving them all bouncing

around the bar like a bunch of kooks. Mary and Lily reprimanded them fondly, but even they were distracted enough not to notice the stranger that had approached them from behind.

" 'ello there, lads!"

The fun died out immediately and Remus watched as Sirius stopped playing at feeding Peter a knuckle-sandwich and shot upright. When he spun around on the bar stool himself, Remus found a stout little man grinning back at them. He was wearing a brown suit over a horrendous paisley shirt, and was so bald that the top of his head looked like one of the shiny cue balls that were always going missing from the Shoestring's billiard tables. He might've fit in with the earlier group of thugs, had he not been about twenty years too old and three feet too short.

"So this is the Marauders!" The man exclaimed, much too eager for Remus' liking.

"Actually, it's just 'Marauders'," Sirius said snidely, making James and Peter snigger into their beers.

"Ah, I gotcha. Like 'em 'Talking Heads'—very mod." He paused long enough to rub both hands together, showing off the golden rings he wore on both pinkies and thumbs. "Marauders… hm, yes… Well, I've 'eard plenty about cha 'a course. Not much gets on round 'ere without ol' Fletch hearing 'bout it. And what I 'eard is that you four are the freshest things since sex, drugs, and rock 'n—*blood.* Blimey son, you know yer bleedin', ey?"

"Am I really? Why didn't any of you tell me?" Remus grumbled, pressing the rag tighter to his nose.

With his obvious accostment out of the way, the stranger turned to the rest of his friends and continued to look them all over, like a fat hyena with a fresh carcass.

"I was told this was the place to find new talent. 'Shoestring on the Thames'—s'got quite the ring to it. Classic origin story, stuff! Let me guess. There's four of ya, so… I'll wager that you must be Sirius Black?"

"What gave it away?"

"Something about the look of ya!" He gestured to Sirius' leather trousers and lack of functioning shirt sleeves. "Like a tight little Don-

juan wrapped up in all the right duds!"

Sirius peered at the rest of them. "A what…?"

"I'm sorry," James cut-in, "but do we know you?"

"Oh! Apologies, where are my manners…" The stranger snapped his thick fingers before taking the gin bottle and pouring himself a drink in Mary's leftover glass. "Doug Fletcher, at your service."

It didn't tell them much, and so Peter's brow creased as he stepped forward. "And you're a friend of Ray's?"

"Weeeeell, I wouldn't go that far. He and I only met today, innit." Grinning again, Fletcher knocked back the shot neat and fumbled to pull a card from his suit pocket. It was a simple thing; reasonably business-like with his name all embossed and an office address and the words 'A&R Manager, EMI Records' written across the front in bold lettering. When Remus read it, he just about fell off the bar stool.

"You see, I represent the arts and repertoire for a very reputable record label," Fletcher went on. "It's my job to head out into the world —ontae the 'scene', if you would—and find the next big thing. And I think that you boys might just be that next big—*massive*—thing."

Peter and James peered over the business card together, mouths hanging open so far they were practically drooling. When Sirius snatched it from them, it was with great astonishment.

"You represent EMI?" He demanded, almost white-knuckling the business card.

"That's what the card says, don't it?" Fletcher poured a second shot, but this one he didn't drink. Instead he just held it up ahead of himself, like he were CEO of a multi-million dollar company, negotiating over a fine glass of sherry.

"Now I'm tellin' ya, you lads come on the scene at a pure, prime time! Music's 'a changin' an' the studios are starving for some fresh sounds. Sham 69, The Undertones, Pistols—all of em, young guns, just like you! *Heh*—no pun intended. But they're the ones changing the scene, right? The rest of the industry, they're all doing the same thing. Radio hacks, I call 'em. All synth this, electronic that. But real rock—now that's sex itself. You heard 'a Van Halen, eh? How 'bout Whitesnake? Cock Sparrer? Or Christ—what's the new one… The Police!"

“Aren’t they the group doing all that white reggae?” Sirius asked, while the rest of them exchanged a dubious glance. “Might as well ask us to jam with the Dire Straits. Fancy being the next ‘Sultans of Swing’, lads?”

“Alright, forget the bloody Dire Straits!” Fletcher hissed. “Too folky anyway. My point is—you’s already got the songs, I ‘eard ‘em. Great stuff! Bleedin’ hits in the making! But more importantly, ye’ve got the look! And ‘tis *look* that I can sell. I mean, hell—I love it! You’re visceral—seismic! Caustically likeable! People want fresh—gritty. Punk rock’s backsliding, and all ‘a us wee folk are tired of the huge stadium bands. We want new fish, and you lads are it, I’m telling ya. You’re like little unsung entertainment juggernauts!”

“I dunno, they just sorta seem like a bunch ‘a virgin nobs to me,” Mary said, making Lily snort into her drink.

“Ah! And I see you’ve already got yourself a couple ‘a lovely ladies to tag along,” Fletcher grinned. “Inspiration central! Nothing makes for a number one hit better than heartbreak. Not that you’ll ever be hurting for company. Just wait until you tour the Balkans, that shite’s as easy as Jagger with his fly undone!”

Fletcher nudged Remus pointedly, but when none of them laughed, the manager quickly cleared his throat.

“So, you lads got a demo then?”

Now it was their turn to be nervous.

“It’s a… working thing,” James blabbed.

“As in…?”

“We’re working on it,” Remus finished.

Fletcher nodded sympathetically. “Ah, I get it. First step’s always the ‘ardest, ‘specially for up and comin’ groups such as your good selves. We used tah think that making the entire album was the ‘spensive part, but nowadays, all ‘a it’s gone through the roof. Poor buggers don’t stand a chance, not without being signed first. And well, no one’s gonna sign ya without a demo, will they? ‘Fraid that’s life, lads. Nah money, nah fame…”

“It’s not that,” Sirius interjected. “We have the money, it’s the studio space we don’t got.”

“I see.” The manager stroked his chin, suddenly more invigorated. “In that case, I might be able to get you guys in over at De Lane.”

Remus' jaw dropped. "As in De Lane Lea Studios?”

"Way to go, dork," Sirius teased. Remus smacked him for it, but Fletcher only looked keen.

“Ah, you know it, eh? Well, would I be right tah assume that you also know who’s recorded there?” The manager leaned in very close, like it was a secret he’d been dying to share. “All four ‘a them Beatles sat at those mixing tables. Pink Floyd used to have it out in the booths too, same with the Who. Legend has it that studio two’s still got a hole in the wall after Pete and Roger got a little too rowdy and one of ‘em put their fist through it. If it were me, I’d bet on Townshend. Why, I even had a similar conversation with Jagger once, but he’s always favoured Roger. Said he was real spazz that way. Speakin’ a which… none ‘a you would happen to be Queen fans, would ya?”

Fletcher could’ve been asking them to sign their own death warrants; they were in it now. Utterly drooling over the idea of recording in the same place their heroes had once stood. Hook, line, and sinker.

“Payment’ll be upfront ‘a course,” the manager told them, “but I got a guy. Works the late shifts at the studio. Can probably get you in after hours. You ain’t bound to see anyone else while the studio’s shut up for the night, so don’t get yer hopes up of running into no bloody Keith Richards, but we’ll see if we can getchu all set up, we will.”

“So you really want us to—to…” For once, Sirius was at a loss for words. James had to smack him on the back for him to spit the words out; *“You’re gonna let us cut a demo in your studio?”*

“You said it yourself, all you’s need is a place to record, right?”

“Yeah...”

At that, Fletcher raised his tiny glass of Scotch. “So whaddya say, lads? You wanna make an album?”

* * *

The next morning, Remus would not remember their answer to Fletcher’s million dollar question. *Yes,* obviously, but anything else—

negotiations and the like—would be lost to the whirl of celebratory drink that had followed. Sirius had announced the good news to the entire pub at the head of their second set, and afterwards some kind well-wisher had offered each of them a bump in the men's toilet.

They'd accepted, of course. They were rock stars now—or at least on their way. They'd have to get used to things such as strangers openly offering them drugs. Up until then Remus had never tried cocaine, Tomny had kept all of that private, but he found the experience not all that different from being drunk. When he was drunk things that usually bothered him tended to fall away; everything was funny, and he was more confident. *Up.* Cocaine made him twice that. It was the perfect social lubricant. He took to the stage like he'd been born on it, and as a result, had strangers pour themselves out to him.

Remus poured right back. A social waterfall.

"Man, you guys are amazing!"

"Thanks, man!"

"Heard you were making an album?"

"Guess so!"

"Will I see you on 'Top of the Pops' someday?"

"Maybe!"

Fletcher bought them drinks on credit. Even James, who was supposed to be driving the van back, gave in after he offered to send a car for them. The instruments would survive until morning. Fletcher talked and talked about brands and companies, and all the bands he'd met and signed—*Did you know that Rod Stewart only ever wanted to play football? Now he's got nine number-one albums!*

The Marauders ate up every word.

"And just wait 'til you start getting fan mail—up to the ceiling, it'll be! We'll work out a post box later, after you've signed all the contracts. Got a dream venue? Somewhere you've always dreamed of playing?"

"Madison Square Garden!" Sirius exclaimed. "We want the Garden within four years. Wembley in three. Hammersmith Odeon in two. I don't fucking care where else."

“Right. No tall order then.”

“And ‘Top of the Pops’,” James added, having spoken to the same shrill party-goer as Remus. “Debut on the ‘Pops’ would be cool. We wanna be national.”

“I’d like to see Japan,” Peter finished. “And Canada. People tour Canada, right? They’ve got mountains.”

“And you?” Fletcher turned on Remus, fresh whisky in hand. “What’ll it be for our killer bassist?”

Remus blinked at him. His nose and throat were numb from a second bump. Ray had put on Roxy Music over the bar’s speakers and he imagined the song was theirs.

“I want Marauders to be the biggest band on Earth.”

Fletcher grinned at him.

“Then I guess we’ve got some work to do.”

They clinked glasses, and it sounded like diamonds. Sirius was staring at him like he’d hung the stars himself. James hugged Peter close, called him brother. Remus asked Fletcher for a pen. He handed him the one from his suit pocket—gold plated—and he wrote a lyric on his palm.

I’m the disappointing kid, bred of them upper class
Dad paid to get ahead, I say ‘finish last’

He’ll have sweat it off by morning.

They ordered another round, this one on the house, and before the drinks even arrived they were being cheered back onto the stage for an encore. Lily and Mary had already gone, tired from their long day spent at school, but they had new friends. Fans. Ray and Fletcher stood by the stage, clapping with a fat cigar in hand. It’d be late soon, well past the 11PM British pub hours. Not that it mattered.

They were rock stars.

They were on their way!

And not for one moment did it occur to them that they were being

completely and utterly scammed.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I'm so happy to be back! Thank you to everyone who was patient over November. Updates for Cadence will resume on Sundays until we're finished for Part 1.

Songs in this chapter: “Germfree Adolescents” by X-Ray Spex, 1978; "Chiquitia" by ABBA, 1979; “All the Time in the World” by the Nips, 1978; & "Play that Funky Music" by Wild Cherry, 1976.

I realised after writing this that “Chiquitita” wasn’t even released until January of 1979 (it's still 1978 within the fic), but I’m the only one insane enough to know this so we’re just going to ignore that. I can’t be bothered to ruin the wonderful scene between Remus and the girls. Pls allow me this one flub, lol.

Also yes, there is a playlist for gap year, I'm just fiddling with it rn. Hopefully I'll have it for you by next week!

As always, I'm over on tumblr doing my own thing, @motswolo. Feel free to come say hi and interact, I swear we’re all very chill

Chapter 99: "Wotcher!"

Chapter Summary

The boys start their first step of becoming real rock and roll stars, and boy is that step a doozy.

Chapter Notes

This is probably my longest chapter yet so you better tuck in. I did say gap year chapters were fewer, but they are long □

CW for THIS chapter: Intrusive thoughts and BPD triggers in the first scene. Remus is triggered by a perceived (or real, depending on how you look at it) feeling of abandonment and that causes him to lash out negatively. He makes some bad decisions and says things he doesn't necessarily mean, so if this is at all triggering for you, please don't hesitate to come over to my tumblr (@motswolo) and ask for a summary of the first scene. The only other thing that should be even remotely triggering is the puns I've managed to sprinkle in 🍯

TL;DR: Remus is not a very nice person this chapter. He ends up looking down on Tomny because of his jealousy and trauma, and this is something that is going to have to be rectified that later. Hooray for main characters that are not perfect and without fault or implicit biases!

Also, excuse the French I'm kinda rusty xo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Out of college, money spent,
See no future, pay no rent,
All the money's gone, nowhere to go;

Any jobber got the sack,
Monday morning, turning back,
Yellow lorry slow, nowhere to go…

- "You Never Give Me Your Money" The Beatles, 1969

Wednesday 6th December 1978

They met up in a tiny greasy spoon cafe near Whitechapel, off the corner of Cable Street and not far from Tomny's flat. Its front windows were decorated in twinkling lights and cotton made to look like fake snow, and there was a flyer pasted on the front door advertising visits from Santa Clause at the nearby shopping centre. Remus would wish that he'd picked somewhere nicer the moment he sat down, but Tomny had insisted—nowhere fancy. They were not fancy folk, as he said, and even if they were, no one did a good fry-up like the average working-man anyway.

When Remus arrived he'd found Tomny smoking outside on the pavement. For a split second he imagined what it might be like if he were just meeting his friend to catch up. Would they batter each other around a bit? Go find some half-empty paint cans and get to tagging the streets? Maybe they'd pop a lock or two, rob a corner shop—have some real fun. There certainly wouldn't be any talk of jobs or babies. Remus missed it, but he knew by the way Tomny looked at him that there was no going back.

Thonas Armstrong had made up his mind, and Remus was just going to have to get used to it.

"I feel a bit bad," Tomny said, "making ya come all this way."

"I live in Shepherd's Bush now, not China. I think I remember my way around St George's East. Best watch out or it's you who's gonna turn amnesiac, ya old fart."

"Cheeky shit. Fine, c'mere."

Tomny hugged him tight. Remus hugged back.

"Aw, Lu... I'm glad we're finally doing this."

"Me too." As they pulled apart, Remus tucked either hand into an arm pit to ward off the cold. "So… Where is she then?"

"Skylar? Oh, she's inside already." He raised the cigarette meekly. "Says being around all the smoke is bad for the baby. M'gonna try and quit, maybe. Might even save meself a few quid, innit."

And the coke? The dealing? Remus wanted to ask. *Have you managed that already?*

“Gonna need the money for nappies anyway,” he said instead.

Tomny chuckled, and then flicked his cigarette butt down a nearby street drain.

“Shall we?”

She was waiting for them in a corner booth, the red vinyl seat off-setting the dark navy of her winter coat. She waved when they came in, and Remus’ stomach plummeted. Skylar *was* pretty. Perhaps if she weren’t he could’ve compounded a poor appearance with the fact that she was up the duff without a penny to her name and created some real pity for the girl. But it was not to be. Dishwater blonde, same as Tomny, with eyes the colour of melted chocolate. She had a few moles, charming ones, with a pouty little mouth. A true countryside princess, with an Essex accent.

“It’s a pleasure to meet youse,” she said, after he’d sat. Then she offered him her hand. The other she kept cradled around the base of her stomach like it was this great weight to bear. Remus didn’t know why; he’d asked Lily and with her due date set for late April, the baby couldn’t have been bigger than a lump of dryer lint. But Remus shook her hand anyway, and introduced himself properly, determined to make a half-decent impression. It was just one meal. He could make it through one meal.

"Oi, Bruce," Tomny called, instantly garnering the attention of one of the guys in the kitchen; "cup of coffee for this one and three of your best fry-ups. Just put it on my tab."

"Ain't got no tabs 'ere," Bruce replied.

"Not even for me?"

There was some grumbling, but Remus could tell it was in good faith when Bruce ambled out of the kitchens with a fresh pot of coffee.

"Thanks, Brucey. Throw in some extra bacon and I'd say that favour you owe me's settled."

Tomny tossed him a wink, and after Bruce had gone, turned to Remus.

"Don't worry about Bruce. Food's cheap and he only spits in the eggs on odd days."

"Actually I thought I'd get your breakfast today," said Remus. "You

know, as a shitty congratulatory."

"Don't play daft. I told you today was my treat, and so it shall be." He pushed one elbow up onto the back of the booth and tucked a lock of Skylar's hair behind her ear for her. "You can buy me a real present later."

"Yeah, alright," Remus scoffed, wrapping his hands around the warm coffee mug. So far Skylar had said very little, and Remus had almost pegged her for shy until she set her own mug down and leaned in.

"I'm not being funny, but I was expectin' a bit more of ya," she giggled. "Tomny said youse were posh. Half-expected you tah kiss my hand when you walked in 'ere."

"He's been known to do it once or twice," Tomny said snidely, while Remus ignored him and stirred several sugar packets into his coffee.

“Tomny says youse are in a band?” Skylar said genially.

"Yeah, I am."

"And you sing too?"

Tomny smirked over the rim of his own coffee, and Remus resisted the urge to kick him beneath the table.

“No, I just play bass. We have our singer, but you really shouldn't bother yourself with Tom, Skylar, all he spouts is rubbish.”

“Nah, nah, I stand by that one,” Tomny grinned. “Go on then, tell ‘er about the band. ‘Marauders’, innit?”

Remus shook his head sheepishly. “It’s just a thing.”

“Now that’s fuckin' pish.” He looked to Skylar. “Back-breakingly modest, ‘e is. Any'fin you wanna know about music, this guy 'ere knows it. He used to park ‘imself in front of the radio all hours. Sometimes I’d find him asleep on the floor, hugging the thing like a teddy bear.”

“Sod off,” Remus said, flicking a plastic fork at him. Tomny laughed, picking up the fork and using it to pick his teeth.

“You guys playing in any big name clubs yet?”

“Not really. Got a thing over at this pub in South Bank—one I told you

about."

"Aye, right."

"But we're looking to cut a demo soon."

"What's a demo?" Skylar asked.

"S'like a resume... For music," Remus pandered. "Comes before the album. It's where I'm headed after this actually. Gonna meet the guy organising it for us, see if we can't pass the tape on to some studios after."

"That sounds exciting," she replied, as Tomny tossed the fork aside and went on sucking his teeth.

"So that getaway plan of yers was for real then? Thought you jus' didn't want to hang out with me."

"You know it's not like that," said Remus. Tomny waved him off, playful, while Skylar glanced between them both. She popped a fried tomato into her mouth, chewed, and then straightened up in the booth.

"So you two grew up together then?" She asked.

"Er, not really."

"Sure, we did!" Tomny exclaimed, sounding offended. "I've had you goin' on six years now."

"Off and on… S'not exactly like we were neighbours or anything."

"Pish," Tomny said again. He gave Remus an odd look, then turned sideways in his seat to look at Skylar. "I found 'im in a park. Little sod was crying like a girl 'til I came around. After that he used to run away and visit us all the time. Straight turned up outta the blue most days. Had to bribe him jus' so's he'd go home. And 'e had this driver—more like a parole officer, really. His name was... Oh, bollocks—what's the fella's name again, Lu?"

"Giles."

"Giles! We's shared custody, me and 'im. Lu was too much of a handful for anyone else to tolerate. Still rings true today."

While Remus rolled his eyes, secretly pleased, Skylar clapped her

hands together in great realisation.

“Oh, I know 'oo you are now! You’re *that* Lu, aren’t cha? Tomny's told me about you... You’re the one that grew up in the big 'ouse with all the dogs and them. You went to that poshy school! ... Your dad’s some sort ‘a fancy minister or something.”

Suddenly the coffee felt thick on Remus' tongue.

“Yeah, that’s me…”

“I used to know someone 'oose dad sorta did that too," Skylar went on, "but 'e was only a parish rep—not even a real priest—so 'e made shit money. How does your family do it then?”

Again, Remus shifted uncomfortably. “My grandfather owned a lot of land. Sold most of it before he died, and my dad didn’t have any siblings so…”

“Christ, you never told me that,” Tomny gaped. “I'll wager that’s a fat inheritance.”

Afterwards, Skylar swatted him on the shoulder. “Tomny, you nob—why didn’t 'oo tell me he 'n Lu were the same person?”

“Didn’t think I had to. Lu’s Lu, Sky. Does it look like I got many poshy public school kids stuffed up my sleeve?”

He waved his jacket sleeve for emphasis and Skylar only shoved him by the arm. She kept her hand there afterwards though, and Remus stared at it, lost in an unformulated thought.

“You must have a lot going on then,” Skylar said, snapping him from his daze. “Or, I’ve heard lots anyway. Tomny talks about you plenty. You knew Lee and them.”

"You've met Lee?"

"Oh yeah, 'e's come round the flat a few times, innie. A bit of a dosser but nice enough so long as Tomny don't ignore 'im for too long. Gets a bit frazzled otherwise, d'ya know what I mean?"

The comment stung, more so for the fact that *she* could’ve known ‘Lee and them’, but thankfully Tomny got there first.

“Sky, I told you that’s off limits,” he said lowly. “Lee is—”

“I remember, I’m not thick,” Skylar replied curtly. “But they were friends once, now I can’t even ask about it? It’s not like he’s offering much to the conversation…”

The couple shared a sharp look, and Remus got the feeling that it was an argument they’d had before but hadn’t really had a chance to finish. He wished they’d stop talking about him while sitting right in front of him. In fact he wished he’d never come at all, but he was godfather now—or would be, in four and half months. *Christ.*

One meal, Remus thought, *Just one meal.*

“So how’s work coming, Tom?” He asked finally, clinging to every word. He was rewarded when Tomny champed at the bit, probably just as desperate to take the heat off.

“It’s orright! Better than I thought, at least. Burrin’s already got me working with him on the books.”

“Gambling?”

He shrugged. “I just count the bets, mate. Working the books, it's honest enough work, innit. S’usually slow down at the tracks this time of year, but there’s always work to be had. It’s a fucking hike to get there though.”

“Thought you were gonna get a car?”

“We did. S’a 1963 Hillman Imp. Runs like a can ‘a shite though, jus' like the name. Overheats at ten degrees and I think that petrol tank is a bottomless pit.”

They shared a chuckle, but Skylar didn’t seem all that amused. She sipped her coffee and then placed a firm hand on Tomny’s shoulder.

“Remus, did Tomny tell you we’re thinking of moving?”

Remus’ smile faltered. “Moving…?” *Like, for real?*

“Yes, out of the city—”

“She means out of the hustle and bustle,” Tomny cut-in. Skylar gave him a tight look for it, but still smiled at Remus.

“We hope to find one of them row-houses eventually,” she said. “Get out of council housing. Nothing huge, just someplace big enough to park the car—a nursery for the baby, you know.”

Suddenly alarm bells were starting to go off in Remus' head. *Abort! Abort!* But Skylar and Tomny were looking at him. He had to say something.

"You're gonna leave London? Just like that?"

"No, never," Tomny replied. "I ain't going anywhere. Maybe jus'... Havering or something. Still counts."

"But it ain't in the city."

"I think Southend-on-Sea would be nice," Skylar interjected. "It's not too far, and plus there's always a pier that Tomny could find work—"

"So what? You're gonna work on a pier for the rest of your goddamn life?"

The comment was sharp, perhaps sharper than Remus had meant for.

"No," Tomny scoffed. "But it'd be nice to be somewhat closer to work. No room for dog or horse racing 'ere, mate—all the decent tracks are out yonder."

"So you're gonna give up the flat."

It wasn't a question, but Tomny answered like it was; "Not entirely. I'm thinking 'a letting one of the other lads take over the lease for a bit. You know I can't afford two rents, but 'least the flat's cheap."

Calm down, Remus told himself. *You can't lose it over a fucking address.*

"Right," he managed. "Well, that's… You, er—You really sound like you've got a plan going."

"We do," Skylar smiled. "And that's not all. Tomny's promised 'e's gonna get 'imself clean so that we'll all be ready when the baby comes."

Instantly Tomny was chiding her. "Lu don't wanna 'ear about that, sweetheart."

"Why not? You should be proud." She looked to Remus; "He's been going to AA. Two weeks clean already, isn't that brilliant?"

Remus was stunned; he barely heard the rest of her sentence.

"AA, as in… Alcoholics Anonymous, Tom?"

“Jus’ a few meetings,” Tomny said sheepishly. “Thought I’d give it a go. It's not that serious.”

“Really? Just—give it a go?"

Don’t.

"Boy, don't you sound committed.”

Stop.

“You're sure it's not ‘Narcotics Anonymous’?”

He's just embarrassed.

Remus leaned forward; “Or do you plan on keeping the blow on the down-low while you’re changing nappies and coaching football practices?”

“Oi!”

A line had appeared between Tomny’s brow, furrowed in hurt and confusion. It should've been enough for Remus to stop, but part of him didn't want to. Instead he was a bucket tipped; the anger swept forth like toxic oil down a river, and this time he went with it.

“I’m just saying, seems like a lot all at once. A year ago you would’ve rather cut off your arm than move out of the city. Very well couldn’t, not with all your customers being—”

Tomny slammed a hand down on the table, making the dishes rattle and Skylar jump.

“That’s enough," he swore. "No... No need to dredge up the past.”

“Oh? I didn’t realise it was ‘past’.”

“Yeah, it is. So *leave it* already.”

Remus clamped his lips together, and it ended in a stare down. He barely saw Skylar. And then that nasty voice crept back in with vengeance.

He's always calling the shots, isn't he? it hissed. *It’s his fault she left so where’s his punishment? 'We don't care—we don't care'? How 'bout he doesn't care!*

One of the salt shakers had upended itself when Tomny slammed his hand down. Remus watched as Tomny traced a finger through the mess absentmindedly. He thought he could hear him mutter the words "bad luck" under his breath, but the whisper was gone a moment later when Tomny brushed his hands off and took a deep breath.

"How yer dad then? Still busy being a pompous sack of shit?"

Under normal circumstances Remus would've accepted the jab as an insult meant only for Lyall and not a reflection of his own character, but he was feeling spiteful all of a sudden.

"I thought we came here to discuss your family," he scoffed. "You know, the one you're lying to."

"Lu." Tomny cocked his head. "Don't."

“Don’t what? I mean, really, Tom—don't you think Skylar should know everything about you if she’s gonna be sticking around? I mean, you made a baby with her, after all. Reckon that means you're alright with her picking through the rest of your dirty laundry.”

Before Tomny could lash out at him, Skylar cupped both hands around her boyfriend's bicep. “I know about the drugs, Remus," she said, looking earnest. "And I want you to know that I don’t care. Everyone makes mistakes, but Tomny's gonna right them. He's gonna come out better, just like I did. Hell, when I met Tomny, I was drinking a bottle a night jus' to get to sleep and going wiv' any guy that'd so much as look at me twice.”

“Yeah, well... I imagine it’s a lot more lucrative to forgive your drug dealer.”

“What'd you say to her?" Tomny echoed. "Lu, you need to shut the fuck up right now.”

“What? You mean to tell me that you haven’t sold any dope since coming back here, Tom? Yeah, right.”

"He hasn't," Skylar insisted. "He told me he hasn't."

"Nah, just look at him. He's lying to ya, Sky."

A vein bulged in Tomny’s neck. Remus had never seen him so angry, and though he was alarmed, a part of him revelled in it.

“Didn't he tell you, Sky? Suppose it feels like a lifetime ago now... But he did it. For *years.* All the way from Limehouse to Shoreditch—Tomny had it all. Uppers, downers, blow, barbs, smack! Whatever fits your fancy, really. Didn't he *tell you* any of that? Did he tell you about all the times we got high together? Or—Or the fights he got into? And how about Lee’s brother, hm? The one who was knifed in an alley? Or me? Or... Or Tonya! Don’t tell me he forgot to tell you about Ton—”

“REMUS!”

The shout was loud enough to draw the attention of the entire restaurant. Like before, Remus and Tomny barely noticed, it was only Skylar who flinched. She looked down at her lap to avoid the strangers' stares and began fidgeting her fingers with red, burning cheeks. Across the table, Remus had both hands fisted together so tightly he could feel the bite of his nails in either palm. The look Tomny was giving him was absolutely deplorable, and he deserved every second of it.

I’ll hate her, he'd told Lyall once, *I’ll make her hate me too.*

“I think I need to use the lav,” Skylar murmured.

“Yeah, think I’ll step outside for another fag,” Tomny said flatly, his eyes never leaving Remus’ face. “Lu was just leaving anyway.”

Skylar stood up, pretty mouth puckered, and set her napkin down on the table. “It was nice to meet you, Remus," she said, and then she left, shapely hips swaying on her way.

Hate her, the voice said.

“Get your fucking coat,” Tomny told him. “You’re done.”

Remus didn’t even have it in him to be sorry. He followed Tomny out onto the icy street corner, shoving his hands into his pockets as Tomny rifled around for a fag. It was cold outside and the pavement was empty apart from a few passing pedestrians and the occasional car. Remus would be due at Fletcher’s office soon—he was meeting the boys. What a fucking mistake all this had all been.

“You crossed the line,” Tomny told him, when he finally had the cigarette lit. “You did it on purpose. You *wanted* to fuck this up for me.”

Remus shoved his hands in his pockets bitterly. “Guess I just thought

I'd save you the trouble of doing it yourself."

"Oh fuck you, Lu! What'd I ever do to you to deserve this?"

"You brought me here!"

" 'Brought you here'— *ha!* That's rich! Forgive me for wanting my best friend to be even the least bit involved with my life! You know, you really are just some spoiled, pampered prat. You think you can take your anger out on Skylar just because you have abandonment issues? Welcome to the fucking club!"

"Only assumed she'd want to know about what it is you really do, but I guess I was wrong," Remus blabbered. "I just don't know what makes her so fucking special that you'd hold off from telling her the truth."

"She's having my kid!" Tomny wailed. "She's gonna be the mother of my child, you fucking bellend!"

"You sure about that? Said it herself, didn't she. Are you sure this kid's even yours, Tom?"

It was too far. Remus knew it the instant the words left his lips. And he didn't blame Tomny for a second, even as he brought his fist up in one fell swoop. The punch was solid, catching him on the jaw and slamming his teeth together with a painful snap. Remus went sprawling to his knees on impact, but he'd saved his teeth and tongue. Lee had once told him a story of a guy who'd made that mistake during a fight. Ended up severing the muscle clean off. Mute ever since.

"You're lucky," Tomny hissed, shaking out his fist; "that was my left."

Remus raised his head, icy pavement biting through the fabric of his jeans. Tomny's punch coupled with the wet ground had zapped him of all his anger, leaving him feeling only miserable and ashamed.

What have I done?

"Fuck... Tom, I—"

"No," Tomny groaned. He looked ill, like he might vomit. "You... You just shut your fucking mouth. I can't—I... Fuck! Fuck—shit—FUCK!"

He punctuated the cry by spinning round and kicking out at one of the rubbish bins the cafe must've set out that morning for rubbish

collection. Luckily the bin was empty, but it did bounce several metres down the pavement, nearly taking out the knees of a well-dressed man walking the opposite way. He glared at Tomny as he passed them, and Tomny raised him the single finger salute and bellowed a sharp: *"Who you think yer lookin' at?"*

Afterwards there was no one left to yell at or kick but each other. Anxiously, Remus got to his feet, fists clenched at his sides.

"I'm sorry, Tom."

"No, you don't get to be sorry," Tomny hissed, pointing a vicious finger at him. " *You* ..." A shaky breath; "You just don't get it, do you? I needed to make this work."

"For who—her? For the kid?"

"For myself, you right bastard!"

Aching deeply, though in no way worse-off than his friend, Remus took a step forward. He wanted to apologise again, but he watched as Tomny retreated from him and knew that another "I'm sorry" would get him nowhere.

"Please, Tom," he begged instead. "Tell me how I can make it up to you."

"This ain't about making it up to me! I brought you here because I wanted you to meet Skylar. Cause—Cause I wanted you to *like* her. And then you go and pull this shit! Like fuck, Lu! … And to mention Tonya? Christ, why's it so hard for you to be proud of me?"

Remus almost whimpered.

"I am proud of you, Tom."

"Yeah, well it ain't enough."

And perhaps it wasn't. For three years Remus had feared only being left behind, and now that Tomny truly had gone ahead he'd become hysterical. It was his own fault. Tomny had offered him a hand— *come with me, be a godfather*— and he'd ruined it. He could see it in Tomny's eyes, and felt it as he watched him turn away.

"Where you going?" Remus asked.

"Away."

"No. No, you said you weren't going anywhere."

"And you said you were happy for me... Guess that makes us both liars."

"So that's it?" Remus demanded. "We're done? Just like that?"

Tomny stopped, his shoulders collapsed inward like a child's. For a long time Remus didn't think he was going to turn around, but then he did, and Remus regretted it all over again.

“I think you should go, Lu,” Tomny told him, calmly stubbing out his cigarette on the cafe wall. “Just… Good luck with all your band shit or whatever. M’sure I’ll hear it on the radio someday.”

And then Tomny moved past him, back into the cafe. The door jingled and a corner of the Santa Clause flyer fluttered in the wind. It would be warm inside, Remus knew, but he didn't deserve the comfort. He deserved only the ice in his bones.

Turning, Remus started up the street toward the nearest tube station where he might be able to catch a cab. Did this mean he was relieved from all future godfatherly duties, he wondered?

* * *

When Remus fully came to again, he was sitting in the back of a cab on his way to Fletcher’s office. The address he'd given them was situated along Coventry Street, just off Leicester Square in Soho. It was a unique area, for lack of a better word—one that felt seedy in the daytime only to come alive with bustle and neon the moment the sun dropped below the horizon. Handing the cabbie a fiver, Remus clambered out of the cab's back seat and found himself knee-deep in Chinatown likeness. Adverts for take-out and call-girls littered the damp street corners, while air stinking of exhaust and local cuisine floated overhead. Across the street lay the iconic Prince of Wales Theatre, dull orange bulbs advertising its in-house comedy show. *‘Too funny for words’,* its marquee read; *‘If you don’t laugh—sue us!’*

All around him people shambled on by, out to catch an early matinee or else pop into one of the many couture shops or peep shows lining the strip. Remus found his friends standing outside a sex shop bearing the name ‘Tunnels of Love’, sharing a cigarette between the three of them while they waited. It was Peter who spotted him first, pushing

the fag onto James and rushing forward, nearly slipping on the slick pavement.

“Moony—Finally! We were starting to wonder if you were ever gonna show.”

He shrugged, hands in his pockets. “I’m here now. Why didn’t you guys go inside?”

“Couldn’t very well go in with three-fourths a band, could we?” James replied, stubbing out the cigarette. “Feeling ready then?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

"Good," said Peter, "I'm tired of freezing my balls off out here."

If James or Peter picked up on his lack of enthusiasm, they didn’t mention it. It wasn’t until they’re rung the building’s door buzzer and were making their way up the set of interior stairs adjacent to the sex shop that Sirius mentioned the meeting with Tomny.

“So, how’d it go?” He asked, keeping his voice low so it might be muffled by the creaking sound of their boots on each step.

“Fine,” Remus replied, before realising he was going to have to try a bit harder to keep his curiosity at bay. “Tomny got a new job down at the dog tracks.”

“And the girl?”

It was James who saved him from having to answer. “Are you sure this is the right place?” He called. They’d emerged on a wooden landing that felt more ‘shabby Soho flat’ than ‘EMI music producer extravaganza’. As they filed in next to each other, one of the doors closest to them opened and a middle-aged man tottered out. He gave each of them a dark look, punctuated by a five o’clock shadow and a terrible underbite, and then gruffly pushed his way through to get downstairs.

“He smelt wonderful,” Sirius said tersely. “Like stale hops and cat piss.”

“Keep it up and he might just come back and stab you with a blunt blade,” James mused.

“Maybe he will. It'd give me something to write about, at least.”

“It’s down here, wankers,” Peter called, having moved further up the landing than the rest of them. “Number three.”

The rest of them followed, stopping outside a dingy panelled door without any windows. It was the same as all the others, except this one had a golden plaque hung up outside. *Doug Fletcher. Arts and Repertoire, EMI Music Publishing.*

Sirius flicked the plaque with his finger. It tinged like plastic.

“Well,” he said, glancing sceptically at the rest of them. “We did come all this way…”

And so, with a deep breath, Sirius raised his fist and knocked.

The door flew open before he’d even finished, revealing a grinning Fletcher in a pin-striped suit and pink satin cravat, bald head polished to a shine. He’d forwent the over-sized golden rings today, and instead had several silver bangles on either wrist that jangled like a cat’s collar whenever he flourished his barrel-shaped wrists.

“If it ain’t my three o’clock! Or should I say, London’s next hardest and heaviest group ‘a thrashers! Come in, lads, come in!” Ushering them inside, Fletcher pointed across the room to where a lanky guy with thick-rimmed glasses sat in a cushioned arm chair. “This ‘ere is my man, Albert Wilson. He’s going to be the one helping you record *in-studioso* . That is, in the recording studio. Heh.”

They nodded eagerly, each without a peep to split between them. For all the uninspiring exterior, they were certainly in awe now. With large street-facing windows shrouded in beaded blinds and rugs that looked like they were fresh off the boat from Persia, Fletcher's office appeared to be dressed up even more fabulously than the man himself. Albert sat on a small loveseat in the corner, legs crossed at the ankles as he looked them up and down. Ahead of him sat a single leather office chair and a large oaken desk decorated with a heavy crystal ashtray, a rolodex, and a golden statuette of what appeared to be a naked women’s bust. The wood-panelled walls, though still marred with the building's general dinge and water damage, were covered with placards advertising EMI and all its signed acts. Several more golden records hung framed over an upright piano. Remus peered at each of the band’s names closely—Muggle & the Martyr, The Crookshanks, Abra Kadabra—none sounded familiar.

“Ah, I see you’ve noticed the high-achievers board,” Fletcher said, coming up behind him. “Abra Kadabra’s ‘Goblets of Ire’ went platinum

just last month, as a matter ‘a fact. Haven’t got the record in the mail yet. Bad luck, that.”

“I've never heard of them," Remus replied. "You said they went platinum in the UK?”

“No, in Bangladesh actually.” Fletcher thumped him on the back. “Here's hoping the next gold-plated record I’ll be getting is yers, eh?”

Remus got the feeling he was supposed to laugh, but thankfully the manager had already moved on. He ushered him back to a large leather sofa that sat across from his desk and Remus squeezed in beside James and Peter while Sirius perched himself on the arm rest. Once he was seated behind his desk, Fletcher eased back into the creaky leather chair and put one foot up on the desk.

“So let’s just start by covering the basics. Which of ya writes the songs?”

“Lupin does,” Sirius answered, without a hint’s hesitation. Remus scoffed and thumped him in the leg.

“We *all* write the songs.”

“Hm, group effort, is it? Makes things a bit messy in the accounting department, but s’nothing we’s ain’t used to. Make sure's you keep record of who wrote what, that way we can divvy up the royalties as needed.” Pointing a finger at them assuredly, Fletcher pulled a cigar tin from his pocket and used one of fat cuban cigars to gestured toward Albert, who’d already begun scribbling away on a notepad. “Put Lupin down as the principle then," he ordered. "The other’s we’ll sort out as we record.”

“Yeah, and when do you think we’ll record?” Sirius pressed. “ ‘Cause we been working on the songs like you said, and we got more than enough to—”

“Hold on now, hold on,” Fletcher eased; “We’ll get there, son, I promise ya. But before we do, what I needs to know is what sort of *image* you lads wanna portray. Who do you’s want people tah see when they look at you—what should be the first thing that pops intae their heads when they hear the name ‘Marauders’.”

“Good ol’ fashion rock ‘n’ roll,” James answered simply.

“Yeah,” Peter added, “we’re a rock band. Like the Rolling Stones or

Cream.”

“You want people to think of the Stones when they come ‘n see ya?”

“No,” Sirius cut-in, giving Peter a pointed look, "we ain’t the Stones. We're better."

“Now *that,”* Fletcher applauded, “is what I wanted to hear. That's a record I can sell!” He paused, long enough to light the narrow cigar off a lighter plated in the same shimmering gold as his records. “You lads have the gusto—the zeal—but if you’re missing anything it’s a goal. Simply saying you want to be the ‘biggest and best’ ain’t enough no more.”

Peter leaned in; “But you said—”

Fletcher snapped the lighter shut, exhaling. The smoke instantly stung Remus' eyes, reminding him of Lyall.

“Being big is great, you need ‘big’ to be the best," Fletcher told them, "but whatchu also needs is a certain uniqueness—a *sui generis,* if you will. You need something that sets you apart from all the rest ‘a the acts on the circuit. I think this attitude of yours could be it, so long as you can back it up with your sound, that is.”

“And how will we know if we've managed to 'back it up'?” James asked.

Fletcher shrugged. “ ‘Fraid that’s on you, but I suggest you do it fast. Punk’s a dying art, my friends. It was rock’s eleventh-hour shot to take back power. Now that it’s failed, we need a new angle. Mosh pits are out and dance parties are in. So you tell me, where are you going to land…? Empty mosh pits, or menagerie dance floors filled with silk-wearing dolly birds?”

“Neither,” Remus said, making all of them turn on him. “We’re not punk. And we sure as hell aren’t doing whatever those new wavers are into."

"So...?"

"So we ain't gonna cave. Instead we’re gonna do it our way, just like the guys before us but better. We’re gonna find all the ones that punk and synth left behind and we’re gonna play our music for them. Not the music they want, but the music they don't know they should be... be wanting.”

He'd trailed off towards the end, suddenly chock full of self-doubt, but he must've said something right, for the others were already grinning at him in agreement. As James reached over to slap him fondly on the arm, Remus caught Fletcher and Albert exchanging a purposeful glance.

“You guys live together?” Albert asked.

“Yeah,” answered Sirius. “Got a flat in Shepherd’s Bush.”

“Daddy paying for the demo then?”

“No, we work for your information,” Remus snapped, thinking of Tomny.

“Alright, alright,” Fletcher cut-in, “I think it's time we get this show on the road, don't you? I told you four the first time we chatted that I wasn’t gonna take any money for meself from the get-go. I know, s'generous of me. Most new acts don't get such a sweet deal, but to save us the hassle of all that paperwork I say we negotiate contracts once the demo’s recorded and in our hands. From there we can start taking it to distributors. Until then, you’re only paying for studio time. Sound fair?”

“Fair,” they nodded dubiously.

“Brilliant. I’d say that makes this a done deal, lads. If you’ve got the money on you today, Albert can work out a date for you to record down at De Lane. What say you?”

The other Marauders all glanced anxiously at Sirius, who slipped off of the sofa arm and pulled open his Glastonbury coat. Reaching inside, he untucked an envelope of cash and passed it over the desk. Fletcher peeked inside and before giving Albert a quick nod of approval and slipping the envelope into one of the desk drawers.

“Next Sunday work for ya?” Albert asked. “We’ll have to do it at night, when the studio’s closed. S’all they’ll allow for student bands, but at least no one’ll be around to bother us. Should give me enough time to cut it all together and get you that demo before the holidays too.”

“Yes!” Sirius exclaimed, looking excitedly at all of them. “The sooner the better really. Can’t wait forever.”

“What, got a flame licking that skinny behind ‘a yours?” Fletcher

teased.

“No,” Peter started for him. “But we told our parents we’d go back to school if nothing came of the band thing, and it’s already been several months.”

“Aw, I get that.” Fletcher stood up from the chair. He was admittedly not that much taller on his feet. “Parents just want what’s best for ya. But you let them know that your good pal Fletch’s got it *allllll* sorted. Demo’s practically a done deal, just gotta hit record! But do your ol' pal a favour, would ya? If anyone else tries to sign ya before we've gone to EMI, you let Fletcher know. Got's to make sure you're not getting a sour deal. Only honour amongst friends, ain't there?”

With that, they made their way to the door, herded out into the hall by Fletcher and his foul cigar smoke.

“Oh, and one more piece of advice, lads!” He called, just as they’d stepped out into the hall. “Get some posters made. Start painting the town in your image. People can’t come to see ya if they don’t know you exist. Who knows, maybe one ‘a them’ll turn out to be your biggest fan.”

The door shut with a slam, and barely a beat had passed before James and Sirius were throwing themselves at each other in jubilation.

"I can't fucking believe it!" James sang. "We're getting our own demo—holy shit!"

"Holy shit!" Sirius agreed. They continued dancing around each other all the way back down to the ground floor, where the next door sex shop's sign was still flashing out its window.

"Don't you reckon we're celebrating a bit early?" Peter warbled as the four of them emerged onto the street and James began grinding his knuckles into the top of Sirius' head in jovial congratulation. "We just handed him everything we have and we've still got nothing to show for it. That was nearly five months' wages, you know."

"And a good chunk of my inheritance," Sirius said, freeing himself from James and poking out his tongue playfully. "Don't worry, Wormy, if the demo fails I promise to buy you out. Maybe you can start up your own art studio."

Peter didn't appear contented, but just then James separated himself from Sirius' side and declared that a round of drinks were in order and

that they should make their next mission to find the nearest possible pub to get royally pissed in. With all of them in agreement, Remus followed on obediently, keeping silent as Sirius eventually fell into step with him.

"So I've been thinking, should we open the demo with 'Hail Mary' or 'Doomed Generation'? 'Hail Mary' would be a real punch in the throat, but maybe we wanna start off more with something more modest—you know, build up to the real heavy stuff. What do you wager, Moons?"

Remus didn't answer at first, and Sirius had to tap him.

"Moons?"

"Something was off about Fletcher."

Sirius tipped his head back to groan; "What, you too?"

"No, no... It's just something that he said." Remus peered down at the wet pavement beneath his shoes. " 'Honour amongst friends', that's what he said, but he's wrong. It's 'no honour amongst thieves', that's the saying."

Sirius bit his lip, looking temporarily deflated. The expression was gone a second later.

"Who gives a shit what barmy idiots like Fletcher have to say? We're only using him to get the demo. Old fool didn't even make us sign any contracts, right? The way I see it, if he turns out completely useless then we just get our tape and get out. Find another way into EMI. I'll bet there's loads of tossers just like Fletcher. It's all 'a part of the game, remember."

Remus nodded. "Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right. I'm like so right it's wrong—that's the best part. Now c'mon, I can feel a stiff pint calling your name, Moons. With luck, it'll be the last one you ever have to pay for outta your own pocket."

* * *

Christmastime, 1978

In the nearly two weeks that'd followed their meeting with Fletcher, the Marauders worked harder than ever before, dedicating every waking hour not spent at work to honing their craft. Remus told himself to be thankful for the lack of free time; it meant less hours would be wasted languishing over Tomny. He hadn't heard from the would-be father since their spat outside the cafe, and since Remus had made no effort to reach out either, he assumed that Tomny simply wanted the space and resigned himself to a waiting game. Things would be alright eventually, Remus told himself. He and Tomny had had falling outs before—this wasn't the first time and he doubted it'd be the last. Even if Tomny didn't call first, eventually Remus would come slinking back, begging for forgiveness, and Tomny would give it to him as he always did. For now, all Remus needed was to be patient.

On the upside (or down, depending on who you asked,) Sirius had somehow managed to wrestle the rest of them into performing the back-up vocals on a couple of their more pop-rock tracks. Normally James was the only one who had the courage to sing back-up to Sirius while on stage, but they'd all agreed that the songs didn't sound as whole without it.

"Why don't you just layer more of yours and James' vocals on top of each other?" Remus had asked. "You can do that, you know. In the studio."

"I know, but I wanna hear it like this first. Now let's cut the whinging and take it from the top, shall we?"

It went okay at first, but then Remus' voice cracked on the second verse and he'd been forced to pummel Sirius with his fists until the arse stopped fully-belly laughing. This went on for several days.

It was clear that the Marauders had really hit their stride as a band during those few weeks. It was then that Remus really discovered how good Peter was at harmonising with Remus' bass. Practically reading his mind, the two of them bounced beats off one another all day and all night until they were creating rhythms just as complementary as any Jones-Bonham composition. Of course James and Sirius had proved as formidable a duo as always. Together they penned a rather explosive composition involving an experimental sort of reverb they could only achieve by placing two amps side by side and swinging the guitar around in front of them in a windmill-like motion. It looked rather stupid in practice, but anything for the art, Remus supposed.

When it'd finally come time to record the songs in-studio, they'd taken

turns pinching each other just to make sure they weren't dreaming. They were due to be up the entire night recording, but still Remus hadn't been able to sleep. Instead he laid awake, staring at the radio and ruminating in his own jitters.

"Just think of the album cover," Sirius had told him, muttering sleepily into the side of his neck. "I'm… mmm… finally gonna get you into a pair of those leather trousers… swear it."

When that fateful Sunday finally came, they waited until near-on nine o'clock at night to load everything into the van. Lily had wanted to come as a show of support, but it was the end of term for her and she had an exam in the morning. Without their favourite ginger tag-along, James and Sirius took the front seats while Remus and Peter rode coach with the instruments.

"I'm starting to think getting Minnie was a good idea after all," Sirius said, tilting James' rearview mirror to grin back at them. "I mean, you two look so cosy back there."

"Would you stop with the stupid name already?" Peter moaned. "It's a car not a golden retriever."

"I still don't get it either," James said, twisting his mirror back. "Why did you insist on naming our van after our old Headmistress?"

"Because," Sirius sniggered. "Now it's a *Minnie*- van."

They all groaned.

James took the A40 over to Holborn, where they found themselves knocking on the loading bay doors of none other than De Lane Lea Studios. There they waited, practically vibrating on the spot for reasons that were entirely unique to each of them.

"You're sure we're in the right place?" Peter asked.

"Yes, we're sure," Sirius snapped, hands pressed tight to his chest to ward off the chill. "Do you see another building around here with the words 'De Lane Lea' written out front?"

"You don't need to be a prick about it."

Before Sirius could answer, the back door swung open, revealing Albert in a pair of matching white shirt and slacks. Remus recognised the faint smell of antiseptic permeating the air around him. Albert

didn't seem to notice.

“Come on then,” the sound tech grunted briskly, shoving a brick beneath the door to keep it propped open. “Let's get that gear inside before you wake up the whole bloody neighbourhood.”

Albert was strictly to the point, Remus noticed early on. He refused James' request for a quick tour of the studios, citing strict time constraints and a lack of free studio space. After overhearing the sound of what appeared to be voices coming from the end of one hall, Remus became almost sure that they weren't alone as Fletcher promised, but before he could inquire further, Albert had them corralled into one of the control rooms, the sight alone impressive enough to make Remus forget all about any possible gate-crashers. The control room itself was very clean and sleek-looking, not at all like the shag-rug and wood-panelled recording booths Remus had seen snippets of in the likes of *NME* and *Cream* magazine. To him, the control table and surrounding area looked more like something torn straight out of one of Marlene’s science fiction novels. A spaceship maybe, or a robot assembly line.

In a clear hurry to get going, Albert kindly helped lug their things into the studio's booth, and from there they got straight to work. Not a single moment was wasted, apart from those spent sorting out the issues with the tape. Of which there were many.

“I got it, I got it! Just let me do it!” Albert prattled, after the machine had tangled for the third time, ruining Sirius’ near-perfect take and prompting all of them to emerge from the live room to see what was the issue. Remus didn’t say anything, for fear Albert would somehow overhear them through the booth's speaker playback, but it appeared to him that Fletcher’s ‘right hand man’ was very new to the whole ‘recording’ business. He supposed it was to be expected; they were still quite green themselves.

With only one hour left until sun-up, the Marauders were nearly depleted. There was Peter, half-asleep at his drum kit, and James who had downed about twenty-seven cups of black coffee, and finally Remus who was quite literally begging for fag. Only Sirius seemed to come with limitless stores of energy, as to be expected.

“Just a bit longer. We still have that last song of yours to record first," he insisted, sliding his headphones back into place and giving Albert the 'okay' through the booth's main window. "Al, cue up a fresh tape, would ya?" He called. "We're gonna do Lupin's ballad."

“No, don’t worry about it,” Remus said into his own microphone, painfully tired and exasperated. "We don't need it."

“What?!"

Sirius' voice came through the speakers along with a horrible sequel of feedback, making all of them with headphones flinch and Peter spring awake from the floor beside his bass drum. "Sorry..." He muttered, adjusting the microphone, then; "What d’you mean ‘don’t need it’? It’s your song.”

“Yeah, and I just don’t think it’s the right fit for the album anymore, that's all.”

“Moons.” Sirius gave him a look that was half sleep-deprived irritation, half forlorn sympathy. “It’s a good song. It should go on the album.”

Remus shook his head. *No.*

Not *that* song.

Not “Tonya’s Song”.

Not anymore.

“None of the others are acoustic. It’ll sound out of place.”

“Sod that. It’s our best love song.”

Love song. He almost flinched when Sirius said it.

"I won't do it. I said no."

“Fine then, be a stubborn prat about it,” Sirius huffed, already reaching for his guitar. “We’ll have Potter play your bits instead—”

“Sirius, why don't you just fuck off!?”

At the sound of his raised voice, Peter sat upright and James lowered his twenty-eighth cup of coffee-in-a-styrofoam-mug. Remus knew that Albert would also be keenly listening in from his place back in the control room, but he was too proud to look. And too proud to apologise. It appeared as though it was becoming a bad habit of his lately.

“I don’t want to," he said solemnly, in place of a defence, "please,

Sirius."

At Remus' pathetic attempt to appeal to his compassionate nature, Sirius deflated some, his pale shoulders falling slack as he tipped his head back to frown at the ceiling. Remus could tell he was more than a little disappointed; he'd always loved "Tonya's Song", enough to look past the fact that it was clearly a love song Remus had written for someone else.

"Come on, Black," James said, chiming in reasonably. "We still have Moony's other ballad, 'How Nice It Could Be'. It's 'love' enough, yeah? Let's sort that one next."

"You also said that we still need to stack a few more vocals for 'Downtown Girls'," Peter called, muffling a yawn.

The look Sirius gave him made it obvious to Remus that he wasn't satisfied, but he didn't push anymore and for that Remus was grateful. Going through the motions and simply playing the chords was the easy part, but either due to their unwavering friendship or general exhaustion, there were no more arguments to be had in the booth. Come seven o'clock, they were stood around the futuristic sound board with Albert, listening to what would go on to become the scrap pieces of the Marauders' very first album. The recording was messy; rough-hewn and clearly amateur—and yet Remus had never felt so proud of anything he'd help create in his entire life.

On their way back to Shepherd's Bush they passed a bottle of Jack around in hard-earned celebration. They got caught up in traffic along the way, but were already on their second or third wind of the night and couldn't be bothered to give a crap. These were morning commuters, all of them on their way to the boring mundane desk jobs that paid for their boring mundane lives. *They* were eighteen—and *they* had just finished recording a studio demo. Soon that demo would be passed on to the execs at EMI, and if all went well there, they'd hopefully be signing contracts within the coming New Year. Invigorated by this knowledge, (and the whisky) Remus looked out the window at a bus full of morning pedestrians and flipped them the victorious bird. Life was good.

Of course they all crashed the moment they arrived home, barely having the energy to bring the gear back inside with them to avoid being robbed. It wasn't until several hours later, at around four o'clock, when Remus awoke to Lily knocking on their door. Regulus had called.

Sirius immediately leapt out of bed, and when Remus eventually found the energy to follow, he found him draped over the kitchen phone, regaling his brother with all the fantastical realities of being a real-life recording artist.

“No, seriously, it was amazing! The studio was damn impressive, they had an isolation box and everything… No, not like in *prison.* It’s meant for—well, if you knew what it was meant for then why bother taking the piss? … Mhm… Ugh. I still don’t know why you’d bother, it’s not like anyone ever has a good time at those fucking parties, least of all us... Sod Mum—why don’t you just come out here for Christmas? Potter’s parents are putting everyone up and there’s plenty of room. You can sleep at the end of the bed like a little cat.” Sirius paused, and slowly his little smirk faded, replaced instead by a deep, unsatisfied frown.

“Fuck family, Edge," he spat. " *You’re* my family. You should be coming out here. Have a visit—you’d love it, I know you would. You can join us, even—fucking—find yourself, I dunno. We’re always on the lookout for a decent roadie anyway…” Sirius sighed again, rubbing his free hand over his eyes. “Right… Yes, yes—I get it! … Christ... Fine. Talk soon… Yeah, you too... bye.”

When he hung up, Remus was waiting with a cup of tea.

“No good?”

“Eh… Maybe Easter.”

He could tell Sirius’ plan to mend the broken bridge between himself and his brother was wearing on him. For months he’d clung to the sparse phone calls, dreading the weeks that Regulus didn’t see fit to ring them. Remus wasn’t sure just how deeply entrenched Regulus remained in the Black family values, but it was enough to still consider them blood. He knew it upset Sirius, but none of them had any right to tell Regulus off. It was a complicated thing, family. And big or small, all of them had their own issues. Similarly, Remus had long since made the decision that he would not be returning to Lupin Estate that Christmas. Instead he and all of his friends were due back at Potter Cottage, where they’d hang tinsel made of freshly popped corn and give another stirring performance in front of all of Effie and Fleamont’s closest friends and family. Looking forward to it most of all was James. Having missed his parents more than he’d care to admit, he rang Effie repeatedly to ask if there was anything they could bring, and every time Effie told him to just bring themselves.

Though he was better at hiding it than James, Remus could tell that Sirius was excited too. And he was happy for him; Sirius deserved a good Christmas after all he'd been through. And this time Remus was determined not to run out on him.

To avoid thinking about the hard things, like Tomny and how he'd spent nearly every Christmas at the flat for the last six years, Remus tried thinking of the friends he would get to see. There were the Potters' of course, as well as Peter's family. Word on the street was that Simeon was bringing a new Oxbridge girlfriend with him, though Sirius strongly suspected this one of being another beard. There would also be Lottie and her older-by-several-years-boyfriend, Roger. Then of course there were James' many cousins, among them Ajay, the coolest Boston-bound Van Halen fan Remus had ever met. For a while it appeared as though the most up in the air attendee was Lily, who couldn't decide whether she should spend the holidays in the city she'd come to love or return home to visit with the family she missed. In the end she went with the former. Her sister was getting married at the beginning of March anyway, and it was quickly determined that taking the train twice would've been a waste of money.

"Vernon proposed back in October, and Pet wants it over as soon as possible so he can't keep making excuses as to why they can't move out together," Lily explained.

"Sounds to me like the bloke doesn't want to be married all that much," Sirius ragged. "You sure he's not bent or something?"

"You think everyone's bent," Peter said.

"You just haven't met Petunia. Vernon'd be a fool to rush into a marriage with that one," James sniggered. "Kidding, Daisy— *kidding."*

And so with the demo out of the way, and nothing to do but wait for Albert to cut it together ("How long does that even take?" Peter had asked. No one had a real answer.) Remus resigned himself to a bit of holiday shopping with the girls.

"Before you ask—no, Lottie's not coming," Mary announced sourly, upon his and Lily's arrival to her South Kensington flat.

"She says she'll be back in time for Christmas," Lily said in favour of her love-sick friend. "Apparently she's got a big surprise too."

"As long as it isn't a baby," Marlene murmured snidely, picking at the pilling on her wool jumper. She seemed to realise what she'd said a

second later, and they turned to look at each other nervously, then at Remus in apology.

"I-I didn't mean that Remus. I'm sure Tomny is—"

“We taking the tube or shanks’ pony?” Was his only reply.

Yes, in true Remus Lupin fashion, he’d neglected telling any of his friends what had exactly gone down between him and Tomny outside that Whitechapel cafe. He didn’t pretend to be entirely innocent, but he kept the details to a minimum even as Sirius berated him for answers. All anyone really knew was that Remus had fucked up. *Badly.*

I’m sure you’re worried for nothing, Sirius had said. *You do that. Mooning Moony, remember?*

And because he didn’t want to admit to just how horrible he’d really been, Remus let Sirius believe it.

With Christmas looming, Remus thought more than once that he should at least send a gift. Not in apology—Tomny would’ve never accepted charity in exchange for such a slight—but rather, something for the baby. But when the girls finally dragged him down to Harrods, he nearly had a panic attack simply walking into the baby section. In the end it was Lily who picked something out on his behalf. He asked her not to tell him what it was; he simply gave her the money and they posted the package the next day.

“Yes, Mum, we’re going to stay the night,” James said, as he prattled to Effie over the phone. “No, we’ve all got Boxing Day off work. Miracle, innit? ... I'm sorry— *'isn't it'* . Now are you sure there isn’t anything we can bring? … Yes, I think we can manage bread rolls… Huh? What do you mean Aunty Jai’s doing the canapés? … Tell her no! She always overdoes it with the mascarpone.”

Across the living room, Sirius smirked wryly in Lily’s direction.

“Got yourself a real winner there, Evans.”

She glanced up from the book she was reading. “What can I say, the lad’s got priorities.”

They all sniggered, except for Peter, who was tucked up beside the coffee table, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He’d been there all morning, sketching out ideas for their first ever band poster. It’d taken

him several tries, and unsurprisingly, Sirius turned out to be quite the critic, but Remus enjoyed watching Peter's process. In the end he'd settled on a sort of collage-style design, similar to the ones bands like the Buzzcocks and Sex Pistols had plastered around the city's seediest underbellies in the past. Using one of the magazines Mary had left lying around the flat, he cut up an advert meant for sunglasses and used the model's pretty black and white image as the poster's centrepiece while replacing the inside of lenses with large mish-mashed letters spelling out 'Marauders'. Around the woman he'd painted swirling black lines, some solid and others dotted like boundary lines on a map, and near the bottom, a checker print pattern advertised their Saturday night shows at the Shoestring-upon-Thames. The entire thing had a sort of 'ransom note effect'—cool, and eerily eye-catching. Remus loved it.

"Right, so Mum says everything's sorted for Christmas," James said, rejoining them only to squeeze in between Lily and Sirius on the sofa. "Hope you don't mind, but I told her you and Moony would be fine sharing a room."

"Ugh, again?" Sirius scoffed. "Fine, but keep him away from the asparagus. He gets gassy."

"Yeah, well, Sirius sleeps in the nude now," Remus retorted.

"And you just *love* it. In fact, I'll bet you're picturing it right now. My bare arse, right in your f—"

Just then, Peter stood up from his spot on the floor and cleared his throat.

"As much as we all *love* picturing Sirius nude, do me a favour and picture this hanging on a brick wall in Soho instead."

He turned the poster around for all of them to see, and Remus got to witness it as James and Sirius shot spine-straight on the couch.

"Looks fucking ace, man!"

"Absolutely dynamite!"

Remus resisted a grimace. *Weirdos.* Six months of living in London and his friends still managed to sound like utter toffs anytime they attempted to lend themselves to any sort of modern slang.

"I think it looks stunning, Peter," Lily said, the picture of loveliness.

“Thanks! But that’s not all, either.” Shoving one hand into his pocket, Peter revealed what appeared to be a small torch no bigger than his thumb. “Voilà!”

“Brilliant,” said Sirius. “Now what is it?”

Without bothering to answer, Peter quickly set the poster down again and rushed across the room. He went first to the front curtains and tugged each of them shut, then he got the lights, plunging them all into moderate darkness.

“Uh… Pete?”

“Just wait for it! ... Shit, I hope this is dark enough.”

There was a short rustling as Peter grabbed the poster and raised it into the air. Then he clicked on his little torch, turned it toward the poster's front, and just like that—all of them gasped. The ink, while invisible under daylight, glowed neon green, revealing a hidden message beneath Peter's work. Staring at it, it was as though the poster had come alive, swirling with neon patterns that glowed in the dark. It felt like an acid trip contained on paper—hatching lines, swirling checkerboard, smiley faces, and little footprints like some ironic homage to the most confusing map of all time. In the very centre was their name, ‘Marauders’, painted on like dripping graffiti.

“Holy shit!” James cried. “Pete, you *did* that? How?!”

“It's cool, right?” Peter grinned, his teeth shining like tiny radioactive pearls. “It’s a black light. Without it, the ink disappears. See?” He illustrated by flicking the torch on and off. “Nicked it from work. They use ‘em in the print rooms—something to do with photography.”

“ *Very* cool,” Sirius agreed. “Imagine how that’d look in a club, with all the lights down! We could pour it over our instruments—they’d see us from space!”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Lily cautioned.

Still beaming, Peter set the torch down and got the lights. “I’m gonna print them off at the shop, I think. Dad says he’s willing to give us a discount on ink. Afterwards we can hang 'em up around town, just like Fletcher said.”

“Magnificent plan, old chap!” Sirius declared, leaping up from the sofa. He snatched the poster from Peter and rushed to hold it up

against the wall, right next to a large photo of the Rolling Stones playing in Madison Square Garden.

“Whaddya think, lads—lady? Is this the stuff of rock legends or what?”

“I think it looks wonderful, Peter,” Lily commended kindly, standing up from the couch herself and giving Peter a kiss on the cheek as she passed. “I’m going to have a bath before supper. Hopefully you ‘rock stars’ aren't too famous just yet to boil your own rice.”

James saluted her, and Lily smiled once more before disappearing out into the hallway.

“It really does look great,” Remus commended, coming to stand by Peter’s side while Sirius frantically ordered James to get in the kitchen and find enough blu-tack to hang it.

Peter shrugged sheepishly, clearly not used to the praise.

“Not like anyone’s gonna see the rest of it without the black light, but I liked the idea of a secret message.”

Remus nodded. “Very clever.”

Just then the doorbell rang, and Peter volunteered to be the one to go fetch whoever it was. As he slipped out into the hall, Remus strode up to Sirius with his hands in his back pockets.

“S’a bit crooked.”

“Wanna help me then, you giant?”

Remus smirked, stepping up behind him and pressing the length of his torso along Sirius' back. Rather than reach for the poster, Remus cupped the underside of Sirius' wrists and trailed his fingernails along the soft flesh there, slowly drawing his sleeve downwards. Sensing his meaning, Sirius pushed his thighs and arse back toward him, face tilting round—

"Looks like it's still a bit crooked, Moony," called James. Then he stepped up behind Remus and Remus could feel his friend's entire front sandwiched along his spine.

"Hey, Prongs?"

"Hm?"

"Never change."

James smiled. In the end it took all three of them (what's that they say about the idiot and the lightbulb?) but the poster was stuck, and afterwards they were able to stand back and admire it.

“That’s gonna look really fucking good hanging in outside Roundhouse,” Sirius hummed.

“Think we’re gonna have to copyright some of this?” James asked, stroking his chin.

“Eh, we’ll ask Fletcher next time we see him.”

“Speaking of Fletcher…” Peter rounded the doorway, clutching a large gift basket wrapped in cellophane. “Looks like Christmas has come early, lads.”

Alarmed by the sudden gift, they stood back while Peter set the basket down on the coffee table with a short grunt. Already they could see piles of goods—flowers, bottles of champagne, wine-infused chocolate, even a customary tin of digestive biscuits—all peeking out from beneath the wrappings. On top, tied to the cellophane with a comically large red bow, was a note.

‘To my favourite band of ragers,’ it read; *‘Congrats on recording your first demo! Here’s to many more. Love your ol’ pal Fletch’.*

“How nice of him,” James said, as Sirius and Peter tore away the wrappings. It was a generous gift, but none of them knew just how generous until they got further down to the bottom.

“Now *this* is what I’m talking about,” Sirius said, opening a box of Cuban cigars thicker than his thumb and popping one of them into the corner of his mouth. “Ol’ Fletch has taste.”

“Oh yeah, real tasteful,” Remus said, pulling several nudie magazines from the bottom of the basket. Sirius and Peter howled with laughter, and eagerly grabbed them to take a quick flip-through.

“Those can’t be real…”

“Holy shit, would you take a look at that minge!”

"That can't be underwear, can it?"

“Think she flosses with it?”

“Now, now, there’s no need to be crude,” James scoffed virtuously, while turning the page himself. What he found was the centrefold, and he held the magazine vertically to take all of it—or should we say, *her* — in. “Well, there,” he drawled, “I’ll be *she* enjoys long walks in the moonlight.”

Sirius sniggered. “More like short walks to the corner, where she—”

“Potter!”

It was Lily, shouting as she made her way down the staircase. Suitably alarmed, James quickly threw the magazine at Sirius, who only panicked and threw it right back. Then James tried to pass it on to Peter instead, who'd already escaped round the coffee table. Desperate, he turned to Remus with the magazine.

“Uh, yeah, nice try.”

Silently groaning, James had just enough time to shove the dirty magazine beneath his shirt before Lily strode into the living room in naught but her robe, her hair twisted up in a green towel.

“Potter, do any of you know where we put those spare towels? *Someone* keeps forgetting to do the laundry and we’re all out.”

“I was gonna do it tomorrow!” James insisted, a strained smile on his face.

“There’s some in our bathroom, Evans,” Sirius offered. “Take your pick.”

She nodded in thanks, and then spotted the gift basket.

“Oh? What’s this?” She strode forward to pluck out the flowers and raise them to her nose. “These smell lovely.”

“Fletcher sent it over,” Peter said, offering her the bottle of champagne as well. “A little congrats for the demo.”

“That was nice of him.”

James cleared his throat, cheeks slightly rosy. “Yeah, that’s er—what I said.”

Lily raised the bottle. “We have a bit of time before I wanted to start supper anyway, shall we celebrate early?”

Each of them shared an enthusiastic look, and Lily smiled and headed straight into the kitchen. As soon as she was gone, Peter, Sirius, and Remus broke down sniggering again, while James sagged in relief.

“Potter, can you come grab the glasses?”

“Coming!” Flashing them each a glare, James ripped the magazine out from under his shirt and tossed it at Sirius before following his girlfriend. Sirius was still chuckling as he opened the rumpled magazine to a woman with a particularly accentuated bottom.

“Hey Lupin, you’re an arse-man right? Get a load ‘a this.”

Remus glanced down at the page.

“Yeah, it’s nice but…” Cheekily, he grabbed a handful of Sirius’ bum through his jeans. “Not quite what I’m looking for.”

Sirius raised his chin smugly.

“Pervert.”

Next to them, Peter gave a sigh, which ended abruptly as the phone rang again.

“I’ll get it!”

As Peter rushed off toward the nook and Lily and James made themselves busy in the kitchen, Remus pulled the magazine from Sirius’ hands and quickly gathered him around the waist, holding them together. Now chest to chest, Sirius reached down and tucked either hand in Remus’ back pockets.

“I like this,” he purred. “You—being affectionate. You’re normally so stingy.”

“Am not,” Remus retorted. “You’re just insatiable.”

“Mmm… maybe.” With a cheeky smirk, Sirius dropped his head down against the top of Remus’ chest. “Christmas is in a few days.”

“Apt observation, Padfoot.”

“I only mean to say that, are you sure you don’t want to go home?”

“What do you mean? This is my home.”

“I know, but Giles—”

“Called him already. Everything’s settled. I’m going to the Potters’ with you. That is… as long as you still want me to.”

Sirius pinched his arse sharply. “See? Stingy.”

Remus grinned, and rested his chin against the top of Sirius’ head. They stayed there a while, unconsciously rocking, until the sound of the cork popping made Sirius straighten up and cheer; “Yeah, pour us a round, Potter!”

James called back eagerly, ready to comply, but just then Peter’s surprised voice cut through all of them.

“I don’t understand… You're saying there’s something wrong with the demo?”

All of them froze, the same thought shooting through their brains; *Demo?!*

Sirius was moving first. He rushed Peter, already set on wrestling the phone from his hands while Peter fought back and James attempted to separate them.

“Bloody—give it here, Pete!”

“Gerroff, Sirius!”

Remus came up from behind, reaching past both of them to hit the centre button on the speaker phone. Instantly Fletcher’s quick babbling cut through;

“—Nothing’s wrong, don’t get your knickers in a twist. Just let me explain and you’ll see that—”

Sirius made a grab for the machine, holding it up to his face. “Fletcher!”

“Ah! Mr. Black, if it ain’t my favourite—”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all here. Now what’s this about *our* demo?”

“Nothing! Nothing! Recording went great—s’being cut together as we speak. It’s just that we’ve hit a little snag with the rights, is all.”

“The rights?” James echoed. “What rights?”

“Oh, you know, the ones that say you own your music and all that. Ooh, speaking ‘a which, you get my gift? Was supposed ‘tah arrive today.”

“Yes, we just opened it but—”

“Fantastic! Can’t trust the post nowadays, I’m telling ya. Pour one out for little ol’ me, would’ya?”

“Fletcher.” Remus grabbed Sirius’ wrists, leaning his mouth into the speakerphone. “Tell us what’s going on.”

There was a slight pause, in which Fletcher cleared his throat.

“Well, you's see, it's like this—as an unsigned band you’ve got the right to record wherever you want s’long as you can pay fur’ it, but I guess EMI’s come out with these new rules, right. According to them and their poncy lawyers, your use of studio equipment means that any and all right to the music is fifty percent theirs, and until we pay that fifty percent’s worth, they won’t release it to us.”

“But we didn’t even use their equipment!” James insisted. “We brought all of our own instruments. Didn’t even touch an amp!”

“It’s not the amps, son. We paid for the studio time, not the use of their tapes and machinery. You’ve heard the phrase ‘red tape’, yeah? Well, they’re covered in it. Can’t so much as re-record on a paper plate without infringing upon some bullshit rule or the like.”

“Shouldn’t you have known all of this beforehand?” Peter asked scornfully. It earned him a sharp swat from Sirius, which he rebuffed with an eager smack of his own. Stuck between the two of them as they crowded around the machine, Remus was forced to separate the two again before turning back to the speakerphone with a ragged huff of his own.

"Explain it to us again, Fletcher."

“Yes, this can’t be legal," chimed Lily. "I've never heard of any blasted rental agreement that's required you to forfeit fifty percent of your work.”

“Who’s that?” Fletcher demanded.

“My girlfriend,” said James. “But she’s right, ain’t she? What kind of studio makes us pay to use the room and doesn't expect us to record

anything?”

“Well, uh—business is business, ya see. Can’t do much when the studio’s withholding the tapes, and it’ll be Christmas in a few days, so our hands are tied until—”

“You promised we’d have that demo before Christmas,” Peter interjected.

“Pete!” Sirius hissed. “Shut up and let the man speak!”

“You shut up!”

“Now I understand any unease,” Feltcher hummed genially; “S’real messy stuff, this is. You know how it goes, the industry takes no prisoners—yada, yada. But don’tchu worry, we’re gonna getcha outta this! It’s just gonna cost a bit more. Copyright charges, legal fees for EMI’s team and whatnot, but it’s really not something to be—”

“Fletcher," Remus cut in, "how *much* more?”

“Just... twenty-five hundred pounds.”

A short gasp went up from each of them, as if they’d just been sucker-punched in the collective gut. Even for those raised like they’d been, twenty-five hundred pounds was an astronomical amount. It was near the cost of a full term at Hawkings; over twenty times what they’d paid for the van. You could take half that and feed a family of four for a year, maybe two.

“Twenty-five hundred?” Peter shrilled.

"Give or take a few hundred."

"Holy christ... Do you *know* what we could do with twenty-five hundred pounds?!”

“Buy yerself a whole new album, I suspect,” Fletcher chuckled. “But look, none of us wanna do that. I’ve listened to what Alfred’s cut together and it's really—”

“You mean Albert?”

“What? Oh, yeah, yeah. But I’ve listened to what he’s got going, and lemme be the first to tell ya, that it’s great! You lads could be on the radio in mere *weeks,* but not if we don’t get this sorted. This is why I didn’t take no managerial fee up front—thing’s like this pop up all the

time, them's the brakes. But I'm tellin' ya, we don't pay the charge they're asking for? They keep everything. You Marauders'll have to start over from the ground up."

The gasp became a reluctant whimper as each of them looked at each other. Their songs! Their *music.* It'd taken so long to get to this point; having to start all over again would be agonising.

"If… we get the money," Sirius started, "what comes next?"

"I've passed what we do have so far onto my pals up at EMI, and they liked what they heard so much that they're offering a contract. Got no details yet, but depending on whether or not they think the full demo's got promise, you could be signed by the end of January."

Signed with EMI? Remus wasn't sure if he wanted to be sick or jump for joy.

"Alright," Sirius said finally, "we'll pay the money. Just make sure we get the rights to our songs back."

"Smashing! If you're quick you can post the cheque today. Just make it out to the office and I'll have my guys work out the rest. It's Christmas soon, so I suppose we'll just have to touch base in January. Look, I know this ain't the news you wanna hear, lads, but you'll learn quick enough that the music industry's just one bottomless pit. You just gotta keep throwing money and promises at it until it throws something back. Cheers."

They hung up, and stood around the phone silently for several minutes. Remus could tell his friends were worried, but he didn't realise how fractured the news had made them until Peter began shouting.

"Did you really just promise to give him twenty-five hundred pounds?"

"Yeah, I did! And we all know where it's gonna come from so you can cut the whinging right there!"

"You don't just get to make all the decisions, Sirius! You're not our bloody manager!"

"You're right, I'm not! But in order to get one, we need a demo, dimbo. So why don't you just stop bleating so the big boys can sort it all out?"

“Screw you! You can’t just promise whatever you want without talking to us first!”

“Easy for you to say, when it ain’t your songs on the line!”

Peter threw his arms up, storming out, and while Lily and James went after him, Remus turned to Sirius.

“You know Peter didn’t mean it that way. Alphard left that money to you, we should find some other way to pay for the rights. You don't have to do it all alone, Sirius.”

“I know,” Sirius said, “but it's my money, and I’m gonna do what I want with it. This isn’t for EMI, or for Fletcher—it’s for all of us. You’ll see, Moons.”

In hindsight, they were stupid to let the issue go so easily. Peter would prove disgruntled over the news for weeks, repeatedly whispering to James how the situation ‘didn’t sit right’, and twenty-five hundred pounds was far too much money to just be ‘tossing away like nothing’. Despite his reputation for playing mediator, James surprised everyone by taking up arms on Sirius’ side. As far as they were concerned, they’d pay out the back end to get their songs back. Adversely, Remus remained more neutral. He couldn’t quite wrap his head around why there was such an issue. It wasn’t like anyone outside of the Shoestring even knew their name; could their unsigned songs be really worth such a fight? Paying for compositions they hadn’t even made any money off of yet felt like paying for thin air. It felt... off.

Come Christmas Eve, Lily had stocked up on any and all entertainment law texts she could get her hands on, almost as determined as Peter to prove that something was wrong.

“I just don’t get it, how could they keep something that’s already paid for? It’s downright stealing. You should've gotten a copy of that rental contract, I can't *believe* you were so stupid as to not ask for one,” she hissed, standing up from the kitchen table as James waited across from her, dressed in a smart-looking sweater and matching black slacks.

"Didn't think we needed one, Daisy."

“Maybe I should go to the library one more time,” Lily went on saying, “see if there’s a book I missed. Something that could help. Or I know! Maybe one of my professors could...”

“Shush,” James hummed, kissing her hand. “It's Christmas, everyone's at home. Now the library’s closed and we have a party to attend. Think this could wait until tomorrow?”

Reluctantly, Lily nodded, then apologised to the rest of them and excused herself to go get ready for the party.

“She’s right, you know,” Peter said later, already draped out over the sofa with a beer in hand. “We posted that cheque to Fletcher without a second thought."

" 'We' is coming on a bit strong, Pete," James griped.

"I'm only saying, who knows what’s really going on with EMI. I haven’t heard from ‘em—have you, Black?”

“Leave it,” Remus warned him. “Like James said, we can fight about this after Christmas.”

The look Peter gave him was sour, but he said nothing more on the subject and a few moments later Sirius appeared at the foot of the stairs, dressed in an all black suit with his hair handsomely slicked back, a red rose tucked neatly into his lapel. Where he’d gotten it, Remus had no idea.

“Ready to go then?" He asked. "Where’s Evans?”

“I’m here!” Lily called, appearing next to Sirius in the entryway. She was wearing a pretty silk dress the colour of irises and was fiddling with an earring. Before she could even finish, Sirius had her clasped around the waist.

“Don’t you just look gorgeous!” He declared, sweeping her into a waltzing dip right there on the rug. Lily shrieked, embarrassed, then batted him on the arms once he’d put her back on both feet.

“Don’t be silly. It’s only a dress.”

“That’s fucking rubbish.” Sirius tugged on his suit collar pointedly. “Prongs! Come tell your girl she looks absolutely ravishing before I’m forced to seduce her myself.”

“Just try it! I’ve a devious plan of my own if you do,” James replied, grabbing Remus by the face and planting a kiss directly on his cheek.

“Oh yeah? Two can play at that game, Potter.”

Sirius surged Lily from behind again, clasping her in a hug. “Evans! *Tu es absolument magnifique,”* he moaned. *“Les anges se jettent du ciel juste pour témoigner de votre beauté. Si jamais je m’intéressais à la gent féminine, je serais honoré si tu envisages de m'épouser à la suite d’une déception amoureuse avec ce connard. Il ne mérite pas ta ardent beauté!”*

“Oh, Sirius, get off of me already,” Lily laughed, struggling out of Sirius’ grip and rushing to grab Remus’ arm instead. “You know I love Remus far too much to cheat. You and Potter will just have to make do with each other.”

“Can do,” James grinned, struggling to give Sirius a fat snog of his own. While they tussled, Peter pushed past with his coat in hand.

“You’re all bloody idiots,” he grumbled. “I’m gonna bring the car ‘round.”

As he went, James grabbed Sirius in a headlock and the two fell onto the ground, a mixture of grunts and laughter following them. Shaking her head, Lily pat Remus’ arm.

“They’ll never change. Shall we go then, darling?”

“Yes, darling,” he replied, “let’s.”

Christmas Eve at the Potters went much like it always did, with warm company, charming decorations and food that was positively to die for. The real party wasn’t to start until the evening of the 25th, but Effie’s penchant for combining her family’s heritage with the Christian holiday always made for a home alight with flavour and festivities. Diya lamps were lit, holly was hung—she even managed to wrangle all the kids into a few rounds of "Jingle Bells". Yes, the home was so warm and inviting that not even Mary and Marlene could be kept away. In Mary’s case, her father and step-mother had decided to holiday in the Canary Islands. Though Mary would have generally preferred warm beaches to icy London winters, she’d remained behind to—as she’d put it—‘work on herself’.

“And who’s to say I can’t do that with a bottle of Bordeaux in either hand?” She’d teased.

Marlene was a bit more complicated. Her family still lived in Lambeth, not far from the Shoestring where they played every weekend, but relations between the McKinnons and their only daughter had been strained ever since Marlene had left home and stopped going to church. Apparently Mrs. McKinnon had attempted contact toward the

end of November and Marlene had agreed to return home for tea, but when that meeting ended with a surprise visit from their church's local priest, Marlene had decided to sever all ties indefinitely.

“I’m not giving up my faith,” she’d assured Remus, the first time he’d asked; “but it’s like, you start seeing the world differently when you don’t have the same neighbours around to tell you how everything's just supposed to be. I'm glad my parents sent me to Hawkings. Otherwise, I'm afraid I would've ended up just like them.”

And because he could, Remus had hugged her just a bit tighter that day.

While the addition of Mary and Marlene to the party's already growing guest list was hardly cause for calamity, Remus still couldn't quite understand how the Potters did it. Ever the gracious host, Effie was pleased by the arrival of every new face, and no matter how many appeared in her entry way, she was always able to magic up room for them to rest their feet. Potter Cottage was always a bit extraordinary like that.

After supper, the eight of them congregated in James’ childhood bedroom for some much needed friendship overhaul, and Remus was struck by the realisation that he’d quite missed seeing all of their faces in the same place. Their flat at Number 43 Knoxbridge Road was home now, but there was something nostalgic about cramming into a tiny bedroom with tiny bottles of sherry they’d nicked from their parents' stores. They passed the bottles around until they were all suitably inebriated and afterwards, drew straws to see who got to choose the music. Lily had won most recently and has surprised all of them by putting on a Stevie Wonder album. Perhaps the worst lightweight among them, James had grown drunk off his dad’s Guinness early, and had promptly began singing every track aloud to her.

“Isn’t she loooovely? Isn’t she wooonderful?! Isn’t she precious! Less than one minute—”

“Potter—Potter!” Lily grabbed his face in her hands. “You know that this song’s about a baby, not a girl, right?”

James gave her a bewildered look like it’d never occurred to him before, and then simply smiled, planting a kiss on Lily’s cheek as he continued on with his song.

“—Isn’t she prettyyyy? Truly the angel’s best! Boy, I’m so happyyyy—we

have been Heaven-blessed!"

"Ugh, someone please save me from this gross public display of affection," Mary moaned, reaching over to Marlene and snatching the bottle from her hands. She grimaced when she realised it was beer, but by then Marlene had already nudged her pointedly.

"You'd love it if that were you."

"With Potter?!"

"No! Just—getting all the attention."

Mary shrugged, handing her back the beer. "Naturally. Who doesn't like a bit of attention? It's the gooeyness I can't stand."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'bathos'," Sirius snarked. "Moony, bend down so I can *chuchoter des mots doux à ton oreille."*

"That sounds vaguely dirty."

"Lend me your ear and find out."

"Assez!" Mary hissed. "Bunch of lovesick jessies you all are. *C'est incompréhensible."*

"I'll cheers to that," said Remus.

"Shall I ask James to give you a kiss as well, Mary?" Lily offered. Mary snidely waved her off, and turned to Marlene once more.

"What's up with you then? Haven't seen you flying solo in ages. Don't tell us Dorcas didn't want to come for Christmas dinner?"

Marlene shook her head. "Tonight's the first night of Hanukkah, so she's spending time with her family."

"You didn't want to be with her?"

"I'll see her on the twenty-sixth. She's promised to save me some sufganiyot."

"Those them little donuts with the jelly in 'em?" Peter moaned, nursing a half-empty bottle of brandy. "Shit, I love those."

"Does it ever make things difficult between you two?" Lottie asked. "You know, growing up with different religions and all."

"Well, we're already both women, so it's not like we can get married even if we wanted to. Dee and her little sister converted after her mum met her step-father. She was only six, but she's got two older brothers and they're agnostic." Marlene began picking at her thumbnail. "Both of our religions denounce homosexuality as a sin, but I know there's more liberal-minded folks out there. Even a few in here, if you know where to look."

"You're welcome," Sirius said, teasing her with a bow. Everyone laughed, and Marlene knocked his shoulder fondly with one fist.

"Dorcas said that America's got its own gay rabbi now, and last year they ordained a lesbian priest."

"Have you found a new dream job then?" Asked James. Marlene shook her head, smiling.

"No, it's just nice to know that we're not alone. Reform is hard, but," she sighed and looked at Lottie, "I guess you could say we're working on it."

Lottie took her hand, and then Peter passed along his bottle of brandy, from which Marlene took a deep swig.

"How is it that America's always ten steps ahead and ten steps behind at the same time?" Mary asked, sounding indignant. "England should have its own gay priest by now."

"Oh, I'm sure we do," Sirius said out of the corner of his mouth. Mary didn't seem to notice.

"I mean, we all know they're there, it's just prejudice keeping things swept under the rug. Like, the last guy I was seeing—"

"Oh my god, did it finally happen?" Marlene cut-in; "Did you finally end up dating a gay guy?"

"Unlabelled actually, although I should've known something was up when he started making lemon drop martinis in my kitchen at three in the morning." Mary smiled to herself. "He was good though, and the lemon drops really were *fantastic."*

"Glad to see you're already over the last one," Marlene said, before turning to Sirius. "She met him when we were down on Portobello Road, said he was dead gorgeous but he had a prick like a—" She wiggled her pinky suggestively while Mary's jaw dropped and the rest

of them descended into copious amounts of laughter.

“Alright, alright! Very funny,” Mary grumbled. “Let’s have a new topic of conversation before I kill myself.”

“Wait, I have one!” Marlene declared, apparently not done in the spotlight. “Potter—” She paused long enough to hide a small beer belch behind her hand; “why didn’t you ever tell us your mum was so fine?”

“McKinnon!" James bellowed, aghast; "You *have* a girlfriend!”

“And eyes.”

“Nah, she’s right, you know,” Sirius said. “Effie’s just so—blimey. I'm not usually one for Oedipus—mostly 'cause my own mum's a fucking hag—but I swear, Potter, if I were any straighter you'd be calling me Dad."

"Fuck off," James scoffed, cutting Sirius off with a swift pillow to the face. “That’s my mum you’re talking about, dickhead!”

Sirius peeled the pillow back, looking devilish. “Oh, I *know.”*

“Hey, Lottie,” Lily called, already suitably curled up on the carpet with her head propped up on one of James’ thighs. “When are you gonna tell us about this ‘big surprise’ of yours?”

All heads turned, and Lottie flushed slightly as she made herself busy straightening her skirt. “Well, I wanted to save it for Christmas. Tell everyone all at once, you know?”

“Yeah well, we’re your friends and I’m your brother so out with it,” Peter insisted.

“You’re not pregnant, are you?” Mary asked, making all of the boys seize up. “ ‘Cause if you are, I know this darling shop over on St James’s that makes the cutest babygrows. Kara-Ann used to dress Gigi in them all the time.”

“No, I’m not pregnant!” Lottie snapped. “I’m… I’m getting married!”

For a moment no one breathed. Remus could've heard a pin drop, if not for the party noise going on downstairs. Lily had sat up from James' lap so quickly he was nearly left sprawling, but for all their worldly views and adult-like tendencies, the announcement had come

as a sure surprise. Of course, it was Mary who spoke first.

"So just to be clear," she started, "you're not pregnant?"

"Oh Mary!" Huffing and rather than show them a ringless finger, Lottie stood up from the carpet and scooped up her purse, which she'd left lying on James' bed. From inside, she produced a small velvet box. “I couldn’t very well wear it, Mummy’s like a hawk with these sorts of things and I wanted Roger to be there when we told everyone,” she explained, opening it and revealing a diamond the size of Remus’ front tooth. “It belonged to his mother," she crooned. "It’s a family heirloom.”

"Now that's a fucking rock," Sirius gaped. Lottie smiled and slipped it on, and from there the girls crowded around, admiring the ring and showering her with compliments. As the girls celebrated, Remus looked to Sirius, who—with an indignant frown—had reached for Remus' right hand and found it empty.

"Oi, where's your ring?" He hissed quietly. In answer, Remus raised his left hand, showing off the silver band.

"Thought it might keep some of the aunties downstairs at bay if I wore it over here tonight."

"Aunties—bah," Sirius scoffed. "What you should be worried about is keeping *me* at bay."

He grabbed the front of Remus' jumper, bringing him in for a kiss that left butterflies twirling in his gut. The moment may have stayed a blissful one, had Peter not shot upright on the carpet.

“Married!?” He cried, making all of them jump. “You’re seriously getting *married?!”*

Lottie looked up from her girls’ huddle. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist, Petey, it’s not like I’m telling you to go out and propose to Moira tomorrow.”

“But we’re eighteen! And Roger’s like—twenty-five!”

“Twenty-eight, actually,” Mary corrected. “He’s an Aquarius with an Aries moon. Very spontaneous, that.”

“Don't start that, Mary, I thought you hated love!”

“Oh, I *love* love, Peter. It’s the happiness I can’t stand.”

Mary's sarcasm aside, Peter threw his arms up and the others turned back on Lottie once more.

“When did he pop the question, Lot?” Asked Marlene.

“Yesterday."

"YESTERDAY?" Peter bleated. Lottie ignored him;

"I was getting on the train back from Reading and Rog pulled me aside and he never wanted to be apart again. I didn't realise how the distance was affecting him—I thought it was only me. But then he got down on one knee in front of the whole platform and asked me right there! Even the train whistled for us..." She blushed, pink as a little girl; "He kissed me out the window as it was pulling away.”

“Ugh!" Mary wheeled back, hand to her forehead. "The romance of it all!”

"And he's the one then?" Lily asked. "He's the one you want?"

"Couldn't imagine anyone else."

“Then I say congrats, Lot,” James called over to them, already opening his arms for a hug. Beaming, Lottie went around the room to embrace all of them one at a time. Last of all was Peter, who did not so readily open his arms in congratulations and merriment. Instead the two siblings squared off, their expressions so similar it was a wonder they weren't looking in a mirror.

“You really aren’t going to say that happy for me?”

“You want me to lie to my own sister?”

“You could at least pretend then.”

Peter’s nostrils flared. “And do you such a disservice? You don't want to marry him, Lottie, you’re only saying yes 'cause you want to play house. Because without him you don't know who you really are, and you can't be arsed to figure it out on your own.”

Lottie slapped him.

“Screw you, you stupid fucking wanker!" She howled. "Wanting to be loved isn’t a bad thing, Peter! *You’re* just afraid that no one’s ever

going to pick you like Roger's picked me. Just because Moira's family has decided that they don't like you doesn't mean you get to take your pain out on me!"

She stormed out, and with a shared look of anxiety, the rest of the girls inevitably followed. Remus, meanwhile, didn't know what to say. They all shifted their weight uncomfortably while Peter stood by, rubbing his sore cheek and clutching a bottle of Guinness against his chest. Finally, he flopped back down onto the rug and met James' eye.

"Don't say it."

"I think you were a bit harsh there, Pete," James replied anyway.

"A bit?" Echoed Sirius.

"Oh come on, everyone was thinking it! It's not my fault I'm the only one with balls enough to say it." Peter snarled, then waved the bottle of Guinness toward the door. "She's never even been on her own! Always had to have a boyfriend, telling her what to do and where to go! Now what—she's just gonna get married and play housewife forever?"

"If that's what she wants," Remus said.

"Aren't you listening? She doesn't know what she wants! She doesn't know who she *is.*"

"She seems to know enough about you though, didn't she?" Sirius prompted. "C'mon, Wormy, what's the real reason you've flown off the handle? Is it really something to do with Thurnberg?"

"None of your business!"

"Pete." James sidled over, placing a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "You can tell us, mate. You know you can tell us, right?"

It didn't take much more than that. Peter had never been one for keeping secrets to himself, and as James bared his familiar sympathy, the explanation came tumbling out.

"You know how Moira and Lottie sometimes hang out?" He moaned. "Well she told Lottie that her parents don't want her seeing me anymore. They don't think it's smart, right? What we're doing with the band... And now that we've left school I guess they don't want their daughter dating some bum."

“Man, fuck them,” Sirius retorted. Remus gave him a sharp look for it, then;

“Did you talk to Moira yourself about it?”

“ ‘Course I talked to her about it.”

“And…?”

“She says she doesn’t want to break up, but if it comes between me and her family, I dunno what she'll choose.”

The words 'not me' seemed to hang in the air, and Sirius gave Remus a look that said ‘I told you so’. Ignoring it, Remus leaned in;

“Have you told her about the demo? How Fletcher’s gonna introduce us to EMI?”

“That’s just more promises. She's tired of promises and I don't blame her.”

“Maybe you should get her to come to a show then,” James offered instead. “It’s been so long since she’s come out to one. Lots has changed since then! Who knows, maybe seeing us actually do something in front of a crowd’ll bring her more on board.”

Peter pursed his lips. “Maybe…”

“And you should apologise to your sister,” Sirius added. “Otherwise she might not invite you to the wedding. Miss all the cake.”

“She never apologises to me,” Peter griped. “Give it a day, she’ll calm down.”

There was a knock at the door, and Simeon stuck his head inside.

“Ho, boys. I know I just arrived and all, but does someone want to tell me why my baby sister’s downstairs crying her pretty eyes out?”

Simeon’s entrance marked the true beginning of the holiday season as far as the Pettigrews went. The next morning the two families came together for a stellar Christmas brunch, and for the first time Remus found himself willingly intermingling with a slew of adults. They asked him things like what he’d been doing since school and what he thought about the housing market and current rate of inflation. When he professed that he didn’t pay much attention to such things they laughed and wrote it off as adolescent charm. It made him wonder

how long he'd be able to get away with it.

After they'd all eaten and presents had been opened, James and Sirius managed to corral several of James' cousins and uncles into a game of footie in the back garden. Marlene joined in of course, as did Mr. Potter, who proved surprisingly spritely for a man who'd woken up complaining of a crick in his neck. It still hadn't snowed, although Effie appeared hopeful for some come the evening.

After having spent most of the day avoiding others, eventually Lottie reappeared without so much as a puffy eye in sight. Not long after Roger made his grand entrance and everyone welcomed him, apart from Peter that was. No, Peter stared at Roger like he was a wad of gum stuck to the floor of the Underground. But they all knew Lottie, and she'd never made a habit of asking permission from anyone; Lottie simply did as Lottie pleased. Now, on Christmas Day, Roger had barely managed to get a glass of Mr. Pettigrew's famous mulled wine into his hand before she was gathering the entire house together to make her big announcement.

"We just wanted you all to know," Lottie called, "that Roger and I... *are getting married!"*

The excitement was immediate; the shriek of joy Mrs. Pettigrew let out could've been heard from space.

"I hope this means you're next," one of James' aunts cooed at Simeon afterwards, as he and his new girlfriend Lorraine stood by to congratulate the happy couple. A humble raconteur himself, Simeon gave an off-hand dismissal and distracted the auntie with talk of his days at Oxford. Remus had only just met Lorraine, but she didn't appear to him all that jealous at the attention Lottie was getting. He could only assume that Simeon picked his girlfriends very meticulously.

"I've never seen such a big Christmas," Lorraine said to him, after the two of them had convened by the buffet table on sheer happenstance. "So many people."

"It's pretty normal around here. You get used to it."

Lorraine cocked her head. "I hear you're in a band."

Remus smiled. Never ending, that.

As the evening slid into night, Remus watched as all of the 'proper

adults' traded fruity cocktails for Remy Martin Cognac and expensive red wine imported from France. Mr. Potter broke out his personal stash of cigars, which he offered to each of the boys despite his wife's griping.

"Don't just keep it in your mouth," Simeon instructed. "You gotta bring it down into your lungs. Nice and deep, like this."

He set the cigar against his lips and breathed in, while Peter nodded sharply.

"I know how to do it, I'm not an idiot."

Peter inhaled, and promptly began to hack up a lung.

"Oh Petey," Simeon chuckled, smacking his brother on the back.

"Here, have one of mine," Roger said, offering a packet of Senior Service cigarettes. Peter took one look at him and declined out-right. On Roger's other side, Lottie shot him a nasty glare.

"Think he'll ever get over it?" Lily asked Remus, having apparently been spying as well. They were both sitting across the room, a sofa away from where James and Sirius were playing their own version of "Jingle Bell Rock" to entertain all the little cousins. As they strummed their guitars, Mary appeared behind each of them and fit a Santa hat over their heads. Neither complained.

"Eventually," Remus answered. "I think he's just upset she didn't tell him first."

"I know how it feels."

"Petunia?"

Lily nodded. "Petunia."

He fit an arm around her, cigar poised in the other. He knew things between Lily and her older sister were complicated, and had been ever since Lily left home for her scholarship at Hawkings, but very rarely did she get down about it. Remus resolved that it was good of her. No way he could've tolerated such a sour bint for a sister.

"Looks like you're going to be buying two bridesmaid dresses next year, huh?"

"Looks like it," Lily sighed. "Pet's vicious too. She'll probably have me

in some hideous colour. Like chartreuse."

"I dunno, I think you'd look quite good in yellow."

"Chartreuse is more green."

"Even better."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "I'm just glad Pet agreed to let James come so I don't have to take the train alone this time. Took Mum days to wear her down for it."

"Now I'm almost offended you didn't ask me to go."

"Are you?" Lily leaned back to look at him; "Alright. Remus, would you consider coming to meet my entire family at a wedding where you'll be forced to smile and dance with me all night while my wonderful sister judges the fact that your suit isn't perfectly pressed?"

"I'd rather cut off my own leg, Evans."

"Sweet talker." She fit her head onto his shoulder. "Have you given any thought to what you and Sirius'll do while we're away?"

"Work, probably. Write some more songs."

"James has asked that you refrain from having sex on the couch."

"Sirius bought that couch."

This time, she bat him with her hands. "And what is it Tomny's doing for the New Year?"

He was half-laughing when she'd said it, but the moment the thought crossed his mind, Remus' smile began to wane. Already reading his face, Lily clutched his arm tightly to apologise.

"I didn't mean to make you sad, Remus. I only wanted to know how you felt about it."

"S'fine."

"No, I'm sorry… Have you not heard from him at all?"

"No."

"Have you tried calling?"

“Once.”

“And?”

“He didn’t pick up.”

She returned her head to his shoulder, so close that the top of her Santa hat was tickling his cheek. Then she took his hand and squeezed it ever so tight.

“It’ll be alright, love,” Lily said. Her hands were warm.

Across the room, one of the young cousins that had been listening to James and Sirius play suddenly leapt up from the carpet and ran headlong toward the nearest window, screaming for his father to join him.

“Baba, look! Snow!”

The entire room moved at once. A true white Christmas hadn’t been seen in London in almost a decade, and so when everyone pulled the curtains back to reveal the thin blanket of snow covering the back garden, a cheer of awe and excitement went up. Mr. Potter celebrated by breaking out a fresh cask of wine for the adults and toboggans for the kids, who were bundled up in winter kits within the hour and shooting out the back door with their scarves whipping in the wind like racing stripes.

“C’mon, Moons!” Sirius urged, trading the red Santa hat for a woolly cap and shoving it down over Remus’ head himself. Remus let him, and during the split-second when the hat’s rim covered his eyes and doused the entire world into darkness, he pushed all thoughts of Tomny from his mind. It was easier now, after all—Sirius was laughing.

The snow cover was thin but they took turns on the toboggans anyway, flying across the slick grass like melted butter. Potter Cottage’s back garden boasted a wonderful hill just beyond its fence, and they raced around under the blue-cover of the waxing moon. It didn’t take long for the first snowball to be thrown either, and from there on out it became a full-on battle. Remus took a nasty shot to the back of the head, courtesy of James, but was avenged by Lily when she feigned in close only to shove a handful of powder down the back of James' jacket. Remus had no time to gloat; already he was being forced to flee as Sirius began pelting him with several snowballs of his own. He managed to outpace Mary easily, who was struggling not to

trip in her heeled winter boots while being chased by a small troupe of James' baby cousins.

“No, no, no! I’m Switzerland!” She shrieked, dodging most of tikes. Unfortunately, Marlene had also followed, and her aim was true—snowball bursting over the back of Mary’s head in one glorious shatter of white.

Remus could feel the sweat that had begun to gather on his back. He’d stopped running long enough to watch James and Peter race down the hill on toboggans, only to come colliding with the frosty ground as Sirius tackled him from behind.

“Moony!” Sirius gasped, pushing his snow-speckled hair out from his eyes; “I’m out of fags. Come get some more with me?”

Remus nearly laughed. It was Christmas, and near-on midnight. Nowhere nearby would be waiting with its lights on to sell them a packet of Silk Cut.

“Here.” He rolled over, pushing Sirius off. “Have some of mine.”

Sirius looked down at the carton Remus offered, then back up at him with an arched brow.

“I said— I’m out of fags. Now come *get some* with me.”

“Ah.”

They helped each other up from the snow, and after checking to make sure no one was paying attention, made a beeline back toward the house. A circle of aunts and uncles had organised themselves around a fire pit, which was being faithfully tended to by Mr. Potter. They were nearly home-free until Simeon stepped out the back door, a bag of marshmallows in one hand, securely blocking their way with the other.

“You two are in a rush,” he mused.

“Forgot fags inside,” Remus lied, at the same time that Sirius said; “Need to use the loo.”

Looking between them both, Simeon simply smirked and tipped the bag of marshmallows in their direction before stepping past without another word. Only slightly mortified, Remus listened to the chuckle Sirius let out and allowed himself to be pulled inside. They made way

for the stairs, but retreated when they heard Effie's voice coming from the first floor landing.

"This way!" Sirius hissed, grabbing Remus by the arm.

“You’re crazy,” Remus laughed, as he was practically dragged through the house and shoved inside one of the hallway cupboards. It was dark and fully crowded with winter kits and the like. Remus was practically tripping over the sea of boots strewn about the floor, but Sirius was already tugging at his clothes—ripping his jacket off of his shoulders with eager fingers.

“Curse you and your infernal hatred for all things cold,” he hissed, while fighting with the thick fleece jumper Remus was wearing underneath.

“Why aren’t we doing this in our room?” Remus demanded, busy feeling around the wall for a light switch.

“Too impatient. Need you now.”

“It’s just upstairs.”

“C’mon, Moons. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Absolutely mental, you are.”

“Fuck. You always know just the right things to get me going.”

"I can't bloody see anything."

There was a little click, and Sirius had turned on the single free-hanging light bulb over their heads. He had a right smirk on his face, and when Remus glanced up, he spotted a single bushel of mistletoe wrapped around the bulb.

“Wow," he smirked, "wonder who put that there.”

“You did.”

“Did not. Must’ve grown on its own. Like Christmas magic.”

“I think it’s a fire hazard.”

Sirius tugged off the light.

“Better?”

Remus kissed him. *Hard and deep,* until they were fully stumbling over the mess around their feet. They were alone, but the house still thrummed with life; they could hear laughter, the call for more firewood, a Christmas album playing off the lounge stereo. The closet smelt of dust and damp, simultaneously wrapped up in cinnamon and cloves of Effie's home cooking. Remus pushed his hand up into Sirius' hair and he felt the remnants of leftover snow tickle his skin. When Sirius spoke, it drove shivers down his spine. It blocked out all other noise, until it was just their bodies and the hazy breaths they traded in the dark.

"Shit, Moony. Little to the left—"

"Fleamont Potter—"

"Oh, fuck. Right there—"

"I don't care if you're hot as the devil himself—"

"Want you—"

"You're going to wear that jacket— oh my!"

For a moment they were blinded by the yellow of the hallway light. Mrs. Potter had swung the closet door wide, looking for a jacket only to come across a pair of boys attached at the lips instead. To her credit, she did not scream, but the look on her face was clearly that of astonishment. Ripping his hand out of Sirius' trousers, Remus leapt away as if electrocuted, lucky they'd really only gotten as far as their dishevelled shirts.

"Hello, dears," she chirped. "Is there any particular reason why you've chosen to coalesce in the hallway cupboard?"

Try as he might, Remus could not come up with an excuse for the life of him.

"This isn't what it looks like, Mrs. Potter!" He cried.

"It isn't?"

"No, we—!"

"Yeah! I—I–I mean, we… We just—!"

It was Sirius who'd finished stammering. He continued on like this for several seconds while Effie simply stared at him, and only shut up

when Mr. Potter's voice came hollering down the hall.

"It's the blue one, Effie! The blue one!"

"The blue one…" Mrs. Potter murmured to herself.

"Mum—" Sirius drew up short, flinching as though saying the word had brought him physical pain. Then he opened his mouth again, as if to offer some further desperate explanation, but Mrs. Potter only pressed a single finger to her lips. Slowly she drew the cupboard door toward herself while also reaching into the closet between them. With a sharp tug she freed a blue duffle coat from its hanger and draped it over one arm.

"The blue one," she said, nodding gently. Then, with a knowing smile, she shut the door. For a moment neither of them said anything—as if waiting for the dreaded *gotcha!*

It never came.

"… Moony?"

"… Yeah, Sirius?"

"Did that really just happen?"

"Y-Yeah... I think it did."

"Oh..."

"Mm."

"Moony?"

"Yes, Sirius?"

"Happy Christmas."

A hand reached across the darkness and found Remus' wrist. He followed its slender fingers, right down to the softness of its palm, and squeezed. Remus smiled.

"Happy Christmas, Sirius."

* * *

Ev'rywhere I hear the sound of marching charging feet, boy,
'Cause summer's here and the time is right for fighting in the street, boy,

Well now what can a poor boy do
Except to sing for a rock n' roll band?
'Cause in sleepy London town
There's just no place for a street fighting man

- "Street Fighting Man" The Rolling Stones, 1968

January 1979

New Year's that year had fallen on a Sunday, and thanks to the British Parliament's great Sunday Observance Act, this meant that there was very little to be done in lieu of partying. The Pettigrews' still hosted their usual get-together, but it was much more subdued compared to the grand ball they'd put on the year before. To respect the sabbath, they served only red wine in tiny crystalline glasses and people mostly mulled around, chatting and smoking in pairs. Mrs. Pettigrew still begged them to perform, and even gifted them a brand-new Marshall amp that helped blow James' old sound out of the water. The songs she suggested were rather drab for a group of wannabe-rockers on their way to the world's stage, but of course they played them for her anyway.

When the holiday lull was over, replaced instead by a blisteringly cold January, the Marauders returned to their home in Shepherd's Bush and got straight to work. Predictably, Lily had made near-on perfect marks in her first term at UCL and rather than drinks, celebrated with a brisk trip to the library to review everything she'd managed to get wrong. Sirius meanwhile had gotten it into his head that if they could excite the studios with their first demo, keeping enough material in their back pocket for a second debut would surely impress. Remus wasn't confident that all of their new tracks would be a hit—Sirius' latest song was called "Wag the Dog" and was really just a thinly-veiled allusion to oral sex with an unsavoury title—but there was something to be said for the effort. When Fletcher called, they'd surely be ready.

Except that Fletcher never called.

Day and night they waited, hoping for even a single scrap of news. When nothing came, they tried phoning the office directly, but they

never got anything more than the telephone answering machine and its cheery reel-to-reel tape message.

“ ‘ello! You’ve reached your ol’ pal Fletch, managerial-extraordinaire! ‘Fraid I can’t take your call at the moment, but m’sure I’ll get to it whenever I’m back in me office. Cheerio!”

They’d left so many messages that the machine inevitably over-flowed, and after finally coming to the conclusion that they weren’t getting through, the Marauders were forced to return to their excruciating waiting game. To James this was dismal news; he’d had to spend all Christmas dodging his family's incessant questions about work and future plans for university. Peter was also in a tizzy, though that could’ve been chalked up to his similar problems with Moira.

“We just have to be patient,” Sirius told them, each day they went without any word.

It was laughable of course; Sirius Black had never been patient a day in his life. Despite his stubborn confidence, Remus hadn’t missed the way Sirius would jump every time the phone rang, racing to make sure he was the first one to pick it up. Mid-way through January, James had bitten every nail down to the quick and Peter had struck up the annoying habit of drumming his hands against any available surface at all hours. Even Remus was beginning to feel the burn of it. Each of them had developed a rather poor sleep schedule, working all day to support themselves only to stay up writing and practising through the night. They were smoking all hours, whether it be fags or hash, which led to one late, red-eyed session where one of them had tossed a still-burning roach into the garbage and accidentally started a small bin fire.

In attempts to cull any further acts of arson while also ‘maintaining and expanding their creative minds’, Sirius managed to get his hands on some magic mushrooms from one of the Shoestring’s regulars. While waiting for them to take effect, James had a brilliant breakthrough on one of the riffs he’d been working on. The lyrics came to Remus instantly and while he scrambled to put pen to paper, Sirius grabbed his guitar and Peter picked up his sticks and just like that they were blessed. It was the best song they’d ever written, Remus was sure of it, but then the mushrooms kicked in and everything went black.

When they woke up the next morning, the paper containing Remus' lyrics was missing, save only a few leftover scraps as though a dog had

gone at it. With no ferocious animal in sight, they were forced to come to the unfortunate conclusion that one of them must've eaten it.

It wasn't all bad though. Later Remus would look back and reminisce, wishing they hadn't rushed themselves so badly. It all felt rather menacing, the idea that only a few precious months lay between life as an immutable rock and roll idols or a boring nine-to-five. Perhaps the reason James and Peter had thrown themselves into the work head-on was because they couldn't bear the thought of reapplying for unis or spending the next four years in lecture halls; their need for stardom would always appear lesser when compared to Sirius', but that didn't mean they didn't want for it.

"I just don't get why we can't go over there ourselves," Peter huffed. "Fletcher promised us that demo weeks ago! You gave him the money, Sirius, so where is it? He said it'd be a done deal by now."

"We know what Fletcher said, Wormtail. We were all there," Sirius grumbled, draped across the sofa with an arm over his eyes. It was a Wednesday—or a Thursday. None of them had slept, and if they had it'd been fitful and unproductive. Lily was cooking breakfast, and James was fighting with the coffee machine while Remus flicked through the morning radio, hoping to pick up one of the pirate stations that sometimes floated down the Thames.

"Fletcher said these things take time," James reasoned, coming out of the kitchen.

"It's been time! No where's our bloody record contract?"

"How 'bout this, if we don't hear from him by next week then we'll head over there ourselves?" Sirius offered.

"NEXT WEEK?!" Peter smacked his hand down on the sofa arm. "Oh that'll make a real difference. Better yet, why not just wait for Easter, or the Queen's next bloody jubilee?!"

With a frustrated grunt, Sirius swung himself upright on the sofa. The anger in his expression might've culminated as something he'd certainly regret saying, but just then the phone rang, making all of them flinch.

Sirius was on his feet in a second—leaping across the room in a few short strides.

"Hello?!"

For a few seconds Remus was hopeful, but then Sirius' glower returned and he was shouting down the line;

"No, we ain't interested in your bloody election! You can take your Iron Lady and shove 'er up your arse!"

He slammed the receiver down, just as Lily came around the kitchen counter, unfazed by the anger as she offered him a cup of coffee.

"Sirius, maybe it is time you guys pay that manager of yours a real visit."

Sirius took the coffee and stared down at it before finally raising his head in Remus' direction. Having already given up on the radio, Remus met his gaze, and nodded.

"Doesn't feel like there's much else we can do. I'm sure one visit wouldn't hurt."

"Fine," Sirius relinquished. "But I'm gonna call again first. If he doesn't pick up, we'll go over to the bloody office ourselves."

All of them seemed to find this agreeable, and Sirius began punching in the numbers, leaving the phone on speaker-mode as the rest of them waited anxiously, clinging to the edges of their seats. At first the line just rang. And rang. And—

"Wilson, that better be you! About time, been waiting on you all day! Now where's my bloody van? You think this ruddy piano's gonna move itself!?"

Sirius' mouth dropped open, and he quickly shut it.

"Fletcher…? Fletcher, it's me, Sirius Black."

Silence echoed through the phone, and then a short clatter, as though someone had dropped the receiver.

"Blimey—Sirius!" Fletcher cried a moment later; "Didn't realise it was you, son. I was just—er… Waiting on this repair guy! Piano's gone outta tune, gots to get it checked. What can I do for ya?"

"We—uh…" Glancing back at his friends, Sirius cleared his throat. "We've been trying to contact you, Fletch. For ages. It's about our demo. You promised us that—"

"Ah, right, right, the demo! Sorry 'bout that, lads, went outta town for the holidays. Then the missus made a massive stink about going up to

visit her parents. They're getting old, you know. Can't hardly get outta bed on their own nowadays, and the government won't do nothin' tah support 'em. You always know a society's gone downhill when it stops taking care 'a its elderly."

The never-ending speech felt like Fletcher's usual harangue, but they were tired and too hungry for answers to entertain it. Luckily Sirius wasn't a complete fool.

"Look, Fletcher, you promised us that demo before Christmas—we paid you for the lawyers' fees for EMI, so what's going on?"

"Tell you's what, how 'bout you and the boys come by my office sometime this week and we can talk all about it? After that we can get the show on the road quick 'nuff, you's jus' got a few more papers to sign, s'all."

"Papers? *What papers* —Fletcher, we haven't signed anything!"

"What's he talking about?" Peter demanded.

"Er—that's right!" Fletcher cried, still upbeat and dreadfully personable. "Can't do anything wif'out signing them papers first! Gotta set it all straight before we head over to EMI, don't we? Show the big boys we mean business. So let's say you lads come over sometime next week and we'll sort it all out then, yeah?"

"How about today—"

"No!" The manager yelped, before giving a very hearty laugh. *"Ahem* —I mean, today's no good for me, lads. Got lots of meetings lined up with the studio. Plus I gotta sort out that piano, y'know? In fact—I, uh —I think that's Al with the van now! So I'll see you lads next week, let's say 3 o'clock Wednesday. Sounds great to me. Now ta!"

He hung up very quickly, and they were left to stare at one another. No one said it, but it was clear they all had the same *bad* feeling.

James reached for his coat, hanging on the back of one of the dining room chairs.

"Right. Who's got the van keys then?"

* * *

BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZZZZZZ!

“Sirius, he isn’t answering.”

“He’s gonna answer!” *BUZZZZ! BUZZZZ!*

Remus sighed, turning away from the door.

“Let me try!” Peter insisted, pushing Sirius away from the ringer. He tried several times to no avail, and finally James took a turn. *BUZZ! BU–BU–BUZZZZZZZ!*

Irritated by the noise, Remus retreated across the pavement and lit a cigarette. Cars passed him by, as did the people, most of them shuffling along quickly so as to avoid the chilly wind that was cutting through Soho like a knife. The next door ‘SEXX’ shop’s neon sign was out, it being before randy-hours, and a bum was sleeping in the doorway opposite the street from them. The whole thing felt as grey as the sky, and not for the first time, Remus got the feeling that their ‘too-good-to-be-true’ moment had finally reached its end.

“Maybe he’s left for the day,” he overheard James say.

“Or *maybe* he’s still trying to pull the wool over our eyes,” Peter said, ringing the bell once more. With an unhappy grunt, Sirius shoved him out of the way and began hammering his fist against the bell. ***BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ!***

“UGH! Moony, come see if you can pick the door!”

“I don’t have a pin or nothing on me,” Remus said, ambling back over. “C’mon, let’s just come back later.”

"He could be in a meeting," James suggested.

“You really believe that shite, Potter?”

“Don’t you? I know you would’ve this morning.”

Sirius scowled at him and turned back to the door. “I don’t care if Rod Stewart and the bloody Queen are shooting a porn rag in his office, he’s—” ***BUZZ ;*** “gonna—” ***BUZZ ;*** “answer!”

B–BUZZ! B–BUZZ! B–BU—

“Bloody—ALRIGHT!”

It was a woman. She opened the building's front door with a vexing hiss, revealing hair that was bleached to a fry and a robe that was little more than a bit of black lace with a wrap around her middle. She might've been pretty once, but a combination of age and poor luck had left her face looking saggy and tired-looking, smudges of mascara impressed beneath either eye.

"Can I fucking help you?" She shrilled, mouth drawn up to reveal uneven, yellowed teeth.

"We're here to see Fletcher."

"Who?"

"Doug Fletcher," James clarified; "The music rep."

The woman slumped against the doorway, raising a cigarette to her lips. "Sorry, boys. No 'Doug Fletcher' 'ere."

"Yes, yes there is!" Peter insisted. "There were two of them, Doug and Albert! Second floor, office three!"

"Nuh-uh. No offices 'ere either."

"But we were just here last month!"

She drew a deep breath and blew the smoke up over their heads. "Listen, I manage the whole building, and I'm telling ya, I didn't rent to no 'Doug Fletcher'."

"Who's in number three then?" Sirius snapped.

"Can't say. M'sure it goes against some sort 'a renter's agreement or clause or whatever."

"How about if we made it worth your while?"

Shoving his hand into his pocket, Sirius withdrew a pair of rumpled tenners and held the money up. The landlady eyed them sceptically, before reaching out and snapping up the notes, which she tucked into her bra.

"You said flat three? That was a short term rental, only asked for a couple month's lease. Paid in cash too. Guy's name was Mundungie."

" 'Mundungie?'"

“Somethin’ like that, yeah.”

“Do you know if he’s in now?” Urged James.

“Unfortunate if he were, what with the way you four were wailing on the bell, but no. He and his skinny boyfriend moved out this morning.”

“This MORNING?!” They all exclaimed. Unfazed, the woman ashed her cigarette on the doorway and shrugged.

“Bad luck, boys. But hey, maybe you can still catch one of ‘em. I saw the skinny one carrying things out into the alley earlier. Normally I don’t let out to those who I figure are buggerin’ each other, but these days I can’t really be arsed. A tenant’s a tenant, s’long as they pay on time and don’t bring the work home. Are any of you looking for a place then? I could … *OI!”*

None of them had stuck around long enough to even hear her offer; they were off like lightning the moment she mentioned the alley. Like with much of London, they were forced to leg it all the way down the street, where they looped the corner and found an entrance to a long, grime-encrusted back lot. There they kept running, racing past back doors that lead to various businesses and the steel bin lorries set outside. As they neared the end, Remus nearly tripped on a manhole cover that was left to teeter precariously off to one side. While he was busy having flashbacks to that night in the pit back in Hawkings, Remus heard Sirius give a deep bellow;

“ALBERT!”

Looking up, he spotted Albert near the end of the alley, loading boxes into the back of a large white van.

“Oh shit!”

Scrambling to toss the rest of the boxes inside, Albert threw the van’s doors shut and ran to jump in the front; too bad for him, Sirius got there first. He grabbed Albert by the back collar of her jacket just as he was climbing inside and threw him up against the side of the van, pinning him in place with arm across the base of his throat.

“Talk!” Sirius hissed. “Before we rip your arms off and beat you with them!”

“Alright, alright!” Albert keened. “I’ll talk, just—just don’t hurt me!”

“You little fucking wanker!” James yelled; “You thought you could take our money and just run off? Where the hell is Fletcher?!”

“I–I don’t know!”

Sirius slammed a fist against the side of the van next to Albert's head. “THINK!”

“Okay! Okay! He’s gone, not like, dead or anything, b-but he ain’t here anymore!”

“Where is he then?” Remus barked.

“I dunno, I swear! He dropped me, same as you! Scam’s no good once people start figuring it out so he never sticks around in the same place for long.”

“So it was a scam!” Peter huffed furiously.

“ ‘Course it was a scam! You really think a guy like Mundungus Fletcher had ties to one of the biggest music labels in the country?”

“Mundungus?” Remus echoed. "You've got to be fucking joking me."

Albert shrugged haplessly. “Can’t help what our parents name us, right?”

The Marauders all shared a defeated look. *Fuck.*

“Look,” Albert rasped, before straining his neck to lessen Sirius’ grip on it; “You seem like nice kids, so I’m gonna do ya a solid and fill you in— *eugh!”*

“Stop talking,” Sirius growled, bearing his weight down further; “You’re gonna tell us the truth, and you're gonna tell us where our money is, or we're gonna be using your face to scrub the fucking pavement.”

“Alright, poshy, alright. Just ease up a bit, okay? Can’t hardly breathe ‘ere!”

Remus reached over and grabbed Sirius by the shoulders, slowly walking him back until he’d released his grip on the miserable man. Still wheezing, although laying it on entirely too thick, Albert took a moment to massage his windpipe before straightening up.

“It’s a common scam for those who know their way around the

industry, innit. You take a group of wannabe rock stars and you promise ‘em big things. Recording contracts, houses, cars, girls, drugs —it don’t matter. They always fall for it, because we're all just as desperate for a piece ‘a the pie as everyone else.”

“You’ve done this before then” James scowled. “Tricked honest people out of their money.”

"They ain't all honest," Albert griped. “It’s easier with young guys—guys like you, fresh off the mummy-daddy money train. You think you know how the world works but you don’t. You think anyone would bend over backwards to make you happy. Give you the shirt off their backs if you only asked for it.”

“I'd be careful not to insult us,” Sirius warned, “or you’re gonna need an extra shirt just to mop up all the blood after we cut you open and sell your kidneys to make up for our losses.”

Albert shrugged, running a hand over his jaw. “Fletch’s been doing this a long time, kid. Longer than you've been around. Hell, even did it to me and my band a few years back.”

“He scammed you too?” Peter asked. “Then why are you *working* with him?”

“Money’s money. You think you can survive on a janitor’s wage?”

“You’re a janitor? But what about EMI?” James echoed. Then it dawned on him. “You don’t really work at EMI… do you.”

“Sure, I do,” Albert said. “I’m the night janitor. Or I should say, I *was* the night janitor. Got sacked last week when they found out I’d let you guys inside. Quite enjoyed the sound stuff though. Think I could make a real career out of it one day?”

Looking about ready to explode, Sirius turned away and aimed a sharp kick at the alley wall.

“ FUCK!”

“Nah, don’t sweat it,” Albert said dismissively; “I know exactly how you feel, lads. But my piece of shit band wasn’t gonna get anywhere anyway—realised it when I figured out what Fletch had done. You want my advice? Get out while you can. You boys don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of making it anywhere. The music industry’s gonna take one look at 'chu, bleed you for all yer worth, and leave ya

for dead. Hopes and dreams? That's all bunk. And you're gonna realise it one day when you've woken up feeling like you *are* dead, wishing you were, and working on crap because the whole world's crap and you're the crappiest crap of all *and then maybe—!"*

Albert never got to finish. Before he knew what he was doing, Remus had stepped forward and swung at him. He caught the janitor upside the chin, felt the scruff of his stubble against his bare knuckles, and watched as Albert went down beside the van's front tire like a bag of bricks.

"Aw shit, Moons!" James moaned, as they rushed to check that he hadn't done any worse damage. Fortunately, Albert was still breathing. He sat up on the dirty cement, holding his jaw and looking up like he couldn't believe Remus had actually hit him.

"Wha' the 'ell, man?"

"You should've stayed scared of us," Remus said lowly.

Wincing, Albert pulled his hand away and gently tested his jaw. Since it was clearly not broken, he reluctantly stood up and began dusting himself off. "Alright, I can see you're very serious about all of this, so you might as well get what you paid for. Mind if I step back into the van for a moment?"

"Nice try," scoffed Peter. "You tell us what it is we're looking for, and we'll get it for you."

Rolling his eyes, he gestured toward the back doors. "Blue box. Tiny one with the handle."

Eagerly, Peter sprung into action. He went around the side of the van and after a few seconds, came back with a tiny PVC case, filled with various unlabelled tapes.

"What's this?"

"Whaddya mean 'what's this?' That there's your demo."

Four jaws dropped. The contents of the box was little more than a mess of tapes—there had to be at least twenty of them, and most appeared to be wound incorrectly or else had bits of film sticking out. It was a far cry from any professional demo recording.

"You've got to be joking," James said, peering over Peter's shoulder to

get a look.

"You keep saying that," Albert remarked. "Sorry lads, but if you wanted something better maybe you shouldn't have hired the janitor to do it."

Already fuming, Remus jumped toward him a second time and Albert fell back into the side of the van with a loud thump, hands up in surrender. "Sorry!" He yelped; "Not funny—not funny at all. My bad, really. Bad Albert, bad! S'just… at least you have something now, right? S'more than any 'a the other poor sods got."

"Have what? This is just a pile of crap," Sirius hissed.

" 'Pile of crap'?" Albert crossed his arms indignantly. "That crap got me fired, I'll have you know. You're lucky you got anything at all. Fletcher's never gone so far for one of his scams before. Getting you in at De Lane was totally unnecessary, if you ask me. Most don't even make it to the office, though I guess that just means he thought you were worth your salt after all. Maybe you should take it as a sign. Maybe you could be that diamond in the rough! That is, if you remember to sign a contract first."

Sirius grabbed hold of Albert's collar again. "We want our money back, shite-for-brains!"

"Hey, I hear you, I really do. But my wallet's empty, mate. Check for yourself. Search the entire van if you must. All you're gonna find is a busted piano and some plastic gold records."

"We should take him to the police," said James.

"You could, but really, what're they gonna do? You have no proof, just little ol' me. I'll bet they don't even hand you a tissue."

"We could crack your damn skull open," Sirius threatened.

"Couple 'a posh school prats like you? Nah, you don't have the guts."

Remus growled; "Try us."

At that, a wide grin split across Albert's face, this time with blood in his teeth.

"Alright, go ahead, beat me into the dirt. But it ain't gonna get you your money back. Ain't gonna bring good ol' Fletch out of hiding. You

ain't rock stars, and you ain't no diamond in the rough neither. You're nobodies, and like every other nobody in this Godforsaken city, you four got scammed. So best wake up, lads, 'cause you got about as much chance of making it as rock stars than I do of becoming the Queen of fucking England."

Chapter End Notes

A 'rolodex' is one of those desktop card index used to record names, addresses, and telephone numbers.
A 'live room' (also known as the 'recording booth') is the room in the recording studio where all the sound happening. On the 'other side of the window' would be the recording computers and the sound tech.
A 'babygrow' is like a sleep suit for babies, obviously.
'Footie' is just short for football.
A 'roach' is the butt of a weed/hash cigarette.

De Lane Lae Studios is a real recording studio. It used to be located in Holborn but was moved to Wembley in the early 70s. Lots of big names recorded there, including Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Queen, and Deep Purple.

The 'Sunday Observance Act' was an act of Parliament in Great Britain that essentially prohibited the use of any building or room for public entertainment or debate on a Sunday. While not necessarily enforceable in private homes, it was generally frowned upon to hold big gatherings on the "Lord's Day". It was repealed in 2005.

Also this probably doesn't need to be added but in the UK the "ground floor" is the equivalent of the first floor in North America, so a "first floor landing" is technically one floor off the ground, ie. "second level".

Ellen Barrett was the first [openly] lesbian priest in America, ordained in 1977 following the Episcopal Church approved the ordination of women. America's first openly-gay rabbi was Allen Bennett, who declared himself gay in 1978. He was the rabbi who would later officiate the funeral of Harvey Milk later that same year.

The first night of Hanukkah would've indeed fallen on Dec 24th in 1978, and although it's not the most important holiday to the Jewish community, it felt important to me that Dorcas would've

been spending the night with her family. Also it probably [very likely] didn't snow in London on Christmas Day in 1978 but I'm pretending it did.

Okay that's all for my notes, see you guys next week on the 18th for the first day of 2022's Hanukkah!

Chapter 100: Phone Off the Hook

Chapter Summary

Tensions are mounting as the boys struggle to pick up the pieces following Fletcher's betrayal. Remus' birthday rolls around, and the band takes a much needed holiday.

Chapter Notes

Happy first day of Chanukah! I wish all those celebrating a wonderful time. Hanukkah Sameach!
Also, happy 100th Cadence chapter as well! I remember picturing a number like this and being absolutely boggled and now... Well, I'm still boggled lol.

This chapter is dedicated to Nour, my rotten solider, my sweet cheese, my gOoD tImE bOy! I seriously love you, Nour, and I'm so thankful for you. Happy 100th chapter, it's yours! (And it's a good one <3)

Note: There is some sexual content in this chapter. Again, it's pretty mild by ao3 standards, but if you wish to avoid, look for the ">>>" and resume reading again at the following "<<<". Other than that there is only mild drinking and angst, lol.

Finally, I chose to feature the song "Vienna" by Billy Joel within this chapter despite the fact that its come to be a bit of a meme what with the rise of tiktok. Really, I had no choice but to put it in. It was the only song for the scene, so to speak, and Billy Joel really is an amazing lyricist. As always, I've timed the song's pacing to my own general reading speed. Feel free to play it while you read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday night, gotta gig with a band,
Playing the electric guitar;
Someday I'm going to make it,
Going to be a super-duper-star;

Get a big flashy car,
And a house for my Ma;
The big break better happen soon,
Because I'm pushing twenty-one…

- “Success Story” The Who, 1975

Late February 1979

It would’ve been easy to pretend as though Fletcher hadn’t gotten to them. As though his scam and subsequent betrayal hadn’t knocked the wind from their sails and left them stranded in a sea of doubt. Remus imagined it as headlines:

Armageddon: London Band Strikes Fool’s Gold!

Verdict’s Out on Marauders—‘Mental Makes NO MONEY!’

Messers See Themselves Out: What’s next for this band of willfully ignorant twats?

They each laughed when one of them made a joke about it, but eventually the laughter would filter off into unease, and then came the restlessness. What *was* next for Marauders? Could this really be it? They'd promised their parents one year... Was fate finally telling them it was time to throw in the towel now? *After all this time?*

“Bollocks!” Sirius would growl. “It’s just a setback, all bands have ‘em! We’ll work harder—practice every day. Eventually we'll get into a real studio! And fuck managers, they’re all money-grubbing bastards anyway. We’ll do it ourselves, no one knows Marauders like we do. No one knows us like *we* do.”

And for a while they believed him, but then life began to creep back in—as it tended to—with its usual responsibilities and when no grand opportunity had presented itself on either the real or metaphorical doorstep, the Marauders were finally forced to admit that their music might be taking a back seat. All of their friends were busy these days; Peter had quit working in the basement of his dad’s paper company to go ink illustrations for the comic artists upstairs, and James had been promoted to head waiter at the restaurant. Still madly in love with her fiancé, Lottie continued splitting her time between London and Reading, planning her wedding around train rides and taxi fares while Marlene continued working hard at the non-profit and on her relationship with Dorcas. Out of all of them, Mary was the easiest to pin down. So far she had invited them to several showcases at her conservatory. Being generally busy and not really that big a fan of opera, Remus had only gone to the one, but even he couldn't deny the fact that Mary was brilliant. In just one year she'd managed to expand

her voice enough to garner her own solo.

"Brilliant!" Sirius declared, once the concert had ended and they'd all gathered in the lobby. "*Assolutamente fantastico!* Best contralto in the county."

It was as close as Sirius came to being upbeat since the Fletcher incident. They'd all taken it hard, but Sirius more-so, perhaps just because he'd been the one to vouch for Fletcher the most.

Humbling accepting Sirius' praise, Mary kissed his cheek as Lily handed her friend a small bouquet of roses. Then she beckoned another man over. He was handsome; Remus recognised him as her partner in one of the duets.

"Everyone, this is Claude."

Claude was gone a week later. Last Remus heard Mary was dating some Austrian guy now she'd met while clubbing in St James, but she'd dumped him too the minute things started getting too serious. As far as Remus could tell, Mary quite fancied most of the men she dated, but she knew how to call it quits when they inevitably began pushing for more than she was willing to give. If only they could all be so pragmatic.

Still nursing the gaping wound Fletcher's betrayal had left on his pride, Sirius insisted they made use of every moment the four of them were home together to work on their music. While Lily was busy with school or otherwise fielding phone calls from Lottie as she fussed over wedding caterers and floral arrangements, the Marauders were downstairs in the basement, hard at work. Perhaps *too* hard. Sirius had deemed their usual 'jam routine' practice-style a futile effort, with too much time spent on haphazard drivel and not enough on overall cohesion. He came at James like a drill sergeant, and Peter like a prison warden—viciously instructing them on their own instruments and not accepting anything less than perfect.

It was unlike them to argue during practice, but after Sirius had spent an entire afternoon meticulously scrutinizing their latest composition, James slumped down on the basement couch with an irritated huff.

"I don't get it," he moaned, "the song's already finished, and I say it's fine!"

"It's badass," added Peter. James nodded, one arm thrust outward in ready agreement.

"Yeah, it's... Shit, it's punk."

"Haven't you been listening?" Sirius snapped. "We're *not* punk! Tell 'em, Moony!"

Remus said nothing, cravenly plucking at a string on his bass and making himself look busy as though the instrument was ever anything less than in-tune.

"Punk is in," James rebuffed.

"And already on its way out! God, I swear we walked into Fletcher's office and you were staring at the ceiling."

"Who gives a fuck where I was staring, he conned us!"

"Yes, and maybe if we stopped looking at it as just a bad thing, we could learn something!"

"Dunno what you're gonna learn," Peter grumbled quietly. "That demo tape we got back was all rubbish. Not a bit of it was usable."

Sirius ignored the comment, as he did with most things that refused to go his way, and went to stand in front of his mike stand.

"Now again, and bloody do it right this time!" He barked, loudly enough that the feedback from the microphone made all of them wince.

One didn't have to be a genius to realise that Sirius was buckling under the pressure. He had been ever since Fletcher, but Remus knew the real reason for the fire that'd been lit under his arse hit a lot closer to home. Near the end of January, a letter had arrived for James stamped with the University of Exeter's seal. They'd all puzzled over it initially, but when James refused to let any of them read it, Sirius' contemptuous side began to rear its ugly head again.

“Exeter? What’s Exeter University doing sending you post? Are they that desperate for a decent football team?”

James didn’t rise to the bait, and so in answer, Sirius leaned over the back of his dining room chair and snapped the letter up. James was on him in a second, but already Sirius’ teasing smile had vanished.

“They’ve accepted you,” he said, clutching the letter hard enough that his knuckles turned white. “Faculty of Business and Economics…

What the fuck do you know about economics, Prongs?"

"It's just an admissions letter," James replied bitingly. "Dad has an undergraduate degree in economics, right, so when I applied I just thought that—"

"You applied?!"

"No, I deferred, you nob! *Last year.* It's just that time, I expect…"

Sirius laughed humourlessly. "So will you go then? Be a good boy and head off to college just like Mummy and Daddy expect?"

"Sod off. I'm here, aren't I?"

"For now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sirius ignored him. "Did you say yes?"

"No. But could you really blame me if I had?"

The tone in James' voice was deadly, and Remus could tell by the way Sirius flinched that he felt it too. Desperate to fuel his anger, he whirled next on Peter, who'd been quietly scribbling in a notepad as though he couldn't be bothered with any of it.

"And you?" He demanded. "Have you gotten any fancy letters you'd like to share with the class?"

Confused, Peter faltered, and Sirius snatched the notepad from his hands.

"What is this anyway, huh?! More illustrations for work? Work—*work*—bloody work! When's the last time you put some real practice in on the drums, huh?! I thought you wanted to be the next Ginger Baker, not Walt fucking Disney!"

James got between them;

"Come off it, Black—leave Pete alone!"

"I'm only saying, he's been real quiet!"

Things might've gotten worse, had Remus not reached over and snatched the letter and the sketches away from Sirius himself.

“That’s enough, Pads. I think it’s probably time we all take a break… Cool down a bit.”

The look Sirius gave him could’ve turned a lesser man to stone, but off he went—ashamed and still entirely pissed off. They heard every stomping step on the staircase, and after that—the slam of a bedroom door. Quietly, Remus mourned. He'd never been exiled to the couch before, but he supposed there was a first time for everything.

“I’m not going to Exeter, Moony,” James said later, when Sirius still hadn’t come down.

“I know, Prongs.”

“Sirius just thinks he wants it more than anyone else.”

Out of loyalty for his boyfriend, Remus nearly found himself telling James that he was right—that Sirius *did* want it more than anyone else. The band had been Sirius' dream for longer than Remus had even known him. Once Remus had asked him who his favourite was. He'd been expecting Bowie, maybe T. Rex or Roxy Music, but Sirius had shot them all down.

My band, he'd said, *because my band's gonna be the best.*

Remus hadn't believed him then, but he'd believed him a month ago, and he wanted to believe him now.

Only, he hadn’t anticipated what that really meant.

No one brought up James' Exeter letter after that night, and eventually days—and then weeks, had passed altogether. They continued with their Saturday gigs at the Shoestring, but it was clear something had changed. All of their naive enthusiasm had been traded for frustration; the Marauders were tired. Any frequenting fans they’d managed to garner before Fletcher had been put off when they’d realised that their once beautiful singer had been replaced by an angry boy too obsessed with perfection to bother with a simple pint during working hours. As a result the band’s showmanship was suffering. They barely had the energy to play their instruments anymore, let alone interact with their audience. Not all days were tough though, just most of them.

Remus’ nineteenth birthday was set to fall on a Saturday that year, and a sure cause for celebration. Though the ridiculousness of his eighteenth would be hard-pressed to be outdone, the anticipation of an entire pub of inebriated strangers, all singing directly to him, made

Remus want to crawl into the deepest, darkest hole he could find.

It was one week to the day of his approaching humiliation when the Marauders arrived in Lambeth for their usual gig. The night had started alright, but then quickly spiralled out of control. James' new amp kept losing power and Sirius' microphone insisted on screeching feedback into the audience's ears, and the drinks they'd downed to help with their hangovers wasn't doing anything for their general playing. It was mortifying to see the room jump with every squeal of the mike, but not so mortifying as the face Sirius made when the first bout of heckling reached his ears.

"Christ, give us a break already, why don't cha?"

"Yeah, get off the stage! Send up someone who can actually play something!"

And that was all it took. No less than three seconds later, the entire pub was bearing witness to the great eschaton that was Sirius Black's temper.

"FUCK YOU! If you think you can do better then how 'bout you peel that crusty arse of yours outta that chair and give it go, fuckin' tosspot!"

The enraged men stood up and Sirius leapt down to meet them, backed up by an equally inebriated James and a heavily frustrated Peter. The girls were there too, with Dorcas and Mary screaming threats and Marlene about ready to smash her beer bottle over the head of the first person who dared call Sirius a ponce. Ray managed to break up the scuffle before either group could really start battering the other, but he wasn't very impressed that they'd driven off paying customers when the night had barely begun. After their set he pulled them aside and gave them the grave news. Ray was cancelling next week's show, as well as the one after that, and Sirius was to go on an immediate holiday.

"What the hell, Ray?!" Sirius demanded. "You're sacking me?"

"Don't tempt me, princess. You four were an utter disgrace up there tonight. This is a pub, not a bloody boxing ring! Now the show's been cancelled, so do yourselves a favour and take the time to get your bleedin' act together."

It was another defeat, this time from someone they admired, and they were all thinking it;

Go home, you're not good enough today. Come back tomorrow. Or never.

Deep down Remus knew that Ray had good intentions, but none of them dared say anything in his favour as they packed their instruments into the back of the van, and especially not after Sirius screamed and hurled a glass bottle against the brick wall of the alley for good measure.

"Well, I for one think it's a good thing," Peter grumbled on the drive home. "Could use the practice anyway. We sound like shit."

"We sound fine!" Sirius snarled at him.

"Yeah, well since when has 'fine' gotten anyone a record deal? We're all out of sync. *You* can't decide what key it is you're singing in and half the time it's like the rest of us are playing completely different songs."

"Then maybe you should take a look at the setlist for once, Wormtail, instead of getting off your face on Ray's free Guinness!"

"You can piss right off, Sirius! You've been like this for weeks, always slagging off. You used to be cool about everything—or *most* things, anyway. Now it's like you've gone and turned into your bloody mother."

Remus had to hand it to Peter, he always did know how to go for the throat.

As Lily spun around in the front seat, face engulfed in abject horror, Sirius pulled the sweat towel from around his neck and whipped it at Peter's head.

"Here, Pettigrew, have mine! Since you're so intent on throwing in the bloody towel! Boy, you and Ray sure are a pair!"

Remus groaned, trying to reach between then; "C'mon, guys, that's enough."

"I ain't throwing in the towel!" Peter cried, snubbing Remus completely. "And neither is Ray! He only told us to take a break—"

"WE DON'T NEED A BREAK!"

"Enough!" Lily wailed, slamming her hand down on the passenger's side armrest. "Keep it up and you're going to make Potter drive off the

bloody road! What the four of you need is *sleep.* Sleep and some actual rest. No more killing yourselves over all this, and for God's sake, no more fighting! Now… James and I are going away for Pet's wedding in a few days, and I think the rest of you should do the same."

"Ah, and I suppose that means dear Petunia's extended a few more plus-ones?" Sirius drawled.

Lily's eyes narrowed vexingly. "No, I only meant that you should get out of the house for a while and stop moping around like miserable, squabbling children. Lottie's wedding is coming up too, and I won't have you ruddy idiots ruining it by being in such a mood."

"And where would you suggest we go, o' wise one?"

"Well, Peter's going to Moira's, for example."

Sirius shot Peter a nasty glare. "I'm sure Stratford's just idyllic for taking the air."

Before Peter could fire back a retort, Remus reached across the van's bench and took his friend's shoulder. "He doesn't mean it, Pete."

"Don't talk for me," Sirius snapped. "You're not my sodding mother."

The comment left a sour note in all of their mouths, and no one spoke any more of of mothers or weddings until they'd passed from Kensington back into Shepherd's Bush.

"Maybe a holiday would be good for all of us," James suggested haggardly. "It's like Daisy said, she and I are going up to Liverpool, and Pete's off with Moira. Moony, Black—the two of you could take the van and go anywhere you wanted. How 'bout Devon? The house there is always empty this time of year. It'll be chilly, sure, but I'm sure Mum and Dad wouldn't mind lending you the keys."

"Oh, yes, Devon!" Sirius sang tersely. "Where the young go to cry and the old go to die. I'm sure there'll be plenty to do. We can go to the pub with all the locals—dip our toes in the ocean and see how long it takes them to fall off."

"I've never been to the sea," said Remus, blandly. This was apparently quite the revelation, as Sirius and Peter whirled on him very suddenly. Up ahead, James was already adjusting the rear view mirror while Lily craned her head around as well, mouth open in a tiny 'o'.

“Never, Remus?”

“Well… Maybe once when I was really young, but I don’t remember it.”

"You came all the way to Dover to get me," Sirius pointed out.

"Yes, and I was a bit too preoccupied to go hunting for seashells, if you didn't notice."

Sirius looked away, but in the front seat, James was practically doing a jig.

“There then!” He declared. “Black, why don’t you take Lupin to the sea? It’ll be like an early birthday trip. You can take the van—make a road-trip out of it if you'd really like. I'm sure Moony can swing the time off work, hasn't very well asked for any time off before, have you, Moons?”

Not wanting to step on any toes, Remus glanced warily at Sirius. He didn't look excited by the idea, but at the risk of sounding like an absolute arse, Sirius simply turned his cheek into his shoulder and muttered a quiet, "Whatever."

Remus tried not to let it show, but secretly he was glad they were getting out of town for a while. Ever since Fletcher, the flat had taken on a rather dismal disposition. Dishes had started to pile up in the sink, and more than once they’d missed putting the bin out on the curb for pick up. It wasn’t that they’d all suddenly become slobs, more like there was so little time for anything else. Work, band—no play. Lily did her best to stay on top of things, but none of them had ever considered her a maid, nor would she tolerate being treated as such. That evening, when they returned to an entryway in desperate need of a mop, Lily turned on them and said just three words.

“Clean. *Then* pack.”

No one argued.

The next morning, Remus called Dorcas and begged her to cover his shifts at the music shop. She agreed, only after much bribery and enough begging that Remus swore his pride would never be the same again. Come Tuesday, when James and Lily were set to leave on a train from King’s Cross, the rest of them gathered their things together and said their goodbyes. Peter had already caught the early train to Moira’s, and Remus was just getting ready to give his friends a lift to

the station when Mr. Potter made an unannounced visit. He'd been kind enough to drop off the keys for the holiday house and even offered to drive the happy couple to the station himself so that Remus and Sirius could get on the road at a reasonable hour. Positively buzzing, he stood in the entryway pouring over an A to Z road map that was probably as old as they were.

"Effie told me of your plans last night, and I think it's brilliant!" He declared, in the same up-beat tone as his son days before. "The house itself is in Dawlish, remember, but Exeter's just a half hour up the road if you get bored. Sometimes the power gets a bit finicky right after winter, so if it goes out just flip the circuit breaker in the garage. Much easier than when I was a boy—they were all real fuses back then. If you have any questions you can always give Effie and I the bell. Though… I suspect the two of you will be just fine."

He gave them a sort of cheeky side-eye, and Remus was left with the feeling that Effie had let him in on more than just their spur-of-the-moment holiday plans.

"Thanks, Dad," Sirius said, wrapping his arms around the older man. Remus hugged him too, albeit less firmly, and afterwards Sirius nudged him, already turning for the stairs.

"I'm gonna go get out bags," he said, folding up the map. He passed James and Lily on his way up the staircase, and while Lily simply embraced Sirius and left a kiss on his cheek before carrying on down, James took a moment to pull him aside.

"*It'll be good*," Remus heard him murmur; "*Just try and relax*."

If Sirius said anything in reply, Remus didn't catch it. Already Lily was approaching him and Monty, suitcase in one hand, handbag in the other.

"Lily!" Monty cried. "You get lovelier every time I see you."

"Hello, Monty," Lily smiled, setting down her bags so she might hug him also. "Thank you so much for offering to drive James and I to the station. We really could've taken a taxi."

"Nonsense, it's no problem at all. Is this everything then?"

"Yes, should be. James is just bringing his suit down now."

"So what's the verdict, Evans?" Remus asked. "Are you wearing

chartreuse?"

"Worse." Bending down, Lily opened the top of the suitcase to reveal a pastel yellow dress covered in frilly satin flowers. "I'm considering spilling wine on it halfway through the ceremony just so I can change."

"If you really want to stop the show you could just spill the wine on Petunia instead."

Smirking, Lily began to rifle through her things. "Here," she said, pulling out a tiny vinyl bag and pushing it into his hands. "My camera. Thought you might want to take it with you."

Remus stared at the device dubiously, afraid any sudden jostle might break it. "Your camera? But don't you want it for the wedding?"

"Knowing Pet, there'll be plenty of cameras around already. And besides, she's got me on child-rearing duty the entire time anyway. Vernon's got cousins coming in from the countryside and she's invited all the neighbours... Now there's two full rolls of film in there. It should work fine so long as you don't drop it into the sea or something."

"No promises," Remus smiled, but he clutched the device protectively.

With a quick kiss on the cheek goodbye, Lily zipped up her suitcase and made to carry it out the door. Remus went to help, but was instantly rebuffed by Monty as he gathered Lily's things in one arm and used the other to walk her down to the flat's front steps.

"All ready then?" James chirped, flouncing down to the main floor with a garment bag over one shoulder.

"Yup. That your suit then?"

"Mhm. Freshly tailored, matter-of-fact. Had to let it out a bit in the waist… I think I've gained weight, Moons."

"You mean since secondary school?" Remus gave him the quick once over. "Think it's normal, mate."

"You're probably right. 'Sides, Lily says she likes it. More padding to cuddle." James pat his gut fondly. "We'll be back next Sunday. Now are you sure you and Sirius are going to be okay on your own?"

“ ‘Course. I’ll feed and walk him twice a day.”

“That’s my boy.”

They embraced, and after a quick check to see that he had his keys, James blessed Remus with his final goodbyes and slipped out the front door. The instant he’d gone, Sirius’ voice echoed down from the floor above.

“Moony! Did you see what happened to that copy of ‘NME’ I left on the dresser table? I just bought it…”

“I packed it!” Remus called back. “Thought you might like to have it on the road.”

“Oh. Good thinking.”

Sirius descended the steps a few moments later. He brought with him their largest trunk—*their!* Felt a bit crazy to think about—as well as a familiar leather guitar case, still just as worn and chipped as the day Andy had gifted it to him.

“Are you sure you want to bring that?” Remus asked, eyeing the guitar warily. “I think the whole purpose of this is to… you know, get away from it for a while.”

“We have to practice, don’t we?”

“You’re not going to get rusty in one week.”

Sirius looked down at the case, lips pursed stubbornly. Remus was already readying himself for a row, when Sirius sighed and set the guitar down against the entryway wall.

“Ready then?”

Remus blinked, trying not to seem too stunned.

“Er... Y-Yeah! Let’s get going…”

They met each other on the threshold of the rug, and there Sirius turned his head up for a kiss. Remus nearly melted. He knew Sirius' chronically bad mood hadn't entirely dissipated, but he’d never been so looking forward to a real holiday in all his life. Perhaps Mary was wrong; maybe romance wasn’t so intolerable after all.

“I’m driving,” Sirius said, as they stepped out the door.

“Oh, you are *so* not driving…”

They got into Dawlish just a few minutes shy of midday. It was a straight-shot along the M4, then down toward Exeter, and it rained the whole way, beating the van’s front windows until Remus was half-sure they’d be swept off the motorway.

“Do you feel like stopping at all?” Remus asked. “Monty said Exeter’s got all the decent pubs.”

“No,” Sirius replied, busy glaring out the window.

Remus kept on driving.

The downpour had lightened by the time they were pulling onto the seaside town’s main road, but the day's previously poor weather had cleared the pavement of all pedestrians anyway. They passed rows upon rows of sleepy houses coloured in worn white, yellow, and blue, and retaining walls made of original brick and mortar. Just over the rooftops Remus could make out the dusky blue waters of the English channel. It was exciting; he’d never wanted much for the ocean, but now that they were there, he could feel the swell of it in his chest. When he cracked his window the briny sea-smell of it seeped in like the rain, clearing his sinuses and giving him the first real breath of fresh air he'd taken since leaving Scotland last June. He'd read once that those who lived by the ocean tended to live longer. Seeing it—smelling it—Remus now understood why.

“Should be your next right,” Sirius said, squinting down at the A to Z and turning it around several times.

“You sure? Your last right almost took me to Glastonbury.”

“Are you gonna sass me or are you gonna turn right?”

“Aye, aye, captain—turning right.”

They arrived at the house when the sky was only drizzling, and there on the corner of the lane that overlooked the sea, they found a mini Potter Cottage sitting idly, just as quaint and as sleepy as the rest of its distant neighbours. The summer house had a private drive for the van, with an attached garage, white stucco walls, and a terracotta roof. All of its windows were framed white as well, with several of them bearing panes made of the most dazzling stained glass. The key stuck in the lock a bit but when it finally gave way, it revealed a cosy living room made up of light pine furnishings and cashmere rugs. Attached

to it was a kitchen, with cupboards painted grey and adorned in matching rainbow glass. The rest of the interior was modest—or modest for its means, anyway. There was no television, but there was a radio. The bottom floor was split up between the kitchen and dining room as well as an office that doubled as the guest room, while the upstairs held two bedrooms and the single bath, all decorated identically to the little beach-themed bathroom the Potters' kept in their home back in London.

"It's nice," Remus said, peeling out of his winter coat. "Ceilings are a bit low though."

"You're just too tall," Sirius mused, stretching up to brush his fingers along one of the wooden ceiling beams. "At least it's not completely freezing inside. Flick on the radiator will you?"

While Remus did so, Sirius shook the damp from his hair and strolled into the kitchen. He went to the fridge first, opening it and sighing. Empty, as expected.

"We're going to have to make a shop run for dinner. How's the weather?"

"Think the rain's mostly stopped," Remus replied, peeking out the lace curtains.

"Might as well go now then. Just let me change first."

Sirius grabbed their trunk and headed down the hall for the guest bedroom, and Remus continued peering out the window. The cottage itself was just a few kilometres from the sea, situated on top of one of the majestic cliffs the town was known for—making for the most amazing view. It being early March, the beach was mostly empty, but he could just make out a few wandering gulls soaring down over the shore.

Letting the lacy curtain fall back into place, Remus strolled back over to the radiator to warm his hands. It was then that he noticed the small wall hutch hung up over the dining room table. Covered top to bottom in photographs, the hutch bore memories from every summer James had been alive; James in the garden, no taller than Monty's waist, James without his two front teeth, wearing swimming bottoms and a woman's sunhat, James on the end of a pier, holding a crab bigger than his head. There were other family members Remus didn't recognise, even a few of Peter; his chubby arm wrapped around James' shoulders while James grinned his very James Potter grin and

held two fingers up behind Peter's head.

"Ugh, just look at them and their happy childhoods," Sirius drawled, strolling up from behind while tying his hair into a half-knot behind his head.

"Sorta makes you want to punch an eight year-old in the face, don't it?"

"Just a bit."

Remus snorted, turning to look at him. "Oi… That's my jumper."

Sirius glanced down at the burgundy knit jumper he'd pulled over his t-shirt. "Obviously. Now are you ready to go?"

They walked instead of taking the van, and though it was chilly, Remus appreciated it. It was the air—the smell of it, the clarity; like his lungs were breathing for the very first time. Overhead the gulls cried, and when they reached the promenade he made Sirius stand at the edge while he fumbled with Lily's camera.

"Do you even know how to use that thing?"

"Just shut up and smile."

He snapped the photo and as it was printing, Sirius came forward and snatched the camera for himself.

"Let's take one together."

While Remus bent down next to him, Sirius raised the camera. He smiled, but for several seconds there was nothing.

"Aren't you—"

KA-CHICK!

"Moons, you ruined it!"

"And I think you've blinded me. *Ugh…"*

As Remus straightened up and rubbed the flash from his eyes, Sirius gave a snort and ripped the spoilt photo from its spout. "Here," he said, raising the camera once more, "give us a little snog this time."

"A snog?"

“Yeah, why not? It’s not like anyone else’s around.”

That was true enough. They’d only passed two people on their way down from the house, a man pruning the dead branches from her front hedges and an old woman walking her dog. Now that they were there, a quick glance in either direction told him that they were the only two on the promenade. They might as well have been the only two in the whole world.

“Alright,” Remus said, secretly giddy. “But only one.”

Sirius smiled and leaned his face back in. They met in the middle, and one more flash and shutter sound later, he was waving the fresh photo through the air.

“You better not show anyone that,” Remus warned, taking the camera and hanging it around his neck by the strap.

“No, I’ll save it for the grandchildren.”

They made their way down onto the beach, past the craggy stones and onto a soft brown sand that clung to the soles of their boots. Remus regularly found himself sinking into the mud holes and little tide pools, but Sirius danced along like it was nothing—winter scarf billowing behind him in the wind. Not far off they could see a family enjoying themselves near the very edge of the shore; every now and then the kids would shoot into the water up to their ankles, scream, and rush out again. Eventually their mother bundled them up into little towels and they retreated back toward the stone stairs, until they were naught but tiny specks in the distance.

“I used to love coming to the sea,” Sirius said, busy kicking up sand as he stared out over the horizon. He had a far-away look in his eye Remus could relate to, like he was thinking about somewhere else.

“Wasn’t aware the great city of Bath had a sea,” Remus called, raising the camera. He snapped a photo of Sirius impressed in the creamy orange glow of the early sunset and afterwards Sirius turned around to smirk at him.

“It doesn’t. Our governess, Gisela—”

“The one who ran off with the gardener?”

“And don’t forget the twenty-thousand pounds from my dad’s safe,” Sirius added keenly. “Before she split she’d sometimes take us over to

Bristol in the summertime. They had this nice beach over in Portishead, bit different from here, but—well, I can't remember much, really… Used to come home with my feet all cut up from walking on all the barnacles though."

"Didn't you swim?"

" 'Course, but Reg hated it. Hated the whole thing, to be honest. Though, s'probably my fault. See, I used to dig up the tiny crabs and put them down the back of his shirt… Once I even brought one back with me and left it on his pillow for him to find. Told him it must've crawled into his ear and drove all the way home with us."

"You are an absolute terror. No wonder he hated you."

"Yeah, maybe... We're better now though."

In a moment of vulnerability, Sirius looked up from the sand and Remus saw all the memories impressed onto his face like a tattered mask.

"I never really was a very good brother," he murmured. "Just… left him there, didn't I?"

"You were a kid," Remus said, overcome with a sense of déjà vu.

"So was he." Sirius sniffed, his cheeks rosy from the cold. "I was a bad brother… Think I waited too long to fix things. Now I'm here and he's there—"

"Regulus is at Hawkings."

"For now. But what about after? He's almost finished with school, and sure—he could go to some fancy university far away, 'cept Mum's never gonna let that happen. He's all they've got now... What if he never gets out?"

Remus shuffled closer, bending in so he and Sirius were nearly nose-to-nose.

"He will."

"And if he doesn't want to?"

"Then he'll have to decide that for himself." Remus sighed, touching their foreheads together. "Regulus is smart, Sirius. And you two are more alike than you think."

Somehow, it was enough for Sirius, and he smiled quietly while accepting the quick kiss Remus offered next. Afterwards he raised both hands up above his head, giving a long stretch before a brisk wind came and left him trembling beneath his coat.

“Fuck—alright. That’s enough beach for today. Let’s head over to the shops before they close, I'm starving.”

They turned together, setting sun at their backs as they made their way back toward the concrete promenade. Halfway there, Remus glanced down at Sirius’ hand, his knuckles red from the cold. When he reached down to take it, Sirius snapped his face toward him.

“We’re holding hands in public now?”

“Why not? It’s not like anyone else’s around.”

“Mm… Clever you.”

* * *

Wednesday 7th March 1979

Reading by the seaside was better than reading anywhere else, Remus had decided—save maybe the middle of the night with Sirius sleeping beside him and the sound of rain pattering against their bedroom window. He learned to love the sound of the waves rolling in, and the wind as it whistled off the water. For the first time in his life he was waking feeling fully rested—eager to get out and breathe the fresh air.

“Maybe we should get a house on the beach,” he said the next morning.

“Yeah, like in Santa Monica,” Sirius replied, busy brushing sand from their blanket while munching on one of the butteries they’d picked up for an easy breakfast. “We’ll get ourselves a big place, with a killer view. Throw massive parties—Prongs can even invite Farrah Fawcett. It’ll be a blow-out.”

Remus didn’t hate the idea, but he returned to his book anyway, pretending not to notice the antsy way Sirius was bobbing his leg. His fingers too, were incessant. It'd been less than twenty-four hours and yet they were constantly tapping or flicking, as though he was just

desperate for a set of strings to set them against. He tried reading—the Potters kept an impressive collection, even way out in Devon—but it was clear that it was mostly for Remus' sake. Sirius held the book, considered its pages—but just appeared bored. Remus wished it were summer, so that they might actually find something to do other than sit in silence or listen to Radio 1's Top 40.

"Feel like heading over to the pub for supper?"

"Sure," Sirius shrugged. "Could use a pint."

So dinner was settled, but they still had an entire day to kill. When the wind inevitably started to pick up again, they fled the beach for warmer accommodations only to find that the power had gone out back at the cottage.

"Monty did warn us this might happen," Sirius sighed, as Remus smacked the radiator and found it cool to the touch.

"To the garage we go."

It was your typical crowded storage shed; few windows and barely enough room for a car but plenty for a mower and a decently-stocked tool bench. Rows of shelves along the back wall held an assortment of boxes and summer commodities, while several tarps covered what appeared to be a table and chairs set for the front garden.

"I found the fuse box!" Sirius called, after they'd fumbled around in the dark for a while. The tiny door squealed when he opened it, but after a bit of trial and error, Sirius flipped the correct breaker and the entire room lit up.

"There! Like magic."

"Good job," Remus said, still hanging on to the string of the only free-hanging light bulb. Sirius grinned back at him victoriously, before his eyes shot wide and he thrust his finger out toward the ground.

"Shit, watch out for that rat!"

The yelp Remus let out was absolutely garish, but it was nothing compared to the clatter when he practically levelled the tarps near the back of the garage. Before he could even clarify about the rat, Sirius was full-belly laughing.

"Sorry, Moons, I was only joking! Didn't realise you'd get so worked

up over a little mouse."

"Oh, go do one, why don't you!" Remus snarled, pushing himself back up to his feet. "Shit… Think I fell on a rake or something."

And then Sirius' face really lit up. "That's not a bloody rake!"

He raced over and grabbed the edges of the tarp, ripping it back to reveal an old two cylinder motorbike. It was missing its seat and flat in both wheels, and appeared to Remus as though it was rusted to the very floor. Remus had never much fancied the things—they were like mechanical horses, except they could go a hundred miles per hour and didn't need to dislike you to kill you—but Sirius spared the bike one glance and was instantly in love.

"Holy shit! Monty never told me that he was hiding one of these! Do you know what this is, Moons?"

"Yeah, it's the biggest bout of tetanus I've ever seen."

"No! It's a relic."

"Well, that relic of yours just about displaced my spine." Remus sighed, glaring at the handlebars. "I'm gonna go make sure the radiator's working. You coming?"

"In a sec," Sirius said, already kneeling down beside the bike. "I'm gonna check her over a bit. See if I can't get this beast running."

"For that you're gonna need real magic."

He left Sirius to his own devices, and didn't hear a peep until several hours later when he'd set his book down only to realise they'd missed lunch entirely. Quickly whipping up a few sandwiches, Remus slipped his boots on and made his way back out to the garage.

"Thought you might be hungry," he called, pushing open the door. Sirius regarded him with a nod. He was still bent over the motorbike, face now streaked with hints of grease. He'd since moved the rest of the tarps and furniture out of the way, scattering various tools about the floor as he worked.

"You got the tires off," Remus said, while Sirius stepped back and wiped his forehead.

"Yeah… Body's almost a total write-off though. I think there's rust

inside the motor."

"You sure Monty's gonna appreciate you messing around with it?"

"He told us to use whatever we liked, didn't he?"

"In that case, I found these inside. Thought they might be helpful."

He handed him the wrapped sandwich, as well as a beer and a stack of magazines, each of them bearing a different style of motorbike on its cover.

"Huh. Guess Monty was looking for a new hobby." Cracking his beer tab, Sirius flicked through the magazines a bit before setting them aside. "Thanks for the lunch. You alright inside?"

"I'm not your fragile little wife, Sirius. I think I can handle a few hours on my own."

He smirked, biting into the sandwich. "Would'a fooled me, what with the way you jumped for that rat."

Remus boxed his ears lightly. "Ready for that pint then?"

"Mhm. I'd like to stop into the shops too, see if they have any rust-remover."

They didn't, but it was too late to check anywhere else so after chatting up the shop's owner, Sirius settled for a large bottle of vinegar hoping it would do the trick instead. Nearby, the local pub wasn't exactly crowded when they arrived. They were the youngest there by at least twenty years and for the most part all of its patrons kept to themselves. It was an old building made with thick wooden beams and cracked leather seats, dated even by the Shoestring's standards. But the beer was decent and no one stared at them when they walked in so Remus had no complaints.

"Look," he said. There was a piano across the room, tucked away in a corner with its key lid shut and missing its bench. Sirius had looked earnestly when Remus pointed at it, but turned back around when he realised what it was.

"Thought this was supposed to be a music free holiday."

"Not music free—stress free! You should play something."

"Yeah, maybe, except something tells me the guys around here aren't

used to a house band."

Remus wanted to push, it'd been ages since he'd just heard Sirius play to *play,* but just then the barkeep came over to collect their empty glasses.

"Say, does anyone ever play that piano?" He asked the man.

"Nah, not really. Hell, I'd put money on it being out of tune."

Remus frowned, disappointed. "Thanks."

"No one can say you didn't try," Sirius said, patting his arm as the barkeep strode off. It felt rather blithe considering he spent the rest of the evening shooting little glances back at the instrument.

Neither of them felt much like eating out so after they'd finished their fair share of ale and lager, the two of them stumbled home in the dark, quietly poking fun at the locals they'd witnessed and whistling at the moon. In the end they took the beach promenade because it was empty, enjoying the feeling of being able to hold each other's hand outside their own home. City-dwelling was starting to look less and less appealing by the hour.

"We still got some eggs in," Sirius said as they staggered inside. "Feel like breakfast for dinner?"

"Yeah, go on."

While Sirius got to cooking, Remus hung up their coats and began fiddling with the radio. The reception was surprisingly good, and soon enough they were being serenaded by the likes of Ian Dury and his blockhead gang.

'Hit me with your rhythm stick—
Hit me, hit me!
Je t'adore, ich liebe dich!
Hit me, hit me, hit me!'

"Wow. Don't you just love the radio?" Sirius called.

"It's certainly eccentric enough." Remus flicked gently through the Potters' record collection. Mostly rhythm and blues, some gospel. "Did you know Ian Dury had polio?"

“Really?”

“Mhm. And he still moves better on stage than half the pricks they’ve got on ‘Top of the Pops’.”

"You know everything."

"Not everything."

"No?"

"No. Like... I have no idea what he means by 'rhythm stick'."

"Oh, I think you *do,*" Sirius chuckled. As he continued to hum along Remus left the radio behind and joined him at the stove, coming up from behind and sliding his hands beneath the hem of his jumper. Feeling keen, he tucked either thumb into the belt loops of Sirius jeans, and leaned in so his nose brushed against the back of his hair.

“I’m glad we came,” he murmured, placing a strategic kiss along the slope of Sirius’ neck.

“Mm, don’t. I haven’t showered today.”

“I don’t mind. You smell good… like the sea.”

“I think you mean like a garage. I was working on that bike most of the day, and I’m about to smell like bacon grease too so piss off,” Sirius said, shoving him back lightly. Remus whined pointedly and tightened his hold on his hips.

“Are you not glad we came?”

“Never said that. Cheeky prat.”

“C’mon, Sirius…” He kissed his neck again, smirking. *“ ‘Hit me with your rhythm stick—hit me, hit me.’”*

“So *now* you’re a singer?”

“Wouldn’t go that far…”

“And just what’s happened to my puritan of a boyfriend?”

“He got bored…"

"And maybe just a little bit drunk?" Sirius looked back at him, and

Remus could just tell he was teetering between carnal need and the instinctive urge to remain mulish. He supposed all he needed was a little push.

“You fell asleep early last night,” Remus murmured, rocking both of them to the music. “Felt a bit lonely, all by meself… So cold at night these days…”

“I’ll just have to assume that your right hand warmed you right up.”

“Maybe… but s’not the same though, innit. Yours is so much *warmer.”*

Sirius waved his spatula around threateningly. “Stop that. You think you can drop your voice a few octaves and speak in hoi polloi and I’m to cream my trousers, just like that?”

“Would you rather me wax poetic? Alright. I could tell you how it feels to kiss you… How it’s like being shocked by an electric guitar cable, right on the mouth. And how I used to get a stalk-on just staring at you. How every morning in our dorm was like going to war with my own body.”

“Now that’s just embarrassing.”

Remus bit his lip over a grin, letting his hands creep down past the waistband of Sirius’ jeans. Perhaps the carnal need was his after all.

“I like you most with your mouth shut—”

“That's rude.”

“—‘cause I know all the best ways to open it again."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. And I know I don’t have to beg for it either… Wanna know how I know that?”

“No.”

“Humour me.”

Sirius tsked. “How?”

“Because from the very moment we laid eyes on each other, you couldn’t have wanted anyone else more if you tried.”

“Ha! Practice that line in the mirror, did you?”

“Only a few times.”

Sirius scoffed, seemingly immune—but then Remus reached past him to turn off the hob and Sirius couldn’t help but follow the gesture with his eyes.

“Well, Pads?”

Another look. Hesitation. And then Sirius licked his lips and Remus knew he was a goner.

‘Hit me with your rhythm stick—
Two fat persons, click, click, click!
Hit me—hit me—HIT ME!’

> > >

“Fuck it.”

A single sharp flourish, and Sirius had spun around, effectively launching himself into Remus' arms and forcing him to catch him. Remus could feel the spatula poking into his back as Sirius wrapped his arms around his neck, but more than that he could feel Sirius' lips on his own. It’d been several weeks since either of them had initiated anything so substantial, not that anyone would’ve been able to tell the difference. They grappled as they always did, hands knocking away hands as they fought to be the first to free the other from their shirt. Sirius won, but only because Remus’ had buttons, which he tore from the holes with a single Hollywood-worthy jerk. As the fabric puddled to the floor, Remus grabbed him around the waist and slid his hands upwards until his thumbs were raking across rib-lines. Sirius had his teeth on his neck, followed by the pillow-soft lips he used to kiss his microphone whenever he wasn’t feeling like a failure. He sunk his fingers into the hair at the back of Remus' neck, like roots into earth, and when he yanked, an involuntary gasp slipped out.

“Our friends are gone for less than five minutes—”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

Sirius gave another sharp tug. “Five minutes,” he hummed, the other hand slipping down until the rattle of Remus’ belt was echoing off the living room walls; “And you turn into a sexual deviant.”

“I’ve always been a deviant—*ah!”* Another gasp, this one almost a whimper, and Sirius had his hand in his trousers.

“Well, allow me to straighten you out.”

"Never."

More rattling and Sirius had all but stripped him to the knees. Slightly disgruntled after being the one to incite such amorous congress in the first place, Remus reached around the back of Sirius’ head and roughly cupped his jaw in one hand.

“Mouth—open. *Now.”*

For once Sirius didn’t argue, and when they kissed Remus tasted teeth and salt and that morning’s bleary-eyed cigarette. He bent into it, core already trembling with the incessant stroke of Sirius’ thumb and wrist. When they broke apart again, it struck him how ridiculous it was that they were still standing in the middle of the room.

“Gonna put you on your back,” Remus swore, already walking them toward the sofa.

“Not if I put you on your knees first.”

“Oh, curse you.” He hooked a finger along those perfect bottom teeth. “You and this *bloody mouth.”*

Sirius grinned, and bit him at the knuckle.

They scrambled the rest of the way, eager to be off their feet and onto one another. Remus ended up banging his shin against the coffee table, inciting a furious string of cussing, but by then Sirius had already smothered it with another laugh-induced snog. Afterwards Remus ran his tongue along his teeth, tasting all the places Sirius’ tongue had already touched, and slid down the sofa until he had both hands hooked beneath his boyfriend’s knees. Sirius’ jeans came off next, and then his pants, until they were pressed up against one another with nothing but their skin separating them. The sound Sirius made in the base of his throat when Remus pressed his lips to the inside of a single quivering thigh was enough to send them both reeling. He kissed again, and then the other side, and *again*— and then when he felt Sirius stiffen as he took him in his mouth, Remus closed his eyes and said a quick prayer for the couch.

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“You know we could still do this, right?” He said later, when they were both lying on top of each other, sweaty and panting as though they’d just run a marathon. It’d been a tight fit on the sofa, but they’d made it work. Twice.

“Do what?” Sirius asked. He had his cheek pressed to Remus’ bare chest, using one finger to trace the *‘LE’* tattoo on his left pectoral.

“Make music—be a band. So we lost one battle, what’s that matter when we’re gonna win the war?”

“Just leave it, Moons.”

“I can’t. This is my life too, y’know.”

Sirius groaned, rubbing his nose into Remus’ chest like he were some great human hankie. “I just don’t know how we could do it without them,” he grumbled. “Potter’s gonna go off to Exeter and be some big-shot lawyer just like his dad. And Pete, well he's talented—he’ll find something. You and I are the ones that are gonna get left behind. Practically broken up already haven’t we…”

“No, we haven’t, you stubborn twat."

"Oi—!"

"We’re not breaking up," Remus said sternly; "We’re just taking a break, that’s all. In a few days we’ll all go home and figure our shit out.”

“And what if we don’t figure it out?” Sirius demanded. “What if James decides he’d rather risk university than homelessness, and moves way back here to go to Exeter? Bloody U-of-E?! Certainly the safer option… Hell… He and Evans can get married early, pop out a few sprogs before he’s even set to pass the bar!”

“You’re being irrational again.”

“Yeah? Maybe I am! Doesn't change the fact, does it?”

“Damn it, Sirius. I don’t get why you didn’t just talk to James about all this. He’d tell you the same shit I am.”

“Because I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want to hear him say that he was leaving!” Sirius pushed himself up so their faces were level. “Maybe he wouldn’t have even wanted to tell me! It’s like, if your plane’s going down and you know you’ve got the only working parachute, do you tell the others? Is it not kinder to let them think they actually have a chance?”

“Not James,” Remus said firmly. “He’d never let anyone go down on their own.”

“Couldn’t blame him none if he did... Look at me. I'm no different from my family—I'm not a Potter, I'm a *Black*. And Blacks ruin everything they touch.”

Remus glanced downwards at Sirius' hand where it rested against his chest. Wordlessly, he grabbed Sirius round the wrist and began gliding his palm upwards, until Sirius had touched the whole of his neck. He guided it up and over his jaw, onto his right cheek, then his left. There, he let it rest, gently cradling his face in his palm. Sirius' eyes softened in understanding, and Remus prised his hand away from his cheek just long enough to kiss it.

"There. Can't ruin me."

"Yes, well, you're an odd sort."

"But we knew that already."

There came a chuckle—a sad one—and Sirius surged forward, pressing his lips to Remus' chastely. "Why do you have to be so good to me?"

"Probably 'cause it's in my best interest," Remus said, jesting as he reached down to cop yet another suggestive feel. Sirius raised his eyebrows when he felt it and then kissed Remus again—*hard,* and several times on the mouth. When they finally broke apart again Remus tipped his head back against the sofa's arm rest while he watched Sirius return to tracing the tiny lines of his tattoo.

“Sirius, you know you don’t have to take on everything alone, right?"

"Sure, I do. How else am I to garner any character development?"

Remus reached forward and pinched him by the nose.

"Ah—!"

"We're not just a band, we're a family," Remus told him firmly. "The only family you and I have got. James *knows* this. And he cares. You're his best friend in the world, Sirius, believe in him."

Pulling his face away, Sirius curved both hands into fists on top of Remus' chest. When he swallowed the tendons in his neck stuck out.

"I… It's like, I don't want him to go, but I don't want him to not regret going either."

"Reckon that just means you love him."

"... Fuck."

Sirius groaned dramatically, as was his nature, and finally laid back down, his head resting in the crook of Remus' neck. It was cramped and hot, but Remus wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Everything'll sort itself out," he murmured, "don't worry."

Sirius said nothing, and after several long seconds of silence, he lifted his face and bit Remus directly over Lily's *'LE'*.

"OW!?"

"Sorry—heh… Intrusive thoughts... Shall we fuck some more?"

* * *

The next morning they awoke to not a single cloud in the sky. It was Thursday, which meant that Remus' birthday was only a few days away. Emboldened by the sudden warmth and good weather, half the town it seemed had flooded to the beach. There were couples walking, dogs jumping in the surf, children playing in the sand. Remus and Sirius had gone down to the shoreline for their obligatory morning 'lie-out', as they were calling it, but had retreated back to the cottage for more privacy when others began drifting too close.

Eager for a distraction, Sirius returned to his beloved hunk of junk in the garage and this time Remus joined him, bringing along the radio and one of the books from Monty's office. He'd wrestled a lawn chair down from one of the shelves which he set up in the corner, sitting and listening to the BBC's midmorning show as he flicked through his novel. Sirius tended to talk to himself when he was really

concentrating, and neither that or the clanging bothered Remus all that much—if anything he was amused by the amount of cursing that came out of it. After scouring one of the dingy manuals while Sirius went on and on about something called a 'flywheel', Remus had learned that the bike was a ‘1959 Triumph T120 Bonneville with chrome plating and a parallel-twin four-stroke engine’—whatever that meant. Sirius almost never missed the chance to say the full name, but beyond that, didn’t seem to have a clue how to fix the thing.

“You have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

“Shut up, Moony! M’trying to concentrate…” Tucking a tiny screwdriver behind his ear, Sirius continued flicking through one of the manuals. “So that there’s the stator… and this here's the wire for the ignition... mm, neutral, battery… but what the hell’s this one for—lights? … Ugh, fuck me…”

It was dark by the time Sirius looked up at Remus and called it quits. He had even more grease on his face than the day before, but was smiling in the end. Remus had never thought him more handsome.

“So… Pints?”

Off they went. The pub was rowdier than they’d last seen it, which felt odd for a weekday, but they were served their swill and left alone and once again the old piano in the corner sat empty.

“I’m gonna see if I can patch the wheels today,” Sirius said the following morning while Remus was washing the dishes leftover from breakfast.

“You’re not actually thinking that you’re going to be able to ride that thing, are you?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I only need it to start.”

“It doesn’t have a seat, first of all.”

Sirius shrugged. “It’s just a hobby anyway.”

That, Remus was glad for. He knew Sirius had a penchant for all things exciting and life-threatening, but he didn’t look forward to the day he’d be scraping what was left of his boyfriend off of the M25.

“Do you know what you want to do for your birthday?” Sirius asked on their third morning at the cottage. Remus almost didn’t hear him;

he was too busy marvelling Sirius from afar. How he managed to make holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a toothbrush in the other look so effortlessly sexy, Remus would never know. It must've had something to do with the deadly no-shirt-big-trousers combo he was currently sporting.

"My birthday isn't until Saturday," Remus said, sipping his own coffee and trying to remain focused.

"My point exactly. We should celebrate."

"I'm happy doing what we've been doing."

"Sleeping and drinking?"

"Don't forget the sex."

"You think I could forget? After last night?" Sirius raised a suggestive brow, spitting toothpaste into the sink.

"You've got your bike, I've got my books," Remus hummed, pouring himself a second cup of coffee. "What more is there to want?"

"Well, I'm sure *more* sex couldn't hurt."

"Ha." Remus shook his head. "I'm happy. I just like being with you. But if you really insist…"

Sirius slid closer, already biting his bottom lip. "Yeah…?"

"I'd really love it if you'd… No, it's stupid."

A kiss along the back of his neck from Sirius, then another.

"C'mon Moony, don't be shy."

"You're sure?"

"Anything," he cooed. "As long as it's within my power, of course."

"Oh good." Remus set his coffee mug down and clapped either palm around Sirius' cheeks. "In that case I'd like to see you play that piano down at the pub."

"You… You play dirty!" Sirius grabbed a nearby dish towel and began swinging it around like a lasso, sending specks of dishwater everywhere. Remus laughed and dashed away, and for a while they

chased each other like newlyweds straight from the altar. It was bliss, or good as. Eventually they would return to their books and bikes, and after three days of nothing but Top 40s, Remus was able to connect to one of the pirate radio stations moored somewhere in the middle of the English Channel. These bootleg disc jockeys didn't have to bend by the soulless will of the insipid BeeBeeCee, which meant no more pop music, at least for a little while.

'Breakin' rocks in the hot sun—
I fought the law and the law won!
I fought the law and the law won!'

"Finally! Some real fucking music, for once," Sirius cried. He pumped his fist in the air a few times as the Clash began blaring through their radio, effectively usurping any peace leftover from the morning. Remus didn't know the song personally, but Sirius apparently did. He maxed out the radio's volume and banged his head along to the guitar, belting out the words and occasionally offering quick one-liners such as *"KILLER LYRICS!"* and *"I LOVE THESE GUYS!"*

Tomny might like them too.

The thought caught Remus in the gut terribly. He wished he hadn't had the notion as soon as he heard the rest of the lyrics.

'I killed my baby and it feels so bad,
Guess my race is run!
She's the best girl that I ever had—
I fought the law and the law won!'

Fuck Tomny, came the voice. *He hasn't called in months. Not one word. You tried—you tried apologising! He wouldn't have it.*

It was true, partly. Back before Christmas he'd called and left several messages, most of them rather tepid and deprecatory at best. Tomny hadn't returned any of his calls.

You see? It's him. He's the one causing it.

'I fought the law and the law won!
I fought the law and the law won!

I fought the law and the law won!
I fought the law and the... '

The song eventually ended, and Remus decided then that he would push all thoughts of Tomny from his head. He didn't want to be worried about it. He *wanted* to be with Sirius.

"Go on, just one song. When's the last time you played music just for the hell of it?" He urged, when they inevitably arrived back at the pub that evening. The crowd had grown again, leaving few tables unoccupied and leaving a dull roar in its wake. It was nothing compared to the Shoe, even on a slow night, but it might as well have been a rock concert for all the action they'd been seeing lately.

"No one wants me to," Sirius rebuffed.

"They don't know that they should be wanting! Come on, you're nervy —you've gotten too used to the audience expecting ya. Remember what it was like when we first started playing and they stared at us as though they'd all forgotten how to blink? That's all you're missing."

"If it's so easy then why don't you do it?"

"I can't play the piano."

"Bet you could if you tried."

"Please?" Remus smiled, knowingly. "It'll be like my birthday present."

"It isn't your birthday yet," Sirius grumbled, tipping back the rest of his pint in one go. He stood up and much to Remus' glee, meandered over to the barkeep. The guy seemed surprised when he pointed at the piano, but if Sirius was hoping that he'd tell him off for trying, he was left disappointed. The barkeep tossed a rag over one shoulder and shrugged. *Have at 'er.*

Nobody noticed it when Sirius stole a chair and sat down in front of the large wooden piano. When he lifted the key lid dust came flying off, making him glower. Remus was expecting a beautiful melody, maybe even a bit of singing if he were lucky, but after several minutes of watching Sirius merely stare at the keys, he got up and shuffled over.

"What's the matter? Why aren't you playing?"

“I don’t know what to play.”

“Don’t *know—?!”* Remus let out a breath. *Oh you.* “Just play whatever feels right.”

Sirius sighed, nodding and shaking out his hands. Happy, Remus reached past the piano to pat him fondly. He had no doubts Sirius would do great, but when he turned back to his seat he suddenly realised that they’d garnered more than a few new sets of eyes. Almost everyone sitting at the nearby tables had turned to watch, either intrigued or confused by the display that hadn’t even started yet. While they sipped their lagers, Remus slipped back the way he’d come, feeling suddenly nervy himself.

Go on Sirius, he thought as he gripped his pint glass. *You can do it. Blow them away.*

Sirius did not bother glancing at the audience as he lifted a finger and checked every key; Remus doubted they would’ve been able to tell if the instrument was out of tune anyway. They only wanted to know whether they should be cheering or heckling. As it was, neither would happen. They'd be too busy gawking at him to even know what to shout.

When Sirius began to play, Remus was relieved that he knew the song. Personally he preferred Springsteen, but as far as Americans went, Billy Joel wasn’t all that bad.

For a while it was just the chords. He’d played several minutes of it, lips pressed together so that Remus could tell he was humming the melody. Maybe he was just trying to make sure he was playing it right —Remus didn’t know. Eventually he'd given up hoping that Sirius would sing, but he should've known better. *Never underestimate a Black.*

“Slow down, you crazy child,
You’re so ambitious for a juvenile.
But then if you’re so smart, tell me—
Why are you still so afraid? Mm…”

It was moments like these that Remus was truly envious of the audience. While he was stuck trying to keep time with Peter's drumming and balance out James' incorrigible solos they were rewarded with nothing short of nirvana. The last time he could remember feeling like this was that day in church when Sheila had

forced Sirius up in front of the entire school to lead the church hymns. He hadn't been nervous then either. It was as though being on stage was his purpose—the one thing his soul was made to do. There was nothing else for him. And like the audience, Remus was awed too.

"But you know that when the truth is told,
That you can get what you want or you can just get old.
You're gonna kick off before you even get halfway through, ooh—
When will you realise, Vienna waits for you…"

Sirius had his eyes closed but he played every note perfectly, to the point that Remus needn't hold his breath. This was rapture if there was such a thing, he was sure of it.

"Slow down, you're doin' fine,
You can't be everything you wanna be before your time.
Although it's so romantic on the borderline—
Tonight, tonight…"

The crowd was dazzled. All noise and chatter had fallen away when Sirius had begun, and now everywhere people were craning to get a better look. One woman took out a camera—'handsome young piano player springs up in local pub' probably made for big news around seaside towns like Dawlish—but Remus couldn't take his eyes off Sirius.

Go Sirius, he thought.

"You've got your passion, you've got your pride,
But don't you know that only fools are satisfied.
Dream on, but don't imagine they'll all come true, ooh—
When will you realise Vienna waits for you…"

Somewhere someone clapped. Then another, and when Sirius' cadence quickened they clapped some more. Soon enough people were calling out to him, encouraging him and raising their pints in the air as cheers. They didn't just like it—they didn't even love it—*they saw him.*

Someone nudged Remus. "Is that your friend? Bloody brilliant, inne?"

Yeah. Yeah, he was.

“Slow down, you crazy child!
Take the phone off the hook and disappear for a while!
It’s alright, you can afford to lose a day or two, ooh—
When will you realise…”

Then Sirius looked up, right at him. And Remus felt it.

Rapture.

“And you know that when the truth is told,
That you can get what you want or you can just get old!
You’re gonna kick off before you even get halfway through, ooh—
Why don’t you realise... Vienna waits for you?”

I love you, Remus mouthed. For a moment he was afraid it hadn’t reached him, but then that smile touched Sirius’ lips and he knew.

“When will you realise… Vienna waits… for you…”

A few rolling arpeggios later and the rapture was through. For several seconds no one did anything, there was silence among the mob. Remus waited for the applause they were used to—the hollering that accompanied every one of their London performances—but there was nothing. Finally, when Sirius looked about ready to flee the piano altogether, a man up front leaned forward.

“Well? You gonna play another, son?”

The breath of relief Remus gave mirrored Sirius’, and when he smiled, everyone began to cheer and clap. Between them, Sirius looked at Remus and matched his giddy grin. *It’s good!* Remus mouthed back, flashing him a thumbs up and a subtle 'go on'.

Someone came forward and set a pint on the edge of the piano, which Sirius snatched up immediately.

“Rule number one!” He called, with all his usual Sirius-vigour. “Never put a drink on a piano. Do that, and it’s bound to go end-up.”

Then he knocked the glass back and finished it in a single breath. The pub cheered, and after he'd wiped his mouth, Sirius set his fingers back on the keys.

"Gonna take it back with this one. See if you know the words… *'The warden threw a party in the county jail! The prison band was there and they began to wail! The band was jumpin' and the joint began to swing! You should've heard those knocked out jailbirds sing—"*

Let's rock!
Everybody, let's rock!
Everybody in the whole cell block—
Was dancin' to the jailhouse rock!

They left in a hurry, as all good stars do, with bellies full of beer they hadn't paid for and grand smiles on their faces. The barkeep had told Sirius to come back anytime; apparently the drink sold better with a show. Who would've thought it?

"God—I missed this!" Sirius exclaimed, as they emerged from the pub and the crisp midnight air hit them dead in the face. "We should do more shows! A few nights a week at the Shoe ain't enough to get us anywhere."

"We could try somewhere new! Like Soho! Or—Or Camden!" Remus suggested, more than willing to humour him after what he'd just witnessed. "Maybe one of the local universities will like us."

"Whaddya talking about, everyone likes us!"

"It's a first step."

"Yeah okay, but we'll want bigger! Remember—Madison Square Garden in four years!"

"Let's start with a few polytechnics first and see what happens."

Sirius laughed, then stumbled—barely able to stand up on his own anymore.

"Bugger, we should've drank more! S'not like we were the ones payin' for it."

"You've drunk enough," Remus told him, clutching the arm Sirius had slung over his shoulders. "Here, wanna stop for some fags."

They turned into a passing corner shop and while Sirius slipped down the sweets aisle, Remus went for the front counter, pressing the bell until the attendant appeared out from the back office.

“One packet of Embassy Golds, please.”

“We’re out. Got Players.”

“Eh… Yeah, that’ll do.”

As the guy rang him up, Remus noticed a radio playing from inside the office. He recognised the voice as the disc jockey from that morning’s pirate station, but it was what he was talking about that really interested him. Every now and then he caught a word —*“London”, “concert”, “clash”.*

“Can you turn that up, please?”

The attendant glanced at him, and then drifted back into the office, raising the volume loud enough for Remus to overhear.

“Yes, you heard it here first, folks!” The DJ trilled. *“The Anti-Nazi League’s hosting a rally in Westminster in protest of the Metropolitan Police’s lack of support following several attacks within the city, and rocking punk act The Clash—fresh off their Pearl Harbour tour—have volunteered to play in support. The attacks are thought to be a result of the rising influence of far-right groups such as the National Front and it is the hope of those participating to force those negligent MPs into direct action! All proceeds from the concert go toward local charities and supporting those affected by the violence, so YOU too can catch the Clash live Friday —tomorrow night, at the Lyceum Ballroom in the West End. Be there, or be a sodding bigot.”*

Remus’ hand shot out.

“Sirius! Sirius, come over here!”

Sirius wandered over, chewing on an open packet of giant coke bottles. “Wha…?”

“The guy on the radio says that the Clash are having a concert. They’re playing in the Lyceum tomorrow night.”

“But that’s in London.”

“I know.”

Sirius squinted at him, still chewing. “Tomorrow's your birthday. You think we should go?”

“Why not? We can do what we want with our own holiday, can’t we?”

“I suppose so.”

“Are you gonna pay for those?” The shop attendant asked, appearing in front of them and pointing at Sirius’ coke bottles. Remus sighed and snatched the sweets, setting them on the counter.

“This, and the pack of Players.”

* * *

Saturday 10th March 1979

Despite the night’s excitement leaving him absolutely wired, Remus slept hard. When he woke, he turned over to find that Sirius had already gone from their bed. He could still feel the warmth left on his side of the covers, as well as the tail-ends of what might’ve been a dream weighing on the forefront of his mind. Already he could feel it slipping away from him, no different from all the others he woke up forgetting, except that this time, all he could remember was Tomny.

They'd been talking. Just talking. About what, Remus couldn't recall. *Happy birthday, Lu*—had Tomny said that? Maybe. But then a baby started crying, and well…

Remus pushed the thought away. They were going home today, no need to get weepy with a four hour drive and an entire rock concert ahead of them.

“Sirius?”

There was no answer from downstairs, and when he came into the kitchen Remus found the dishes washed and sitting in the drying rack. Scratching the back of his head, he went to the backdoor and opened it to the brisk Devon chill.

“Sirius?”

Again, no answer; but this time Remus could hear the distant sound of

radio music coming from inside the garage. He was just in time to witness the local dust lorry as it rumbled up the road toward the next house. Stuffing his feet and pyjama bottoms into his boots, Remus scuttled down the driveway and picked up the now-empty tin bin, carrying it back to its place amongst the heap of rubbish that had been left piled next to the garage. He couldn't remember putting it out the night before, but clearly one of them had been sober enough to do it.

"Sirius?" Remus banged on the outside of the garage, once he'd wrestled the bin into place. "Are you alive?"

"Yeah, in here, Moons!" Sirius hollered back. *"Mmm… 'Mommy's alright, Daddy's alright, they just seem a little weird… Surrender! Surrender!"*

It might've been Sirius' singing that'd distracted him, or just his own horrid luck. Either way, Remus turned for the garage doors and got his boot caught on a dirty old tire that'd been left out to rot in the rain. He stumbled, cursing, and straightened up to give the tire a sharp kick—sending it rolling backward and straight into the rubbish bin. A colossal crash sounded as the bin took a tumble of its own, and then the radio cut out.

"Moony, you okay?"

"Fine," Remus huffed. "Dropped the bin."

Grumbling under his breath, Remus righted the bin as well as the old tire. He'd just fit the lid back on when he noticed something sticking out from behind the rest of the rubbish. It was vinyl, like the cushion from a car seat, only much thinner. Too wide for a bike, it was… *oh.*

"I'll assume the bin said something particularly nasty to you to earn such treatment," Sirius said. He was crouched down beside his precious motorbike despite the early hour, a predictable smear of grease on either cheek.

"It deserved it," Remus replied, wiping his hands on his trousers. "You look busy. Did you decide that we aren't going home today after all?"

"No, no! Just thought I'd give Gisela here one more tune up before we go."

"You've named the bike after your old governess?"

"What can I say? I'm nothing if not sentimental." Sirius tapped a screwdriver against the metal body, before tossing it away and

popping to his feet. “You’ve got perfect timing though, I was just about to see if I could start her up. I fetched the petrol myself just this morning, now stay right there!”

Not entirely convinced it’d work, Remus crossed his arms and leaned against the garage doorway. He watched as Sirius swung his leg over the sports-bike, hovering over the uncomfortable lack of seat.

“First you turn your fuel line on,” he said, moving slowly like the bike might buck him off. “Then you press this here to see if the fuel’s coming out—it’s called the tickle.”

“Imagine if you’d studied for your A-Levels like you studied this bike.”

“Ha-ha… Now, ignition on.” He flicked another switch on the body. “And finally—the firing stroke!”

With one foot on the throttle and one on the ground, Sirius grabbed the bike by both handlebars and threw himself up—then down. There was a striking sound like a thousand matches being lit and suddenly the motorbike was thrumming beneath him; a dead thing brought back from the brink.

“Holy shit!” Sirius exclaimed. “I–It turned on! Moons, she turned on!”

“I see that.” Remus pushed off the doorway, genuinely impressed despite himself. “I didn’t think you were gonna get that thing to so much as purr.”

“Well, she’s purring now!” Sirius cranked the handlebars this way and that, flashing him with its single headlight. “C’mon, let’s take her out for a spin. You and me!”

“Sirius, you know we can’t.”

A beat, and then Sirius deflated. “Yeah… you’re right. Don’t even have —”

“I mean we can’t…” Remus smirked, picking up the dirty old seat, “without this.”

Sirius’ mouth fell open. “You found it!”

“It was out with those old tires. I guess Monty meant to get a new one.”

“Aw, dunno why he’d bother. This one’s a beaut already!”

Leaping off the back of the bike, Sirius took the bike seat and set it over the garage bench table. He took a rag to it, wiping away the layers of dirt and grime that'd been collecting for months. The vinyl was cracked in several places and even missing a chunk out of the back, allowing cotton to burst out like a wound, not that Sirius seemed to mind. It only took him a few minutes to slide the seat back into place and screw it down.

"Ah! Feels good," he sighed, practically bouncing up and down. "So whaddya say, Moons? Feel like taking her out for a birthday spin?"

"Oh? Is it your birthday?"

"Aw, please?"

He'd probably regret it, but the look on Sirius' face was too bright to dampen. After rushing back inside to change, Remus met him out on the road, where he found the bike purring and Sirius blowing dust out of an old helmet.

"Found this inside. Here, put it on."

"What about you?"

"Haven't you seen the films? The good-looking guy never wears a helmet."

"Forgive me if I'm not convinced." Pulling on the helmet, Remus swung his leg over just as Sirius showed him, and nervously wiped the sweat from his palms. "Right. You can go now."

"Aren't you going to hold on?"

Oh!

He slid closer until he could feel the elegant curve of Sirius' back forming to his chest. They were so close, Sirius might've been able to feel his heart thumping through his jacket.

"Feet up, Moons, just like I showed ya!"

Remus did so, squeezing even tighter as he felt the bike lurch beneath them. "A-Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Nope!" Sirius revved the engine. "But that's half the fun, innit, delinquent boy?"

He only had time to mutter a quick prayer before the bike was moving, curving down the cobble road and onto the main thoroughfare. It might've been alright, had Sirius not jumped the stop sign and immediately cut off an oncoming lorry.

"Oops!"

"Sirius! We are going to *die!"*

"Everyone dies, Moons! At least we'll die in style!"

With the honking lorry at their backs, Sirius put on a burst of speed, and just like that they were off.

For the first several minutes, Remus didn't dare raise his head. The bike's revving made his stomach hurt and the wind rushed his ears like a slapping tidal wave. The only thing keeping him from being swept away completely was the feel of Sirius' leather jacket lashed between his fists. They hit a pothole and suddenly all Remus could picture was their mangled bodies as they flew through the air, Sirius' brains splattered across the roadway like a Jackson Pollock painting. *Not so handsome now, are you,* Remus the ghost would say.

"Moony, you big ninny!" He heard Sirius shout. "Have you looked up even once?!"

"You're going to kill us!"

"Better men have tried, believe me!"

Remus resisted the urge to punch him in the gut, fearing a crash.

"What's that?" Sirius called. "Something's in the road!"

"Shut up!"

"Oh god!" The bike wobbled sharply. "Moony, look out! We're gonna __"

"SHUT UUUP!" Remus wrenched his face up, his heart in his throat, and found nothing—only open road ahead of them.

"Knew you could do it," Sirius sniggered.

Right, Remus thought, *now* I'm *going to kill you.*

As maddening as Sirius was, he'd released him from his fear—however

temporarily. The wind still rushed them, only now Remus could feel the tickle of Sirius' hair as it whipped around and kissed him fleetingly on the face and neck. The bike was sturdy on its wheels, and with them aboard it went roaring down the country road, never straying far enough from the sea that they couldn't see or smell it. The sky was ice blue and the air was colder now, but Remus didn't even care. He was reminded of being back in Sandra's fancy coupe, racing around every bend as fast as the engine could handle. It was as close to flying as he'd ever felt.

Up and down they went, yielding to every bend and racing down the straightaways like lightning. Sirius read the road better than someone on a first ride should've been able, but Remus had already gotten used to being surprised by him.

"I love you."

Sirius leaned his head back. "What was that, Moons?"

"I said—" and he took a deep breath; "I LOVE YOU, SIRIUS BLACK!"

"OH! HA! I love you too! I love you, Moony—*I LOVE MOOOOONY! WAH-HOO!"*

Remus tightened his hands around Sirius' waist, heart thumping all over again. Sirius put on another sharp burst of speed, and then looked back at him and smiled.

"I love you more than anything. Happy birthday, Moons."

Remus blushed beneath his helmet.

"Sirius, you're really such a—YOU FUCKING IDIOT, EYES ON THE BLOODY ROAD!"

"HA-HA!"

Chapter End Notes

Getting "off your face" is just drunk.
If someone "slags off" they're criticizing or mouthing off.
The "A to Z" is a popular road map in the UK.
"Butteries" are a type of bread roll.

Songs featured in this chapter:
"Hit Me with Your Rhythm Stick" by Ian Dury & the Blockheads,

1978 (It was the band's number 1 single); "I Fought the Law" by The Clash, 1977; "Vienna" by Billy Joel, 1977; "Jailhouse Rock" by Elvis Presley, 1957 (ever heard the Queen version ? 👀); and finally, a quick cameo from "Surrender" by Cheap Trick, 1978.

Fun fact: In the original version of "I Fought the Law" by Bobby Fuller the line is "I left my baby and it feels so bad" but the Clash changed it to "I killed my baby". You won't find it on any recordings except for the original live version of them at the Lyceum theatre, found here, but it was this cover (and this choice) that really helped get the band noticed in America.

Just as a note: for pacing's sake the final chapter count might be pushed to 107 chapters instead of 105, but the last few will be shorter (as compared to these latest ones). Will update you guys when I've reached a decision.

See you next week for Christmas! I will be posting on the 25th
<3

Chapter 101: All the Young Punks

Chapter Summary

I'm King 'a the dock! I'm King 'a the dock!

Chapter Notes

HAPPY CHRISTMAS to all those that celebrate. And also advance happy last day of Hanukkah (Dec 26th) for tmrw~

Major CW for this chapter(!!): TW for ableist language (the word 'spaz' is used once) as well as violence (a real ass-whooping) and strong homophobic language. I don't know how to overstate this—the violence is more psychological than it is physical, but it's still a heavy scene. It's not my intent to glorify anything, so if you are at all trigger by it, please stop reading at the '> > >' pick up at the '< < <', and feel free to come over to my tumblr (@motswolo) to ask for a censored version of the scene instead. A few people did that following the TW's in chapter 99 and I think it worked out very well.

Note: There is a lot of slang used in this chapter. If it helps, check the end notes first. (Though you might risk spoilers.)

- Technically the original "Rock Against Racism" benefit concert this chapter is based on would've happened in 1978 but I'm using a bit of facsimile because this is ultimately fiction. So as far as I'm concerned, the Clash played a show at the Lyceum Theatre in March 1979 and that's that, lol.

- Also the chapter picks up almost immediately following the previous one—March 10th 1979, Remus' nineteenth birthday. Admittedly, I've never been backstage at the Lyceum. In my head it's got tunnels like a stadium even though it's very improbable. Oh well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't know how I'm gonna tell you,
I can't play with you no more;
I don't know how I'm gonna do what mama told me,
My friend, the boy next door;

I can't believe what people saying,
You're gonna let your hair hang down;
I'm satisfied to sit here working all day long,
You're in the darker side of town…

- "That's the Way" Led Zeppelin, 1970

"Say it—SAY IT!"

How had this happened? It was just supposed to be a concert…

"Didn't you hear me? I said say it!"

He couldn't think. Didn't know *what* to think. Where was Tomny?

"I'm gonna give you one last chance… Either you say it, or things are gonna get a whole lot nastier."

I'm King 'a the dock! I'm King 'a the dock!

He would not say it.

* * *

Earlier that night…

It was a hard sell trying to convince Sirius that they couldn't just leave the van and ride the motorbike all the way back to London. Sirius finally relented after Remus pointed out that he didn't actually *have* a motorcycling licence, *and* that he didn't fancy dying a miserable death along the M4 on his birthday, but it took promising to return for the bike come proper weather to get his stubborn ass into the van. So long as Monty didn't mind a little sharing, that was.

"You're sure we can park the van here?" Remus asked, wrenching the gear shift into park. It was just after six and they were in the West End. The streets seemed lively enough, though how many were on their way to the same place as them, Remus couldn't be sure.

"It's fine, stop worrying!" Sirius called, practically leaping from his seat and slamming the van's door after himself. "We don't have time to go all the way home anyway. Now c'mon, we'll miss the opening

act!”

Undoing his seatbelt, Remus slid out and came to join Sirius on the pavement. He noticed a smear of grease on his left temple, the only remnants of their wild morning spent zipping up and down the Devonshire streets. “At least you’ll blend in with the dirty punks,” he teased, using his thumb to wipe it away.

The Clash were playing at the Lyceum Ballroom, an old theatre that’d been made over and revamped more times than Bowie’s career. They had to hurry just to make it there on time, but upon arrival, they found a crowd big enough to rival any one of James' covetous football games. There were punks and Jamaican rude boys and mod revivalists with their mopeds. As promised, the Anti-Nazi League had congregated themselves along the Strand with their small rally of banners and bullhorns. There were other tables set up, mostly bearing the names of sympathetic council members and various other trade unions, and along the street a large gathering of police officers had taken it upon themselves to help direct traffic. Remus could tell by their dour looks that they were not as excited to be there. A few were carrying riot shields, pacing uneasily; the only thing standing between the League and those taking offence to their being there in the first place.

Despite the looming presence of police, another throng of people had assembled across the street, these ones carrying boards and placards bearing various slogans in support of the National Front and all their fascist-favouring allies. Through megaphones of their own, they shouted obscenities and foul abuses to all that were gathering. Thankfully the nearby streets were so loud that the noise of the traffic and crowd's eager yammering all but drowned them out. Remus doubted they'd be putting up with the snub for long, but the police were out in force, and they had a concert to get to.

After dodging a few trades activists (and only getting suckered into signing one petition) they managed to shove their way toward the front of the queue. Remus paid for the tickets—a meagre two pound fifty—and while they waited for the usher to rip their tickets, Sirius picked up one of the boot-tramped fliers from the ground and waved it in Remus’ face.

“ ‘The only band who matters’,” he read. “It’s certainly bold enough.”

“It’s a lie. Tossers haven’t seen us yet.”

If Sirius hadn't been broken of his musical blues already, he certainly was now. He grinned at Remus and suddenly a crash sounded as a window somewhere nearby shattered, causing both of them to flinch and duck. The mob was throwing rocks now.

Inside the Lyceum opened up like a palace, everything everywhere gilded and shiny, just ripe for use. The punks stood out as juxtaposed against the historical venue, not that they seemed to care. Egged on by the crowd's inherent competitiveness, Sirius managed to elbow his way into the stage's very front, tugging Remus along without care. The usual velvet seats had been removed in favour of bodies packing themselves into the pit, and it was so hot Remus could feel the sweat already gathering along his spine.

"Prongs is gonna kill us, you know," Remus said to Sirius, half-shouting in his ear just to be heard.

"Eh, let him! Punk waits for no one."

Many times Remus had wondered when it'd be that they'd get to see heroes like David Bowie or the Rolling Stones perform, but they were all off touring the likes of America and Japan. Besides, that was music, sure—but this? This was culture.

They knew the show was starting when the lights came down and a guitar could be heard echoing feedback through the sound system.

The band itself was a riot. Joe Strummer was a frontman for the history books, a complete legend in the making. They played punk rock as it was supposed to be; not angry and self-righteous, but valiant and unafraid, willing to say all the shit that needed to be said—damned be the consequences! They wore shirts with the collars popped, and were decorated head-to-toe in studded belts, zippers, safety pins, with the traditional bovver boots that could curve a head in. Their hair was slicked at the temples like the teddy boys of old, but their voices were powerful, teeming with youthful rage. The ruling establishment, police, alienation, boredom—they condemned all of it. They were provocateurs, yet nothing about them read as a cry for help. They weren't unclean animals champing at the bit, nor were they pretentious shit-bags just looking for a reason to whinge.

The crowd fed into them but never did itself in. No one was spitting at each other as they had in the basement of the 100 Club while watching Sid Vicious play an unplugged bass guitar with blood dripping down his face. The throng simply moved as one, ebbing and

flowing like a great metal-studded sea while the band came alive ahead of red and yellow stage lights.

‘He's in love with rock'n'roll, whoaah!
He's in love with gettin' stoned, whoaah!
He's in love with Janie Jones, whoaah!
He don't like his boring job—NO!'

Sirius leapt up and down for the entire set, pounding the air with his fist. With his unkempt hair and leather jacket he could've almost passed for a punk. No one gave him a second glance as he used Remus’ shoulder to hurl himself skyward with added velocity. Toward the end of the show when a large guy in a sleeveless leather jacket began to jostle him unfairly, Remus stepped in and told the prick to fuck off. It didn’t work, and while the encore started and the band began to thrash harder than its audience, Sirius took his arm and together they escaped toward stage-left. They ended up in front of one of the stage monitors, not ten feet from where the guitarist was ripping into his Les Paul. He could’ve sweated on them and Remus would’ve thanked him.

‘Hanging about—down the market street,
I spent a lot of time on my feet!
When I saw some passing yabbos,
We did chance to speak!’

“THINK I SHOULD TRY IT LIKE THAT?” Sirius yelled in his ear.

“TRY WHAT?” Remus yelled back, too busy watching the band and getting battered by the crowd to be paying much attention.

“PLAY THE GUITAR ON STAGE! LIKE STRUMMER! I COULD DO THAT!”

“I’M SURE YOU COULD, PADFOOT! JUST—HA!—JUS’ LIKE ‘IM!”

“WANKER! I SO *COULD!”*

Remus threw his head back and cackled, nearly butting the guy behind him in the forehead. They were packed in like sardines, sweating through their leather and fever-driven to teenage madness. Remus’ head felt like it was in an oven, but he wasn’t even conscious

enough to complain. The music had hold of him; every drum fill was a punch, every riff a stab to the gut. He was sober but he might as well have been on speed.

‘All the young puuuunks!
Laugh your life—
'Cause there ain't much to cry for!
All the young cuuuunts!
Live it now—
'CAUSE THERE AIN'T MUCH TO DIE FOR!'

The entire thing finished with one final sweep of the drums, and just like that, the Clash were forever impressed on Remus’ subconscious. He’d be humming the likes of “Clash City Rockers” and “Tommy Gun” under his breath for years.

As the band left the stage and the theatre lights went up again, the crowd continued to rally. They were desperate for anything more, even the tail wisps of a show well-done. Cupping his hands over his mouth, Remus whooped and fed into the fever until he felt Sirius tugging on his arm. He was pointing furiously at a wall along the side of the stage, where the concert’s previous lack of light had concealed a single inconspicuous door. At first Remus was confused—he didn’t want to leave, the high was *there!* But then, as he blinked at him dazily, he began to realise just what Sirius was alluding to. The door was painted all black to blend in with the stage, but if they’d come in from behind, then moving forward could only mean one thing.

They had to wait for a short lapse in the security. As the men in black cut-off t-shirts began shepherding everyone out, Sirius slipped past the flimsy barrier and reached the door in a single stride. Then a miracle happened—the door was unlocked.

“Christ, I can’t believe that worked!” Sirius gasped, the moment they were through.

“Stupid luck,” Remus agreed, nodding and still breathless. The hallway they'd found themselves in had walls made of brick, lacquered in a peeling white paint. There were countless doorways cutting through it like Swiss cheese and behind them they could still hear the sounds of life—celebrating fans, endless cries and whistles, the clattering of stage equipment already being packed up. No broken windows, though if the situation outside hadn't improved in the last

two hours then Remus imagined it was only a matter of time.

Without any preamble, a roadie came flying out of one of the doorways, wheeling along the usual stack of flight cases. Remus and Sirius just about fled in the other direction when they saw him, but the guy barely glanced their way, rushing past in cargo shorts and a t-shirt with dark stains under either armpit.

Watching him go, Remus glanced at Sirius. Sirius glanced back. Wordlessly, they both descended into a fit of laughter that lasted just long enough for—

“OI! YOU TWO GET BACK ‘ERE!”

They’d been spotted. Their great conquest of the Clash's backstage foiled. Before Remus could even beget an apology, Sirius slapped him in the gut and sprinted away.

“Leg it, Moons!”

They took off together, the security guard roaring at them to return or face the consequences. Within a few seconds they’d caught up to the roadie from earlier, who gaped the moment he realised who was overtaking him. Not willing to give up so early, Remus stayed tight on Sirius’ heels and squeezed past the trolley of flight cases, only to get his jacket pocket caught along the edge of the middle case. It tugged free all at once, taking the rest of the black boxes down with a thunderous clatter and nearly sending the roadie flying over the handles.

“SORRY!” Remus yelped, as Sirius threw his head back and cackled.

The mess slowed down the guard some, but by then the hallway had widened into a full underground passage, complete with stacks of crates sitting idly by. Countless wires lined the floor just waiting to be tripped over. They might’ve been able to take advantage of the head-start, had the noise of the falling cases not drawn the attention of every other person within ear-shot.

As two more members of security turned and darted straight for them, Sirius grabbed Remus by the elbow and yanked him through a doorway off to their left. It led to a concrete stairway that smelt of mould and damp. With little light apart from the glowing yellow lamps mounted on the wall, there was no telling where it might lead.

“Up or down?” Remus demanded, still aware of the shouting out in

the corridor. Next to him, Sirius looked frantically at each staircase.

“When in doubt!” Was all he said, before he was wrenching Remus down and further into the heart of the theatre.

They raced over either step, hearts launching into their throats as they heard the door they’d come through slam open and heavy boots fill the stairway above.

“Bloody run, Moons!” Sirius hissed, taking the steps two at a time.

“I am!”

Thankfully they managed to find another door just one floor below. This one merged into a different corridor, packed with theatre hands as well as crates upon crates of different stage equipment. Speakers sat piled against the wall across from them, along with several pieces of a drum kit and a soundboard larger than their entire bed back home. Remus might’ve stayed longer just to admire it, had Sirius not already been pulling on his arm.

“C’mon! We just—”

“Pissing sod—outta the way!”

They’d turned directly into the path of several men, and the one in front—who was perhaps no taller than Lily—waved his hands in their faces frantically until they jumped apart. He scowled beneath his aviator glasses, almost comically large on his face, only to immediately forget their existence the moment he passed by.

“I don’t care what the fucking lawyers have to say, the lawyers know piss-all about what fucking punk is!” He was howling at the guys; “Someone sort it out! We’re in Canterbury next month and if I have to hear Topper whinge one more time that his stash’s been cut, I’ll have ‘em all sacked!”

Sirius yanked his arm again. “Dammit, Moony! *Come on!”*

But Remus was frozen. Somewhere between 'piss-all' and 'Canterbury' he'd recognised the angry little man from the pages of his *New Musical Express* magazines back home.

“Don’t you know who that is?” He hissed, standing firm. “That’s Bernie Rhodes." *Bernie fucking Rhodes!* "He used to manage the Sex Pistols." *With that dickhead Malcolm McLaren!* "Now he’s managing the

Clash."

“Blimey, you sure?”

“Uh-huh!”

“Wicked.”

Too star-struck to realise how long they’d dawdled, Remus was almost tempted to follow Rhodes down the crowded hall until the door leading to the stairway flew open behind them.

“YOU! STOP RIGHT THERE!”

“You blokes just don’t bloody give up, do you?” Sirius floundered, practically leaping several feet backward in surprise. Together he and Remus turned and made another mad-dash up the hall—dodging several people and even more equipment while their ears continued to ring. They were headed straight for a crossroads, but the security guards were only an arm’s length behind, and they did not sound happy.

“This way!” Sirius hollered, disappearing around the right-hand corner at the end of the hall. Remus might’ve followed, but another trolley of equipment emerged out of the bisecting path, cutting him off. With nothing else to do, he threw himself down the opposite hallway and sprinted past several girls smoking while lounging across wooden crates of stage decor. He made a left, then another left and finally a right, wondering how an underground theatre space could feel so endless. When the shouting had finally ebbed some, Remus stopped to catch his breath. He wished he knew where Sirius had gone, or where *he’d* ended up. There were still people around, mostly loitering in the hallway with cigarettes in their hand. A girl wearing more makeup than Siouxsie Sioux eyed him appraisingly before meandering into a dressing room across the way. Inside Remus could hear plenty of chatter, as well as the occasional bout of laughter.

“Oi, you see a kid running around here?" Someone called distantly. "Bloody berk jumped the barrier.”

Remus groaned. Seemed his pursuers hadn’t given up and were now just barely around the corner. Apart from the dressing room, his only other option was a heavy metal door with an exit sign hanging over it, but when he tried the handle, there was no give. A cardboard sign hung from it, tipped the wrong way. When he turned it around it read; *Door handle busted, use south exit.*

Typical.

All other options spent, Remus turned to the door the Siouxsie-girl had gone through and slipped inside. It was clear it was a dressing room, but if only he'd known beforehand just *who* it belonged to.

“So Joe, what d’ya think about the bootleg LPs of the Clash that are going around? I mean that’s bound to be taking money out of your pocket, right?”

Joe…?

“I say good luck to it, ‘cause we ain’t hit anyone wiff a live LP like we should’a. Like they expect, innit. But we ain’t like th’ other bands ‘a our standard—we’re trying to do sum'ffing new. Show up the other groups, say ‘this is what a proper group does’. Not sell old rubbish that ye’ve already bought.”

Remus quite literally froze. His eyes were watering furiously from all the cigarette smoke but he would’ve had to be blind to miss who was leaning up against that dressing room counter. His face was on the bloody tour poster—and every half-decent copy of *NME* of the last year. It was Joe Strummer, lead singer for the fucking Clash.

“So these bootleg people, I say good luck to ‘em,” Strummer went on. “It’s a pirate business and we’re watching. So if we catch ya, we smash the microphones—we smash the tape recorder, and we wrap th’ tape ‘round yer ‘ead. But good luck to ya, right. If you can get it onto vinyl then I’m not gonna start chasing ya.”

The interviewer nodded methodically, holding the microphone almost directly beneath Mr. Strummer’s nose while Siouxsie-girl passed him her cigarette.

“Joe, is there a message behind what you write that makes it a little more special than anything else on the scene? You call it either ‘the dole or rock ‘n roll’, but do you really think the working class understands you?”

“ ‘Course they understand, and what we’re saying to the working class is… You okay there, mate?”

Remus blinked. He almost looked around to see who Strummer was talking to. Then it hit him.

No way. No way *Joe Strummer* was actually talking to *him!?*

The singer arched a brow, glanced at the Siouxsie-girl, and pointed with his cigarette.

“Toilet’s just there, mate.”

Remus couldn’t believe it. Joe *fucking* Strummer just told him where the bathroom was.

Holy shit!

Before he could do anything else—like sob or soil his trousers—a pair of hands slammed down onto his shoulders.

“Gotcha!"

It was the security guard. He pinched Remus around the neck uncomfortably, fisting the back of his collar and leaving no room for an escape.

"Thought you could take off and run wild back ‘ere, didn’t you, greasy bleeder!" He shouted, then; "Apologies, folks. I’ll get ‘im outta your hair now…”

There wasn’t time for anything else. The guard hauled Remus out of the dressing room faster than he’d arrived. As he marched him back up the hall, grumbling about the ‘other miserable git’ that could’ve only been Sirius, Remus couldn’t help the smile that’d spread over his face. In the back of his mind, he’d already won the night. He could still hear the concert. Or wait—someone somewhere was playing the new Clash record like a hail Mary.

I want to move the town to the clash city rockers,
You need a little jump of electrical shockers!
You better leave town if you only want to knock us,
Nothing stands the pressure of the clash city rockers!

At one point, just after the furious guard had finished swearing up and down that he was going to spend the night in the nick for such a stunt, another man dressed in all black with a stage pass hanging around his neck appeared and complained of a brawl that’d broken out in front of the theatre between several punks and a group of National Front thugs that’d come to crash the party.

“You best be thanking your lucky stars tonight, boy,” the guard told

him, as he threw Remus out into a back alley by the scruff of the shirt. It was surprisingly busy outside, the alley filled with plenty of other kids, all mulling around and waiting to see if they'd manage a glimpse of the famous rockers through their back door. A few of them glanced at Remus venomously on his way out, as though they too had dreams of breaking in to get even a whiff of Strummer's presence. Remus didn't care. The feeling of being on speed was back, and lasted even as Sirius threw himself at him from behind.

"Moony, you made it!" He cried, as Remus turned to face him. "Been missing you. Thought I was going to have to spring you from the nick."

"They threw you out too, huh?"

"Caught me by the stairs," Sirius grumbled. "But I almost made it onto the stage! I was trying to snag one of the mikes but they beat me to it."

"Bad luck."

"Yeah... but get this! As I was running away, I spotted this sitting near the side of the stage."

And then Sirius held up a drumstick.

"You didn't."

"I did!" Sirius twirled the stick around expertly, before taking Remus' hand and placing it in the middle of his palm. "Happy birthday, you handsome nob."

Remus beamed down at the gift, before hugging Sirius tightly and tucking it into the back pocket of his jeans. "I saw Joe Strummer," he bragged, unable to help it. "Looked at me and everything. Even offered to let me use the loo."

"No fucking way! You jammy bastard!" Sirius celebrated by punching him in the arm. "Well, you'll be pleased to know that I didn't waste all of my time since being thrown out on my rear. I've been outsourcing as well."

"More drumsticks?"

"Not quite." With a triumphant grin, Sirius held up a tiny baggie of white powder, no bigger than a ten pence.

“You bought *cocaine?”*

“SHHH!” He hissed, covering Remus’ mouth with both hands. “You trying to get us mugged?”

Remus shook him off, still shocked by Sirius’ brazen attitude. Sure, they’d had the occasional cheeky bump or two at the Shoestring, but none of them had ever gone so far as to buy it themselves.

“It’s not even coke,” Sirius rectified. “Guy called it DMT. Supposed to feel like those mushrooms we had, ‘cept it kicks in faster and won’t knock us on our arses all night. Or so he said.”

“Where’d you even get it?”

“Group of skinheads at the end of the alley.”

“Sirius, you generally aren’t supposed to talk to the fascists at the *anti-fascist* rally.”

“But all the socialists had was pot.”

Remus sighed and nudged him with his elbow. “C’mon. Let’s get home before you start tweaking for heroin on the corner.”

“Just for that, I’m not sharing.”

They slung an arm around each other and started for the end of the alley, stepping over dirty puddles and piles of rubbish. The other punks watched them but paid no mind for the most part, too busy standing around and smoking.

“Prongs and Wormtail really are going to be so miffed they missed it,” Sirius was saying. “Maybe we should take ‘em to a show. Hey, the Damned's just made a comeback! And I hear Rat Scabies likes to challenge people in the audience to get up and play for him. Think Pete would go for it?”

“Truthfully I think Peter'd have a heart attack if someone like Rat Scabies so much as looked at him.”

“Ha! Probably. Couldn't very well blame him. Man, we should get over to America! I’d like to see Van Halen—and the Cars,” Sirius said, busy gawking at a girl with hair spikes sharp enough to poke an eye out. She flipped him off for it, and he finished by blowing her a kiss.

“America, really? Have you ever even been on a plane?”

“Few times. Mum used to fly Reg and I to Germany every other summer to visit our grandmother. Bitchy old cow. Then another time for my cousin Bellatrix’s wedding in Marseille. Also a bitchy cow. Have you never been on one then?”

Remus shook his head. “Mum always said she hated flying. And I don’t have any cousins.”

“None at all?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Man, first the beach and now planes. Is there anything you aren’t a total virgin at?”

“I can think of a few things.”

Smirking, Sirius slipped an arm around his waist. “Flying ain’t that bad anyway, but hey—if you get nervous, I’ll let you sit in my lap for moral support.” He sniggered while Remus steered them past a set of skip bins covered in graffiti. As they neared the end of the alley, one of the skinheads that'd been loitering caught up with them, hands and neck buried deep in his bomber jacket.

“Looking for a score, lads?”

“Nah, we’re done for the night,” Remus said.

“Jus’ a penny. Whatever you want—I got it all.”

“I already paid up, mate,” Sirius said. “Leave us alone.”

“These cunts ain't givin' you any trouble, eh Whacker?” Another one said, waltzing up from behind. He had the words ‘East London’ tattooed across the top of his forehead and whistled at them like one might a dog.

“Givin' lip, Perry,” the other one—Whacker—told him.

“Don’t mean nothing by it,” Remus insisted, "we’re just not looking to score anymore tonight."

Meanwhile, Perry looked him up and down in his heavy jacket and Ben Sherman shirt. The gaze was scrutinising, and Remus immediately let go of Sirius’ shoulder.

“Oh. You’re with the toff," Perry cooed. "The twee wanker with the

cutesy RP. Thought we'd scared the piss outta him already." He elbowed his friend. "Got no balls, them upmarket packers."

"That's not what your mum said last night," Sirius grumbled.

"What d'you say, prick?" The skinhead lunged forward, attempting to snag a fistful of Sirius' jacket, but Remus got between them first, shoving the guy off. He stumbled a moment before righting himself next to his friend, looking furious. Immediately Remus threw his hands up.

"We don't want any trouble," he bleated. "Sorry on behalf of the wanker... Say, how 'bout I just slide you a tenner and we agree not to look at each other anymore?"

"That's a gas, but I got a better idea. You hand over everyfin you got or I'll make it so you can't look at anyfin anymore!"

Remus felt himself sigh. They could probably handle a few pricks looking for a fight—provided they didn't pull a knife, that was—but he knew from the sound of heavy boots down the alleyway that Perry's shouting had already drawn the attention of others.

"Here." He tossed them what was in his pockets; a few rumbled notes, his cigarettes, a cheap lighter, nothing worth losing an eye for. He tried to hide the drumstick, but Whacker noticed it first and snatched it. Then he leered at Remus, waving it in his face and playing at taking an eye out before growing bored and pitching it down the alley. It hurt a bit to hear the distant clatter, but not enough for Remus to throw a punch.

"Moony!" Cried Sirius indignantly. It took another sharp look from Remus before he was reluctantly emptying his own pockets, grumbling under his breath. They took back the DMT, and when all that was left was their keys, Perry took them too and threw both out onto the dark street the opposite way just for a laugh.

"Now there's a good boy," the skinhead jeered, once Sirius had managed to resist throwing himself at him. Remus was thankful. Lily had hidden a key beneath a stone in the flat's tiny garden ages ago, they could leave the van for one night. Better to just get away with all limbs intact.

"I want the jacket too," Whacker said, jutting a thumb at Sirius' leather coat. "Hand it over."

“No, not the jacket,” Remus growled. “It’s cold out. Now you took our money, even got your merchandise back. Let it be done with.”

“And how will you pay our fee?” Another voice called. Remus spun around instantly, furious and about ready to lose it himself.

“What fucking fee—”

“Our handling fee,” Lee grinned. “The one you pay to avoid being *handled.”*

It was like being stared down by the barrel of a gun. Remus staggered slightly, enough that Sirius looked over at him with concern. But he was there alright, really there. *Lee.* He strolled up with the rest of his crew, flicking away a cigarette butt as he adjusted the collar of his coat. It wasn't the boy he’d once known, but an angry man, looking to settle a score.

“Hello, Lu.”

Dammit.

“You know these toffs, Lee?” Perry called.

Lee eyed them plainly, hands in his pockets like he were observing a fair game of footie. Similar to the last time Remus had seen him, his hair was shorn short, only now he bore a tattoo of a swallow on the side of his neck along with a single name. *Ian.*

“Know the skinny one,” Lee replied, turning his head to spit into the drain. “Wouldn’t miss that scrawny pair ‘a legs anywhere... Not his boyfriend though. He’s new.”

A round of scornful laughter echoed from the group at Lee’s back. There had to be at least ten of them, counting Perry and Whacker, and it was clear that they respected Lee enough to not step on his toes when he spoke. The rest of the punks seemed to have moved on, or were otherwise keenly watching from near the theatre’s back door. No one wanted a piece, nor were they about to risk taking a knife to the gut for a couple of strangers. It just wasn’t the way.

“Lee,” Remus breathed. “What are you doing here?”

“In the West End? Or do you mean, here-here? It's a concert, innit. Didn't realise it was invite only. No, I think the better question is, what the fuck are you doin’ here?" Lee paused, looking them up and

down with a sneer. "Yer no punk. You're just a posh little cunt who's lost his way. Guess not much else is new."

More jeering, this time accompanied by a sharp smack to Remus' shoulder courtesy of Whacker. Sirius bat him away for it, but the boys had crowded in around them now, backing them up against the alley wall. There came more shoving, leering voices attempting to get a rise out of them; *"What 'oo doin' 'ere? What 'oo doin' 'ere?"*

Eventually it got to be too much. The next time Whacker went to touch him Remus snapped—shoving him backward into his friends while the rest of them gasped and heckled like a pack of noisy hounds.

"Ohh, I get it," Lee started. "You two came to see the show! The Clash… Fancy yerselfs a couple 'a punks, do ya?"

"Better than you," Sirius scowled. "You look like the shoe-rag Joe Strummer uses to polish his boots."

"You watch yer mouth, 'fore I bash those pretty teeth in," Lee snarled. "You don't even know what 'tis they're talkin' about up there. You don't know what it's like to be us. Blokes like you make us *crawl.* Right across society's fuckin' underbelly! Drinking the dregs that your kind's leftover!"

"You think you've got it tough? You're the one selling drugs to teenagers. You can eat shit, we came for the art."

"Art? *Art?!"* Lee let out a loud bark of laughter, which every boy returned in glee. "HA, art—figures! You rich cunts always did have a nasty habit of puttin' suffering behind fancy glass cases to ogle. But reckon I might as well introduce you, Lu." And then he turned back to the group, arms wide. "Listen up, lads! This 'ere is Lu, and he is from *Blllllll—ackheath!* Though I didn't know it 'til more recently. Before that he'd always said he was from the south side. Now 'ere, show of hands—how many 'a you are from the south side?"

Hands went up, and Remus felt a bead of sweat run down the back of his neck.

"Well, I'll be shittered," Lee cackled. "Recognise any of 'em, Lu? Or were you too busy legging it back to daddy's every night to pop in for a visit?"

"Lee, please—"

“Sh-sh-sh-sh!” Lee swept in, nearly placing a finger to Remus’ lips himself. “Story ain’t done yet, love.” He smacked Remus lightly on the cheek, and while Sirius pulled him back a few steps, Lee turned toward the other men. “Get this, boys, Lu 'ere, i*s so* posh, that his dad breeds dogs in his spare time. Fuckin' dogs! Fancy ones—purebreds—from America! Watches 'em hump each other for a hobby! Oh, and I almost forgot—he also works for Her Majesty’s little government, swiping pennies from the poor and pocketing them for himself—”

“Tory scum!” One shouted.

“—After all, can’t get that rich without picking ‘a few pockets—”

“Go back to Daddy, bloody queer!”

“—Maybe we ain’t so different after all!”

“Kick ‘is head in, Lee!”

The barrage grew in volume, and Remus could feel the stab of the rough brick as he and Sirius held themselves flush against the wall.

“Mhm, that’s right,” Lee goaded, arms still raised like some hellish conductor. “Piss-taking cunt had us all fooled. Told us he was down on his luck—made us feel *sorry* for ‘im. Then he slithered his way into the group like a fucking snake, telling porkies ‘til he was blue in the face—pretending ‘e was one ‘a us! ... Well are you...? Are you one of us, Lu? 'Cause now’s the time to prove it." He tsked. "I do hope you’s were listening when Doss taught you how to throw that punch.”

Remus could feel his heartbeat in his ears. The shift in the group was palpable, like wolves drooling over the idea of their next meal. He felt his resolve crumble, but he had to say something or else Lee'd probably shut his mouth permanently. And so he resorted to the only thing stronger than his fear—anger.

“H-Hanging with the fascists now, Lee? What’s next, beating up kids who don’t want to shave off all their hair? You’d make a pretty shite patriot… Would'a thought the NF prefers those who can read.”

“Watch it…” Sirius murmured, rather hypocritically.

“You should listen to your mate,” Lee warned. “Y’know I don’t run like that, I’m anti-racist. Got no beef wiff immigrants and I ain’t no white power skinhead. Nah, this ‘ere’s a *class* issue, ‘n it’s *you* I got the issue wiff… You, who I’m about ready to kick the piss out of. And this

time, ‘fraid there ain’t gonna be no Tomny ‘round to save you.”

Several boys spat at their feet. The rest pulled knives or otherwise readied their fists. Remus should’ve been bricking his pants, but instead all he could think of was Tomny. Even if he was there, would he even deserve his help?

“Look, it’s clear you don’t like him, but Lupin never did anything to you!” Sirius shouted. “You were friends, for Christ’s sake! Doesn’t that count for anything? I thought guys like you valued loyalty.”

“Not for lying scum!” Lee barked. “Now best get outta the way, princess, that is unless you wanna get the shite beaten outta you too.”

The threat was enough to get Remus moving again. He grabbed Sirius by the wrist and pulled him back, already shoving him further down the wall, toward the end of the alley.

“Quick, go.”

“What? Fuck off, I ain’t going anywhere!”

“Just go, Sirius.”

“Aw, the little batty boy’s playing brave!” Perry jeered, shattering the hollow feeling in Remus' chest. “You sure they’re just mates, Lee? Seem like a couple ‘a poofs tah me.”

“That right… Best keep our backs to the walls then, lads.”

“Fuck off!” Sirius screamed, jumping forward quickly enough that Remus had to grab him by the arm. “Let’s see how brave you are without all those miserable bellends standing at attention behind you! Fuckin’ wanker!”

More shouting, and this time the boys retaliated with an armed assault. Sirius took a half-full beer can to the forehead, shocking him enough that he had to stagger back into Remus while the others continued lambasting them.

“I’m going to beat the seven shades of shit out of you!”

“Cheeky twat!”

“Try saying that again!”

“Put ‘em in their place, Lee!”

“Enough!” Remus roared. “It’s me you’ve got a problem with, leave him out of this!”

Lee held up a hand, and the abuse stopped almost instantly. For a moment no one did anything. Lee was staring him down, and yet Remus couldn’t stop to worry about only him. He kept Sirius behind him, who was already bleeding from a split across his eyebrow, whipping his gaze back and forth so he could best determine where the first blow would come from. Finally, Lee reached into his pocket and withdrew a pocket knife, which he opened carefully and showed off as though it were a card in a magician’s deck.

"See this? I could gut 'chu right 'ere... Leave ya for dead."

Remus swallowed. A 'but' seemed to hang in the air, and just when he thought Lee was likely to make good on his words, he passed the knife off to one of his friends and stepped in very close.

Not without honour, then.

“When’s the last time you talked to Tomny? And don't you lie to me.”

It was not the question Remus was expecting. He straightened up, but Lee was already so close. Even in the darkness, he could see the pin-point pupils; the red veins in his eyes.

"December."

Lee scratched his nose. “You hear his girl’s up the duff?”

Remus didn’t speak, but Lee knew him too well. He read his answer off of his face as easily as looking at him.

“Ah, so you did know. Did he tell you he was quitting the gang then? Some pish about family. As if we weren’t already a family! Ha—fucking prick…" Lee stepped away a hair, grinding his teeth together in some sort of ironic smile. It was impossible to keep up; one moment he was threatening to kill him, the next he was smiling like they were old friends.

Lee poked him in the chest, hard.

"You... You just couldn’t help yerself, could ya, Lu?" Lee turned breathless, as though he were struggling to remain calm. "Always slinking back there," he grew louder, "dragging down our Tom! What, you bloody in love with ‘im or something?”

Remus scowled, resisting the urge to shout.

"I don't have anything to do with Tomny's choices. We're not—"

Lee slapped him, but it was Sirius who cried out. Remus held his cheek in a daze.

"I said *don't. Lie. To. Me.*" Lee paused to take several breaths. Slowly the smile returned, but when he spoke his voice was raw, his eyes glassy. "It's all your fault, Lu. You lost me my best friend. So now... I'm gonna take yours."

> > >

A moment of silence followed, and Remus had just enough time to look back at Sirius before Lee raised a hand.

"Take him."

The crew moved all at once, arms locking over Sirius' shoulders like vices. Remus was still free, but in his panic he stepped toward Sirius and the guys holding him twisted Sirius' arms sharply, forcing a cry from behind his teeth.

"STOP!" Remus shouted. "STOP—STOP, LEE—STOP!"

"You want it to stop?" Lee asked. "Fine. Get on the ground."

He didn't understand what Lee was saying. It took another shout for Remus to get moving, and by then Sirius was fighting against his captor's hold like an animal caught in a trap.

"Don't do it, Moony!"

Lee pointed at Sirius; "You keep quiet! Lu's got some apologising to do. And he can start with each one 'a those pretty fingers."

Apparently Remus was not supplicant enough. Lee went around him and kicked his legs out, forcing him down to his knees. The dirty water leftover from that morning's rain shower instantly soaked into the knees of his trousers, turning his skin to ice.

"Give me your hand."

Slowly Remus raised it.

"No. Your *right* hand."

It took another breath, and by then Remus was sure he couldn't feel the tips of his fingers anyway. But he *did* feel it when Whacker stepped forward and gripped his wrist, using the other hand to take hold of his pointer finger and wrench it backwards. Not broken—but the threat was there, waiting on Lee's command.

"Now let's see," Lee mused, his words slow as he recounted; "Flacky. Doss. Seesaw. Tomny. Ian. Five friends... five fingers. Sounds pretty fair to me."

"You actually blame him for all that?" Sirius exclaimed, while attempting to kick out at Lee with either leg. "You fucking lunatic!"

"Shaddup!"

An arm went around Sirius' throat, making him gurgle pathetically as Remus' heart began hammering wildly in his chest.

"You can have me," he told Lee, "but let him go. He's not part of this."

"Nice try. But you *made him* part of this."

With a smug look, Lee crouched down ahead of him. Whacker still had hold of Remus' wrist. One wrong move and he'd be tuning his guitar with his teeth for months.

"How'd you do it?" Lee asked, his voice deadly low. "How'd you fool Tomny into thinking you's were one of us?"

"I didn't."

Lee hit him again. "Liar!'

"—I didn't! Don't you know?! People don't fool Tomny! He sees right through them. Tomny's always known exactly as much as he wants to."

"Then why didn't he kick your sorry arse to the curb, huh?"

"Reckon it's 'cause he liked him!" Grunted Sirius, as he clutched tightly to the arm around his throat. *"Bloody f*—get off!"

No one listened, and Lee looked at the ground beneath his boots. He murmured something beneath his breath Remus didn't catch at first but should've seen coming. They'd known each other for so long, there was no way Lee didn't know exactly how to get under his skin.

"Liked..." Lee snapped his head up. "You fucking ponce. Always did wonder what you and Tom got up to behind closed doors."

It felt like Lee had sucker punched him. He got the reaction he wanted when Remus moved forward, but he couldn't go any further without feeling a sharp twist in his finger.

“Maybe you're right," Lee grinned. "Maybe he did like you. I mean, after 'ah, he was always so protective of you—even made his girlfriends jealous sometimes. Here’s this skinny little shit from nowhere, can't offer nothing, and yet he's the favourite of all favourites. Tom could’a picked any one of us, but no… He chose *you.* The miserable little sprog fresh from his mummy’s golden teat.”

Calm down, Remus told himself; *It’s what he wants. You can’t lose it now… Sirius—*

“Is that it then, Lu? Is that why Tomny kept hush all these years? So you’d feel obliged enough to stick around and—oh… you dirty little boy...”

“Shut your fucking mouth!”

A pair of hands came down before he could even consider lunging at him, and Remus groaned as he was forced to the alley floor. Anticipating the shove, Lee side-stepped him as he fell and was on his feet in a second, slamming a boot down over Remus' back and driving the air from his lungs.

“Moony!” Sirius yelped from somewhere behind him.

“Cheeky sod, you’ve forgotten whose backyard yer in!” Lee leered, stomping on Remus’ back until he could feel the bite of the freezing pavement on his cheek. “Why don’t you just stay down there, eh? Taste the dirt—see how them dregs really feel.”

And he should’ve.

He should’ve just stayed down like Lee told him to. Should’ve shut his mouth and waited for them to lose interest. Should’ve rolled over and shown his belly like the wounded animal he was. But that was the thing about Remus, he’d never been all that good at doing what he was told.

With a heavy grunt, he flipped over onto his side, upsetting Lee’s stance and sending him stumbling backward. For a split second, it

almost seemed like he had a shot of getting to his feet, but there were nearly a dozen guys around, and every one of them knew how to best keep a man down. Before he could get off his knees, one of the skinheads slammed a heavy boot into Remus' side, making him double-over in pain. Then another grabbed him by the hair, forcing his chin back until they could capture him in a headlock. He couldn't get a breath in, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to struggle.

"Fuck—you... *LEE!"*

"Yeah, you's always were a half-decent scrapper," Lee chuckled, before flexing his hand and driving it straight into Remus' stomach.

"Stop it!" Sirius wailed, pinned in a headlock of his own. "Let him go! Stop hitting him—Remus!"

"Ha. Fought best with a damsel to save too!"

The fist came down again.

"Stop it!"

Again.

"STOP IT!"

Again.

He took each shot to the ribs, then the stomach; might've vomited had they not kept his head up. As he retched, Lee stepped back for a breather and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Well! Nothing like letting off some good ol' steam. And now... Well, now I'm gonna break every single one of those little fingers. Someone hold 'em up for me, would'ya?"

His hand was captured, and no matter how Remus pulled the arm around his throat just got tighter. He gave up when he began seeing black spots in his vision, and by then Lee had him around the wrist, ready to snap his thumb at the joint.

"Shall we say a countdown?"

"Stop it!" Sirius said. "You fucking bastard—*let him go!"*

"One."

Remus wheezed.

"Two."

He shut his eyes.

"Thr—you know what? I've a better idea."

The entire group of them exhaled, even those of Lee's guys that'd been anticipating the celebratory snap of bone. Releasing his hand, Lee crouched down over Remus again.

"Now I got's an idea for ya, Lu," he cooed, poking Remus tauntingly in the cheek. "How 'bout we let'chu both go? That's right—you and princess there, can waltz on out all on yer own. Hell, we'll even give you yer shit back. All you's got to do is one little thing. Can you do that for me, Lu? Just one *teensy-weensy* little favour?"

"Don't listen to him, Moony," Sirius croaked, earning himself a sharp jab to the stomach from Whacker and Perry each. Remus cried for him, practically spitting, but he couldn't move with the bicep around his throat. Every time he struggled the skinhead squeezed tighter, until everything began to blur together again. A distant ringing had started in his ears like a far away telephone. He couldn't feel his toes. Were they cold?

"Oi, careful not to kill 'im Keg. Still need the bastard awake…" Lee whistled, then smacked Remus on both cheeks. "C'mon, eyes on me, Lu. You ain't done your penance yet. All's you gotta is repeat after me, then we'll let cha go, orright?"

I'm tired.

The thought came to him slowly, like a leaf drifting downstream. He was so cold.

"Just three little words: 'I'm a ponce'."

It's cold out. I'm cold.

"I don't 'ffink he's listening, Lee."

Another smack.

"Jesus Keg, fucking let the man breathe, would'ya?! Can't say shit with your fist in his throat."

There was a sudden release, and the breath surged in all at once—filling Remus' lungs to the point of discomfort. For a moment he almost believed they were somewhere else, but then his eyes fell on Sirius, still struggling with an arm around his own throat.

Sirius…?

“Cute show, Lu, but you ain’t done,” Lee goaded, close enough that Remus could feel his breath on his cheek. “Go on, you gotta say it. ‘I’m a ponce’.”

He wanted to humiliate him. For all he'd done, Lee wasn't a killer, but he was hurt. And he wanted to take that hurt out on Remus.

“ ‘m… not a ponce…”

Lee’s lip lifted viciously, revealing a sharp chip in his left canine. Remus thought he recognised it. Back when they were fifteen, Doss had bet Lee that he couldn't make the jump across two of the floating docks in the Shadwell Basin. Naturally Lee tried it anyway, and he made it across, only to crack his face open on the way back. It earned him a split lip and a nasty goose egg, but for those few precious moments he’d done it. Lee had bested them all.

Take that! Take that, you shitty tossers! I’m King ‘a the dock! I’m King ‘a the dock!

“Fucking—*pay attention!”* Lee snarled, driving another fist into Remus' stomach. “This is your last chance, Lu. Either you say it, or things are gonna get a whole lot nastier... Now SAY IT! ‘I’m ponce! I’m a dirty little queer who'd lie to his own friends' fucking faces!”

“You miserable bastard!” Sirius kicked his legs out, like a fitting horse. *“Don’t touch him!”*

Lee grabbed Remus around the jaw.

“SAY IT! OPEN YOUR GODDAMN MOUTH!”

And because he couldn’t refuse anymore, Remus did open his mouth, just like Lee wanted him to.

Then he spat in his eye.

Take that! Take that! I’m King ‘a the dock! I’m King ‘a the dock!

Lee wheeled back, wiping at his face hysterically. His hands were

shaking. Drugs or rage, Remus didn't know.

"You little…" He dissolved into a laugh of disbelief. "Oh Lu... fuck—I warned you."

I can take it, Remus thought proudly. *You can't break me.*

And maybe he could've stayed proud like that, were it just him, but as Lee wiped the spit from his eye and turned to look at Sirius and he knew just how wrong he was.

"Perry, break his arms."

There was a hint of hesitation probably along the lines of *'Both of them?'* but it was quickly dismissed. Perry grabbed Sirius' wrist and braced back against his own forearm, ready to snap it at the elbow. Remus could see the alarm in Sirius' face, the way he stared at his own arm as though it was already taken from him. As though he were already a lost cause. And as Perry got ready to shatter it all, Sirius squeezed his eyes shut.

"NO!"

The cry ripped free of him like an organ from his chest. In a fit of strength, Remus tore his right arm free and grappled onto Lee's trouser leg.

"No, no, please—*please, Lee—PLEASE!"*

"Gerroff."

"Please, please stop it! Don't do this, you can't do this!"

"I told you!" Lee roared. "I told you to say it! NOW HE PAYS!"

It was like watching in slow motion. He could see the tightening of Perry's hand, the strain on Sirius' face as he waited for the inevitable snap of his arm. It'd kill him, not having his arms. They were already mourning their first failure. If Sirius couldn't play anymore, it'd all be over. They'd never come back from it.

So, Remus turned everything off.

"*I'm a—!"*

He never got to finish. Like the hiss of hose, a great noise echoed from out on the main street, whistling through the air and ending with a

horrible bang. Everyone turned to look, even Lee, and suddenly the sound of yells and rushing books were coming toward them.

The crowd pushed their way down the alley together—anti-fascists and National Front members alike. Marching forward, Lee caught hold of another nearby skinhead and shook him for answers.

"It's the bizzies!" He cried. "Police started shooting off gas bombs like the fucking Provos!"

"Lee, I can't be arrested again, I only just got out!" Said one of the guys. The fleeing man pushed free of Lee's hold, and Lee took a harsh shouldering from another runner. Nearby they could hear the wail of an ambulance, and more hiss-and-bangs as the police culled whatever riot had started beyond them.

"Come on, Lee," Perry said, throwing Sirius into the alley wall and grabbing his friend by the front of his Ben Sherman in a panic. "Forget these fuckin' packers! We gotta go!"

Perry might as well have been asking him to shake hands. Forgetting his revenge, no matter how misconstrued, he couldn't take it.

A police whistle cut through the air, closer than before, and more and more people plunged down the alleyway looking for an escape. Smoke filled the air, enough to make Remus cough—but then he realised it was just the arm around his throat. He stared at Lee, gurgling deep in his throat and begging him with his eyes. *You hold all the cards.*

"Lee! ... *Lee!"*

Agony. That was what Remus saw in Lee's face. He was so close. Where was the satisfaction?

"Let him go," Lee growled, "fucking... let him go."

Remus was released immediately, kicked for good measure, and nearly trampled as the boys all turned in the opposite direction. Sirius was by his side in a second, so fast Remus nearly lashed out at him when he felt his hands on his ribs.

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"This ain't over!" Lee was screaming, as his friends half-dragged him toward the end of the alley. "I see you again, and I'll kill you! I'll kill you, you hear me?!"

They were swallowed up by the crowd, and Remus could hear Sirius' voice as he rasped sharply in his ear.

“Remus. Moony, are you alright? Come on, you have to get up. Can you stand?”

He would have to. Gritting his teeth, Remus rolled over and allowed Sirius to haul him upright. Water had seeped in through his trousers and the front of his shirt; his throat felt raw from screaming.

"Did I say it?" He croaked.

Sirius shook his head, confused. "Moons, you're in shock."

"No!" Remus yelped. " 'I'm a ponce'—did I say it?!"

"No. No, you didn't say it."

I...

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, idiot. We've got to get out of here."

Tugging Remus’ arm over his shoulders, Sirius turned and began leading Remus to the end of the alley. It was slow going, and every scream and pop of a smoke grenade made them flinch.

"You know, for a skinny guy you sure do weigh a ton," Sirius was mumbling. Remus leaned on him just a little bit more for the next few steps, and Sirius responded with an exasperated laugh. "I don't know how you do it," he grunted; "attracting drama everywhere you go—it's mental. Starting to think you're a bigger attention whore than I am."

"No one's a bigger whore than you, Sirius."

"Oi! I'll have you know that I am a single dick kind of chick. Or is it the other way around..."

Remus started to laugh and then seized up. "Ow! Shit... don't make me laugh."

"Laughter's the best medicine anyway, and by the looks of things, you need it. You're hurt bad, Moons. I should take you to the hospital."

"No hospitals," Remus grunted. "Let's just get home."

Stopping just long enough to readjust his hold on Remus' arm, Sirius grumbled something under his breath that sounded a lot like 'bloody predictable' and continued walking. Remus couldn't be bothered. His entire body hurt, and he had to breathe through a sliver in his teeth just to keep himself from wincing after every step.

The idea had been to move away from the fighting, only they hadn't anticipated just how far the rally had broken down. Emerging out of the alley, they found what could only be described as a state of pure calamity. War had broken out ahead of the Lyceum, with police and civilians scattered everywhere. Sirens razed the night while hordes of Metropolitan police were arresting punks and skinheads alike. Down came the rally signs for the National Front and the Socialist Workers Party and anyone who so much tried to stand their ground was beaten into submission with heavy batons.

A group of kids had managed to light flares and were using them to ward off arresting officers while several others had climbed on top of cars, stomping their windows in as well as beating back anyone bold enough to try and stop them. Others clung to the theatre's front steps and massive stone columns with megaphones in hand, screaming their agendas at the top of their lungs.

Everywhere people were running—away or toward the fighting, sometimes Remus just couldn't tell.

"This way," Sirius hissed. "I see an ambulance."

"N-No! Don't need no bloody ambulance—find the van!"

"There's blood on your face."

"It's cosmetic. Stole it from Mary."

"Wanker. Look who's making jokes now." They stepped down a curb and Remus' ankle nearly buckled.

"Shit… Sirius, I'm—"

"Don't talk anymore then," Sirius hissed. "Just walk. Look around for the keys if you can."

As the two of them stumbled along, several police ran past with riot shields and batons, blowing on whistles shrill enough to make their ears seize. The air was thick with smoke, and as they coughed, a bottle soared over their heads and burst against the building wall next

to them. Sirius did his best to shield him from the raining glass, but it'd happened so quickly Remus barely had the time to register it.

"FUCKING WANKER!" He heard Sirius bark, though no one came forward to take credit for the act. Across the street, they spotted one of the skinheads roughing up a young punk girl, violently shoving her into a wire fence as she spit and pummelled him with her fits. Sirius was off in a second.

“Get your hands off her, you thick fuck!” He cried as he tackled the skinhead from behind. It was enough to rip the guy off of her and send both him and Sirius sprawling, allowing the girl enough time to bolt. Remus rushed to his aid, but was beaten to the punch by a pair of officers. They wrestled Sirius and the skinhead apart, instantly wrenching their arms behind their back.

“Get off me!” Sirius grunted. “Get your hands off me, ugly prick! Shitty fucking cozzer!”

Then he punched the officer, straight in the nose.

“Sirius!”

Remus took one step—*two!* He grabbed the cop from behind, ready to rip his arms off should he refuse to release his Sirius. Only he hadn’t seen the other officer come up from behind and raise his baton. It came down over Remus' head like a lead pipe, turning his feet to flimsy paper beneath him. As he collapsed to the pavement, all Remus could remember thinking was that being bashed in by a cop didn’t feel any different from being bashed in by Lee's thugs.

* * *

Remus woke up a few hours later in a holding cell without windows. It was dark inside, the sort of dark that stripped away all time and space. He’d been relieved of his coat, forced to endure the horrible chill that had since settled deep into his bones. When Remus tried to lift his head up off the hard-as-stone bed, he found Sirius sitting across from him in a little ball, forehead resting on his knees. His head was up before Remus had even finished groaning.

“Moony!”

Sirius rushed him in a second, clambering onto the prison cot and

cupping Remus' face with either hand. “Shit… Fucking pigs really got you, you’re going to have one hell of a lump. Are you alright, does your head hurt at all?”

“Ngh… No worse than usual.”

Sirius frowned horribly. “Shit, I dunno how to check for a concussion... Here, how many fingers am I holding up?"

Remus blinked. "I'm thinking of a number between two and..."

Scoffing, Sirius pulled away before he could finish, accidentally letting Remus' head slam back against the cot.

"Shit, sorry! Didn't mean to give you another bruise."

“Oh yeah, just add it to the collection.” Remus winced again as he tried to sit up. He needed Sirius’ help to do it, but eventually they were both settled back along the cell wall, shoulder to shoulder against the cement.

“And you?” Remus asked him. “Are you alright?”

“Me? Oh yeah, never better. Always wanted to see what the inside of the nick looked like. Bit dreary. Could use a rug.”

“Hollywood says we get one phone call if you’d like to give Mary the bell.”

Sirius grinned weakly. “One of the assholes that brought us in came by earlier. Said they were gonna hold us for the night, release us in the morning. Honestly, I was expecting worse.”

“What—You think participating in one riot’s gonna get you a trial? You’re not that famous yet, mate.”

“Yeah, but I sure socked that cop though.”

"Knew you were gonna bring that up."

"So you did see!" Sirius chuckled dryly. “Man... Prongs and Wormtail are never gonna believe us. Lottie’s wedding is next week, think she’d find it funny if I made my speech in handcuffs?”

“You're not getting a speech."

"Truly a missed opportunity."

It was so stupid. There they were, talking to each other as though they hadn't just been beaten to a pulp by one of Remus' ex-best friends and promptly arrested and thrown into prison afterwards. Remus nearly called it for what it was, but then Sirius was leaning his head against his shoulder. It was a nice feeling, but the weight was enough to make Remus groan a bit.

“Sorry!” Sirius chirped. “Wasn’t thinking… How’s your body feeling?”

“M’alright, nothing feels broken. Lee was pulling his punches—trying to show off. None of them really stuck.”

“Fucking prick. We should’ve curbed his miserable face in.”

“There were two of us, and almost a dozen of them. Nothing we could’ve done.”

“Still, if I ever see that fucker again, I swear I’ll…”

Remus shook his head. “Don’t think about it anymore. Do you know what time it is?”

“No. Past midnight at least."

"Oh good, so it isn't my birthday anymore?"

Sirius winced as a reply. "You were out for a while... Sorry to say all you have to show for it is a black eye.”

“Better me than you.”

“Oh, because you’re so tough?”

“No. ‘Cause you’re the face. How’re we gonna put you on the cover of the album with a black eye?”

“Ah.”

Quietly, Sirius reached over into Remus’ lap and took his hand. He was warm—the warmest thing for miles. Off in the distance Remus could make out the sounds of other offenders as they paced back and forth in cells of their own; snoring, moaning, or else the occasional curse directed to the officers, God—even their own mothers. It all felt rather stereotypical. But dark rooms were to dark thoughts what lungs were breathing, and despite telling Sirius not to stew on it, Remus couldn’t help but think of Lee.

The evening's events came back into him like a wash of ice. Just… all of it. The concert, the drugs, Whacker, short and rat-like, and Perry, with a face like a decomposing toad. Lee.

Say it!

"Sirius… I…"

I'm a fucking ponce!

"It's not your fault," Sirius cut-in, already reading his mind. "It's not. You were their friend."

"Once."

"Once is enough. Once matters."

And maybe it did… *once.* But things were different now. If Lee was to be believed then Tomny was on the outs too. Maybe he and Skylar had already headed up to Havering—hell, maybe the baby was already here. He didn't know, he and Tomny hadn't talked in…

"Stop that," Sirius ordered. "I can see those cogs moving inside your head. You can't think about that—you *can't.* We don't mourn the people who've hurt us, Moony."

"I miss James," Remus said, pathetically. "And Lily, and Peter and Marlene."

"Me too."

"I wish none of this had ever happened. I wish I'd never met Tomny."

"Don't say that."

"It's the truth. Maybe if we'd never met then none of this would've happened."

"Maybe, but then you never would've come to Hawkings, and I..." Sirius bit his lip. "We aren't our parents, you know. I don't care what Lee says. We are *not* them."

And because Sirius needed to believe it as much as he did, Remus did not argue.

Neither of them spoke for a long time, and eventually they laid down next to each other on the tiny cot, Sirius' back pressed against Remus'

chest, their arms wrapped around one another. Eventually Sirius' breathing had become so level that Remus thought he'd fallen asleep. Then Sirius whispered into the dark;

"Moony?"

"Mhm."

"I'm sorry for what happened tonight."

"... Don't think about it. It was my idea to go."

"I know, but I wanted you to have a good birthday. Shit I... I should've found you something better than that stupid stick. I should've—"

Remus leaned forward, burying his face in the crook of Sirius' neck. He still smelled of sweat and the cloying scent of police smoke grenades, but Remus didn't care.

"Tell me something happy?" He asked.

Sirius was quiet for a while.

“Remember last month when Sid Vicious died?"

"Jesus. I said happy, not depressing."

"No, no." Sirius chuckled. "He died and it was in all the papers, right?”

“All of them,” Remus relented. “Even Sheila heard about it.”

“You still write to her?”

“Sometimes. She's a bit more forceful over the phone.”

“That’s nice… You deserve someone to write to.”

“Sid Vicious,” he prompted, when Sirius grew quiet again. “You were talking about Sid Vicious.”

“Right, right. Easy to forget... And that’s the problem, ain’t it? The guy’s been dead—what, a month? And it’s like the whole world’s forgotten about him."

"Not quite. They're saying he murdered his girlfriend."

"I don't believe it," Sirius said, before squirming a bit. "Or maybe he

did, I dunno. Not like it matters anyway, it's already old news. Everyone's too busy interviewing Paul McCartney and wondering what colour knickers Rod Stewart's wearing these days."

"Leopard print, for sure."

Sirius chuckled quietly. Then he reached for Remus hand, drawing it tightly across himself and lacing their fingers together.

"I'm not gonna end up like Vicious, Moony. Getting so far only to throw it all away... When I go out, people are gonna remember me."

"And what is it they'll remember you for, Padfoot?"

Sirius squeezed his hand.

"… All of it."

* * *

Sunday 11th March 1979 — The Next Morning...

"On your marks, gentlemen!"

They both started awake, shooting upright on the cot in a hurry. For a split second Remus almost forgot where he was. Then he heard the rattle of the keys in the cell lock and it all came flooding back. Sirius sat next to him, looking disoriented while he blinked the sleep from his eyes.

"Ngnn… What time is it?"

"About half-past five," the officer answered, swinging open the cell door.

"In the morning?!"

"Just in time to catch the first train. Now on your feet!"

Sirius waved him off, clearly irritated to be woken before any reasonable hour, and turned on Remus, eyes suddenly shooting wide.

"Shit Moons, we fell asleep! How's your head?"

Remus groaned, recounting the day before. Clash City Rockers. DMT. Lee. *I'm a ponce!* Lee, again.

"Well, I'm not dead, so…"

They were released, along with a stern warning to stay away from any further rallies—fascist, socialist, or otherwise—and a warning that if the guard ever caught them sharing a cot again he'd have them arrested under the Sexual Offences Act.

"Homophobic bastard," Sirius grumbled, shrugging on his jacket outside the station gates. "We weren't even doing anything! Try telling a straight couple they have to wait until twenty-one to share a bed."

Remus had no energy to agree; after a night spent in the cells, every inch of him felt like it'd been hit by a train. Still, he swallowed the aches and any urge to complain. He told himself that they just needed to make it home where he could assess the damage properly and sob in the shower should he really feel the need. It was a fine plan, only it fell apart slightly when they returned to the street where they'd left the van the night before and found it missing. After a few stressful minutes of wandering, they discovered that in their hurry to get to the concert, they'd parked in a taxi rank and the van had been undoubtedly towed.

"Man, that Joe Strummer really fucking owes me," Sirius lashed, after they'd jumped the turn-stalls and took the Tube the rest of the way home. "A van *and* a microphone. They can keep their bloody drumsticks."

"Oh yeah, you can ask him when you're famous," Remus replied blandly, busy counting the building numbers as they turned onto their street.

"So how's it feel? You're nineteen and officially a felon. Bet Sheila would love that phone call."

"You tell Sheila," *Thirty-nine, forty, forty-one;* "and I'm telling Effie."

"Bastard." Sirius shoved him, ignoring the way Remus groaned. "Okay, who's telling Evans then?"

"No one. Let her think we were in Devon the whole time."

"And the van? They're gonna be back soon—and the sign back there said the tow yard's closed on Sunday-Mondays."

“Then we'll just say that the van hasn’t been towed. That it’s… being lended out.”

“Riiiight. Good one.”

“We can just tell her that Dorcas needed it,” Remus said. “Or that Kingsley called and—*oof!”*

Remus' chest twinged. He had a curse on the tip of his tongue and was ready to unleash it upon Sirius for daring to stop right in front of him, only they'd made it to the front steps of their flat, and Remus—being much taller—merely had to glance up to see what had stopped Sirius so soundly in his tracks.

“Holy fu…”

Remus could not believe his eyes. It was—

"Regulus?"

He was sitting before their front door, looking young in his school clothes and jacket, his trunk tucked up behind him as though he’d been dozing against it. He looked weary, and when he stood up it struck Remus that he’d grown—that his hair had grown! For a moment he looked so much like Sirius that Remus began to wonder just how hard he’d hit his head.

“About time you got back,” Regulus said, dusting the dirt from his trousers. “Where have you been then—prison?”

They were too flabbergasted to laugh. Sirius held a hand to his forehead, then dropped it as he rushed up the stairs to embrace his brother. Regulus let it happen, wincing only slightly when Sirius began to bark into his ear.

“Reg! Holy shit, what are you doing here?! Scratch that—*how’d* you get here?”

“I took the train, of course. Had to see you.” Regulus pulled away and regarded Remus with a nod. “Lupin.”

“R-Regulus.”

“You little shit, you told me you weren’t coming!” Sirius smacked his brother lightly on the shoulder. “Out for Easter break then?”

“Sirius, Easter isn’t for two weeks.”

“Oh... Then why’re you here?”

Regulus glanced down at his feet. “Something’s happened back home," he murmured, meeting Sirius' gaze again as his brother went a rough shade of white.

“What is it?” Asked Sirius. "What's wrong?"

“It's father, Sirius,” Regulus said. “He's gone. The funeral’s tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Welp, it was about time they got arrested Did you catch Regulus 'prison' pun?? Lol.

Slang for this chapter:
The National Front is/was a far-right, fascist political party in the United Kingdom. In the 1970s they were very focused on "keeping England white". Disgusting stuff, but very real.
'Flight cases' are the durable black/silver cases that music and film equipment are often shipped in
'Sacked' means fired.
A 'berk' is a foolish person.
'The dole' is the UK's version of unemployment benefits; jobseekers allowance.
The 'nick' is prison.
'Miffed' is annoyed.
'Skip bins' are dumpsters.
Ben Sherman shirts were popular amongst the skinhead culture but had nothing to do with anyone's political views, as skinheads had a wide culture and could be either left or right leaning (see: white power skinhead).
Saying 'that's a gas' or 'that's gas' means you heard something funny.
'Telling porkies' is slang for telling lies.
A 'cozzer' is a police officer.
'Bizzies' are police.
The 'Provos' is a slang term for the Irish Republican Army.
The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 declared that while the age of consent for heterosexual couples remained 18, it was illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to engage with homosexual acts. This discriminatory law was not repealed until 2003.

Songs mentioned in this chapter: "Janie Jones" (1977), "All the Young Punks" (1978), & "Clash City Rockers" (1977) all by The

Clash.

The conversation between Joe Strummer and the interviewer is pretty much plagiarized from THIS interview. I still feel a little bit "ehhh" about putting words into real rock stars mouths, so this is just one way I like to get around that.

Also, I wrote another b-side! It's just a quick snippet, but this one is Marlene's. You can find it HEREHERE. (Tomny b-side coming soon xx)

Updating next **MONDAY!!!!** Jan 2nd (most because I anticipate being hungover on the 1st xx)

Chapter 102: Sunk

Chapter Summary

"You went into the water. Please don't come out the same."

Chapter Notes

CW: Discussions of child abuse, though no specific instance is referenced. Panic attacks and burn scars and discussions of drowning. But also some good ol' fashioned hooliganism so you know it's not allllll bad.

Also, this chapter may as well be Pink Floyd's chapter. It's got several songs from "The Wall", despite the fact that that album didn't come out until November of 1979. Apologies for stretching the truth, but that album just gives me insane Regulus vibes. For those who enjoy this aspect, go ahead and play "Outside the Wall" when you get to the 'bridge' portion of our final scene.

Sirius also plays the piano this chapter! It'd sound something like this, but closer to 1.25 speed, hehe.

Finally, here's a playlist for Gap Year. It took me until now to realise I hadn't posted it. I still have a couple songs to add, but it's mostly fully formed, so enjoy xo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hush now, baby, baby, don't you cry,
Mama's gonna make all of your nightmares come true,
Mama's gonna put all of her fears into you;

Mama's gonna keep you right here, under her wing,
She won't let you fly, but she might let you sing,
Mama's gonna keep baby cosy and warm;

Ooh babe, ooh babe, ooh babe,
Of course, Mama's gonna help build the wall…

- "Mother" Pink Floyd, 1979

When he was six years old, Remus watched as his father took a dog

behind the family barn and shot it.

They'd left that morning to hunt foxes near Oxfordshire. Remus hadn't gone, he was too young. Instead he'd gotten to stay and have tea in the garden with Giles and his mum, but he'd seen them leave; twelve of his father's best hounds, all trained to perfection, along with several colleagues from work. There had been excitement in the air, jovial handshakes interlaced with the incessant barking of dogs all desperate to be freed from their kennels. Only one of the dogs appeared weary enough to give pause. A juvenile called High Strung, aptly named for its skittish nature, had just been deemed fit for a first run. Normally this would have taken place on private property, with a fence and game birds and all the like, but Lyall wanted to test the dog's limits. The breeding bitch had been brought all the way across the Atlantic, desired for the sleekness of her black coat. Back home she'd produced champions, and when her first litter was born on English soil, it was clear that High Strung was that champion. They praised him for his strong legs, the nobleness of his face. Surely he'd be the perfect hunting animal—he'd win awards!

But then came the accident.

Unused to the sound of a gunshot, High Strung bolted first chance. One of the men foolishly tried to grab him, but the ground was uneven; they caught the side of a ravine. Both master and dog fell.

The man was sent to hospital for his injuries, but the dog they brought back to the estate. There was no hospital for living investments, or at least not ones so far gone. The handlers had taken one look at High Strung's shattered pelvis and declared him a dead dog breathing.

It'll be lame forever, Lyall. Best to put the beast out of its misery.

He's my dog, I'll do it.

Remus didn't understand; when he heard his father's answer he felt a swell of pride for having such a responsible father. Lyall didn't know that Remus had followed him from the garden, that he was watching as he pet the dog's flank and set a pistol to its skull.

Goodbye, poor beast.

* * *

Monday 12th March 1979

"Moony?" Sirius' uneasy voice drifted through the door; "How's it looking?"

Remus didn't answer at first. His eyes were glued on the mirror that hung over the chipped bathroom sink. *Lee pulled his punches*—that's what he'd told Sirius. A lie, then. Barely a day later, and the skin over his stomach looked like the flesh of a bruised apple.

"Not that bad, actually," he called, dropping the hem of his shirt. Good thing too; Sirius came striding in a moment later with a tie in either hand.

"Black or navy, do you think?" He held either tie up to his throat. "I know black is more traditional, but personally I think nothing screams 'I hate my dead son-of-a-bitch dad' more than looking miserable in navy blue."

Remus pointed weakly to the black, and Sirius sighed, tossing both over his shoulder.

"Almost ready to go then? You've been in here for ages."

"Yeah, yeah…" Rubbing along the back of his neck awkwardly, Remus resisted a twinge. Sirius had been very short with him all morning, his usual sarcastic attitude dialled up to a nine. Not much had been shared between him and Regulus the day before, save for a few details about the funeral. Regulus drifted around the flat like a nervous ghost, while Sirius behaved more like a cornered dog—likely to bite the moment he felt threatened.

The service was being held that morning at some fine church in the city, with a subsequent celebration of life taking place at the historic Black manor later in the afternoon. With no car and no way to get one so early in the morning, they'd been forced to concede defeat where the service concerned. Regulus appeared antsy at this, but if anything Sirius only looked relieved.

"Are you doing alright?" Remus asked him, as they stood facing each other in the bathroom. "You seem…"

"Upset?" Sirius sucked his teeth, revealing a sardonic smile. "You think because my father died and my own family didn't even care enough to tell me they were holding a funeral that I'd be upset?"

“Sirius—”

“Or because my little brother ran away from his train home ‘cause he couldn’t stomach the idea of going back there on his own, despite the fact that he hasn’t asked me for anything in over five years? *Or*—Or that the only way I can help him is by going back to that fucking place despite the fact that I swore I’d never go back! That’d I’d never see them, or speak to them, or even mention their names again? Ha! No—No, don’t be silly, Moony, I’m not upset at all.”

“It was a stupid question,” Remus amended sorely. “Forget I said anything… Is Regulus at least doing any better?”

“Dunno. Tosser still hasn’t said much.” Sirius crossed his arms. “Half expected to wake up and just find him gone, y'know. It's like, why’d he bother coming to me? He knows what I’d tell him…”

Don't go. It was written across his face like an angry plea, and Remus nodded, understanding.

“You could tell him not to, ‘cept the moment you tell him *not* to do something, he’s just gonna wanna do the opposite. He’s too much like you, Pads.”

“Yeah,” Sirius scoffed, “it’s how I know the only thing left to do is to follow him. At least if I’m there I can assure that the only person doing something they’ll regret is me. If it were just Reg, he’d probably let mother convince him to do something epically stupid. Like agree to a marriage pact. Or join a cult.”

“Didn’t you once say that your family’s basically a cult already?”

“So you understand the risk? Good.” Sirius glanced back toward their bedroom, where Remus knew a pair of dark suits would be laid out over the bedcovers. They'd been hanging in the back of the wardrobe for ages—a bygone remnant of what had once been their lives. Seeing him now, Remus didn’t have to ask to know what Sirius was thinking.

“Don’t worry,” he promised, stepping up to hold him from behind; “I’ll go with you. I’ll never leave your side.”

There was a shuddering breath, followed by a single forlorn sniffle, and then Sirius turned his head back to face him. His eyes were glassy, but his mind was made up.

“Well, Moony… once more unto the breach, shall we?”

It was a sordid morning. Regulus had been ready for hours by the time the two of them were both dressed and making their way downstairs. He was reading the newspaper, but rushed to hide it the moment they came into the room. Remus didn't have to ask what article, he'd read it himself that same morning.

MILLIONAIRE BUSINESS AND OIL MOGUL, ORION BLACK, DEAD AT FIFTY

BATH—Well-known investor Orion Black died in his family home last Wednesday, aged fifty years. While a cause of death was not immediately available, spokespersons for the family's estate were able to confirm that a heart attack and subsequent heart failure was to blame for the patriarch's premature passing.

Various prominent business leaders and politicians alike have expressed their condolences over Black Sr's death. The Somerset-born magnate had succeeded his family's business and all related assets in 1961 following the death of his father, Lord Arcturus Black III . Though the Blacks are notorious for being private when it comes to their affairs, it is open knowledge that the family garnered its immense monopolies via various industrial and scrap metal industries founded in 1892 by the then family head, Lord Phineas Nigellus Black.

Commissioned by Lord Black near Oxfordshire in 1902, the largest of the estate's metal-work factories saw a great boom throughout the First and Second World Wars, expanding into automotive and watercraft construction. In 1924 the family expanded into the oil business, thus further contributing to their already massive wealth. It is not known which direction the Blacks plan to take their endeavours in the coming future, but spokespersons for the estate have said that the family has no intent of slowing down. Orion Black is survived by his wife, Walburga, and son, Regulus. The private funeral has been scheduled for this coming Monday, March 12th. The family is requesting privacy during this period of mourning.

It was startling almost, how an entire life could be summarised in three short paragraphs. *That's funny,* Sirius had said when he read it, *they didn't mention anything about his massive gambling habit, or the gout, or the many, many mistresses. I would've at least expected to see something about the sweatshops in India or the deforestation in Bolivia, but nah, these*

tossers didn't do their research at all.

Regulus didn't have much to say on the subject, and even if he did, he certainly wasn't about to share it with them. After accepting their offer of the couch he'd awoken with deep bags under his eyes that refused to go away no matter how much he rubbed at them. There were hardly any wrinkles in his dress shirt, though he still worried over them with frantic little motions. No one seemed all that interested in breakfast, and so Remus put a pot of coffee on, which they shared in rather unenthusiastic silence. Sirius refused to come out of the kitchen, meanwhile Regulus had taken up residence at the dining table, stirring his coffee several times clockwise, then an equal amount back again.

"I know what you're both thinking," Regulus said unexpectedly. "You think I shouldn't go. That going back there again would be a mistake. All the extended family will be there…"

Remus, who had been sitting on his own at the nook, glanced gingerly back at Sirius, who was leaning one hip against the kitchen counter and staring stubbornly down at his coffee, obviously listening anyway.

"I think you should do… whatever it is you came here to do, Regulus."

Regulus looked up at Remus, then over at his big brother.

"One more time then?"

Sirius tapped the side of his coffee mug thoughtfully. Then he set it aside and produced a small silver flask that he began filling with the first bottle of liquor he found amongst the cupboards. Afterwards, Sirius turned and raised the flask to them.

"One more," he said, before tipping it back against his lips.

* * *

You little shit, you're in it now,
I hope they throw away the key!
You should've talked to me more often than you did—
But no, you had to go your own way,
Have you broken any homes up lately?

- “The Trial” Pink Floyd, 1979

Remus could still remember how it’d felt to be barred from his mother's funeral. Back then he would’ve given anything for an older brother who could just tell him what it was he was supposed to do. What he was supposed to feel—what to do next. Watching those two brothers, he almost felt a sting of envy, as though the eleven year-old inside of him still hadn’t learned how to forgive. But after they’d gathered their boots and coats, Sirius took his hand and squeezed it tightly, and Remus knew then that whatever he’d missed when Hope had died, he would be that for Sirius now.

Bath was a good two hours away, and with no hope of springing the van from the tow-lot until Tuesday, they’d decided to rent a car out of Ealing. The surcharge to rent to anyone below the age of twenty-one had been horrible, but they’d managed it—a cheap Morris Marina that’d left another unfortunate dent in their now dwindling rainy-day fund. Sirius would’ve never complained about money, but was forced to dismiss Regulus’ worries over it when he began insisting on paying him back in the future. As it was, Regulus had brought very little cash with him and had spent most of it on his train ticket into London.

“You didn’t just try to train-hop?” Sirius had asked.

“I’m not a lunatic,” Regulus had replied.

So there were still a few differences between the two then.

The Black family manor was much too large to be located in and around the main city, and instead laid on the outskirts of Bathford, a civil parish some three miles from the Bath’s city centre. It was the ancestral home of the Blacks, and while not all of Sirius’ cousins lived nearby, they were expecting a decent turn-out.

“No doubt Bellatrix will be there. She'd have brought that shitty husband of hers, Rudingus or whatever.”

"It's Rudolphus," Regulus mumbled quietly.

"Still a cunt." Sirius chuckled to himself. “Suspect Uncle Cygnus and Aunt Druella'll be by too. And of course Narcissa… she'd be married now, yeah? Gross. Think Aunt Belvina will be bringing a new boy-toy, Reg? How old was the last one you wager—I'm thinking somewhere between eighteen, and eighteen and eleven months.”

There was no answer from the back seat, and so Remus took it upon himself to fill the air;

“I forgot how insane your relative’s names are.”

“Oh, you mean like Bellatrix? That’s nothing. Our mum’s father had a cousin named Eridanus. Though she never seems to find it funny whenever I ask for stories about our dear ‘Uncle Anus’.”

Remus swallowed his smirk, and suddenly Sirius was shooting upright in his seat, pointing out the window.

“There, just over that ridge is Brown’s Folly. It’s this useless old tower on the hill that was built by some lord for his squire or whatnot. Reg and I used to go there when we were kids. Snuck out all the time, didn’t we, Reg?”

Again, Regulus said nothing. Sirius didn’t seem to notice.

“Mum used to threaten to send dogs after us,” he went on, sniggering again. “We’d stay out in the woods for hours—Reg was always getting us lost.”

“You mean *you* were getting us lost.”

“Yeah, alright, but I always got us out again though, didn’t I?”

More silence.

“Remember how Kreacher was the only one who could ever find us? Hell, that dog was so old and decrepit it pissed dust. It’s a wonder something didn’t just come along and eat him first.” Sirius leaned his head back. “Bet you’re looking forward to seeing him again, hey?”

“Kreacher died. It was last Christmas.”

“… Oh.”

Sirius was decidedly less chatty after that.

Eventually they’d turned onto the private road that would take them to the manor. It was initially forested on either side, but eventually opened up to reveal sprawling green hills, somehow perfectly manicured despite its egregious size. There were animals lounging amongst the knolls that Remus initially took for cattle, but upon closer inspection, turned out to be a herd of small deer.

“They’re fallow deer,” Regulus explained. “They come around in the spring and early summer when the fawns are being born. During the winter months they migrate south toward Southampton. But they always come back.”

“At least someone still enjoys the idea of coming home,” Sirius mumbled.

There was no missing the manor when they saw it; a large baroque country house, made of a white limestone and built in one long row. There was very little landscaping save for a stone wall surrounding the property and a massive front drive, now decorated with every sort of lavish car one could imagine. The Morris Marina stuck out terribly with its chipped dandelion-yellow paint job, though there were very few left around to witness their arrival.

“It’s late in the day by rich sod's standards,” Sirius observed, peering up at the cloudy sky; “Reckon they’ve already retired to the drawing room to lament over our father’s greatness.”

Remus had pulled the car into park next to a very lavish black Cadillac, and not for the first time, began to feel massively out of his depth when it came to the Blacks. His grandfather had inherited land thanks to a series of good business dealings following the war, and Lyall had always had a stern grip on his own finances; Remus had come from easy pickings, he knew better than to deny it, but this—this was *old* money.

“That’s my old bedroom there,” Sirius told him, pointing to a top corner window along the houses’ eastern side. “Always wanted to bring a guy over. You know—a quick shag or two, just to scandalise Mum.”

“Sirius.”

“Yes, yes, Reggie, don’t get your knickers in a twist.” Smirking, Sirius adjusted the front of his suit. “I already promised—no squabbles, no causing a scene, no telling Bellatrix she looks fat in her new funeral dress. No giving Mum any reason to rip someone’s head off—namely ours. You know, truthfully, it’ll probably be the most boring funeral our family has ever had.”

With a look of plain distrust, Regulus stalked on ahead and Sirius took the opportunity to wink at Remus. He raised his hand, revealing a pair of crossed fingers.

“He knows it’s an impossible promise. On a good day, our family makes the Borgias look like saints.”

Somehow, Remus was not all that comforted.

They followed Regulus up the drive toward the manor’s looming front doors, but Sirius stopped them when they grew near the trimmed hedges.

“What are you doing?” Regulus demanded, as his brother took his arm and began dragging him away.

“You’re not just going to waltz into the front door, are you, Edge? You’re an honorary Marauder now—where’s your sense of adventure?”

Regulus didn’t seem too pleased at the idea of becoming any part of Sirius' grand schemes, but did not fight as he was led around the side of the vast house. Together they stopped below one of the manor's protruding ground floor windows and Sirius started by asking Remus for a boost. Balanced on the tip of Remus' knee, he pulled a single trusty hair pin from his pocket and began shimmying the long end in between the gaps in the window.

“We shouldn’t be out here,” Regulus hissed. “That’s father’s study, we aren’t allowed.”

“And who’s going to stop us? His ghost? ”

Regulus baulked slightly, but Sirius paid him no mind. With a giddy *“A-ha!”* he’d managed to wiggle the pin all the way inside and lift the old brass latch, allowing the window to swing open toward them.

“There,” he mused, tapping Remus’ shoulder to indicate what a good job he’d done; “I know I’m no burglar extraordinaire—like *some* people—but I don’t think I’m half bad at this.”

“Oh goody. Just what you needed, an even bigger head.”

Sirius grinned as Remus helped hoist him inside. After he’d given the okay, Regulus came next. Making sure to grab hold of as little of Remus as possible, he continued grumbling about the idiocy of having to break into his own home until had shimmied himself over the edge of the window and his skinny legs had passed out of sight. It took both Black brothers to haul Remus inside, and what they found was an interior just as grand as its out. Sitting pretty at nearly three times the

size of their flat's living room, the study spread out before them in an opulent row, with oak panelled walls and shelves on every side. A desk sat at one end, paired with a luxurious leather armchair and one of those fancy standing globes gilded in real gold. Beyond the desk hung a portrait of a man with a thick moustache and a white rose in his lapel. Remus didn't have to ask if they were related; his black hair and stern expression gave it away.

"Ah, great-great-great grandfather Phineas!" Sirius exclaimed, throwing himself down into the leather armchair and spinning around to face the portrait; "How I missed your ugly mug staring me down from beyond the grave. Not so smug now, are you? Say, how's Dad? Has he invited Hitler to play a round of golf in all nine circles of Hell yet?"

"Sirius, we shouldn't be in here," Regulus said again. He'd crept over to the study door and was standing next to it, squeezing his palms together as he often did when he was anxious. Outside Remus could hear the telltale noises of others gathered; no laughter, but plenty of lull and chatter.

Ignoring his brother's plight, Sirius spun around in the desk chair and began stroking his chin in an exaggerated manner. After reaching forward, he knocked the lid off of an ornate cigar box and pinched one of them between his two fingers, taking a pretend draw off of one end.

"I've been thinking of growing a goatee myself, Moons, what do you think? Facial hair's been ruined on me, on account 'a the family resemblance, but if I'm going to Hell anyway then I figure a few whiskers wouldn't make that much of a difference."

Abandoning the door, Regulus stomped toward the desk. "Enough," he snapped. "No one's laughing, and I didn't bring you here so you could poke fun and get us thrown out first chance."

"If I remember correctly, it was us who brought *you* here. Right, Moony?"

Remus held up a hand, not interested in being fodder for Sirius' reckless spat, and finally Sirius tossed the cigar aside and stood up.

"You think everything I do is pointless, don't you, Reg?"

Regulus' nostrils flared, indignant. "I wouldn't, except you always have to take the piss about everything."

"True. Fine, then. Think what you want, but you should know that I do have a reason for coming here."

With a haughty look, Sirius began pushing his father's chair up against the back wall. Then he climbed onto it.

"Moony, help me with this, would you?"

Remus didn't fully understand until he was helping Sirius lift his great-great-great grandfather's portrait off of the wall. The portrait itself was immensely heavy, though nothing compared to what they found underneath. It was an elaborate steel safe, inset directly into the wall and complete with a spinning dial lock.

"Big enough, isn't it?" Sirius said proudly. "If there was anything Dad was good at it was playing the role of the overly pretentious, clichéd malefactor."

"What are you doing with Father's safe?" Regulus asked uneasily.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm getting you your inheritance. If you're gonna come all this way for his bloody funeral then you might as well get something out of it."

Taking hold of the dial, Sirius leaned his ear against the side of the safe to listen to the mechanisms click. "What do you think? Surely he wouldn't be stupid enough to use his own birthday." Sirius spun the dial, grinning, but when he reached for the handle, the safe did not budge. "Hm… Oh, I know! How about his and Mum's anniversary, hey?"

Regulus slapped both hands down on the desk. "Sirius, stop it."

"*Tsk!* No cigar. Should've known. But hey, how about the day he met Adeline? Everyone knows she was his favourite mistress."

Click, click, click—nothing.

"The year the war ended?"

No.

"The day his father died?"

No.

"The day we struck oil down in Venezuela!"

All of the codes were wrong. Huffing, Sirius stood back with his hands on his hips. He looked as though he were playing a part, while Regulus merely looked woebegone—like a kicked dog.

“No way he made it as simple as one-two-three-four.” Sirius stroked his chin again; “Oh! *I know*—how about your birthday then, Reg?”

Regulus scowled deeply as Sirius turned back to the safe. Remus had read once that avalanches sometimes made these great cracking noises, like the creak of old wood beneath a heavy boot, as its first sign of impending danger. Seeing Sirius now, he could almost hear the cracking begin in real time.

After entering the numbers correlating to Regulus’ birthday, Sirius leaned back to pull the safe handle sharply with both hands; no give.

“Darn. Really thought I’d had him with that one. Favourite son and all… Hm. Should we try mine then? Just for fun, of course.”

This time when Sirius spun the dial Remus was sure he could hear the cracks. He could see them too, displayed across Regulus’ face in a look of horror. *Don’t,* it seemed to say, but even just deep down, Regulus knew how alike they were too. The moment anyone told Sirius not to do something, he was only going to do the opposite.

“Moony, I might be in need of your expert lock-picking skills in a moment,” Sirius teased, taking hold of the handle; “ ‘Cause I can’t possibly figure what the code would be if not—”

Because he was sure he would fail, Sirius had yanked the safe door open with all of his strength, simultaneously losing his balance and sending himself sprawling backward when the door unexpectedly fell open.

Luckily for him, Remus’ reflexes weren’t all rubbish.

He caught Sirius before he could body-slam himself against the floor, but the force of the catch carried the both of them sideways and into the wall, where they collided with the portrait of Phineas Nigellus. The painting teetered for a moment, before falling forward and clipping the legs of the massive standing globe that’d been resting next to the desk. What followed was like a failed chain reaction, and Remus found himself recalling that night back at school, when they'd set off the smoke bombs in Salazar House only to fumble massively.

With the heavy portrait as its trigger, the antique globe fell to the

ground, shattering its wooden stand and effectively releasing the globe's sphere like a pinball machine. It hit the bottom of the window with a hollow thunk and ricocheted into a nearby floor lamp. Regulus did rush to save it, but proved too slow, and the lamp teetered dangerously before finally over-turning and smashing into a million pieces against the wooden floor. The crash was legendary.

Afterwards you could've heard a pin drop. Sirius sat up, pushing Remus' arm off. He was gaping—not at the lamp or his brother, but at his father's safe. It was clear that whatever game Sirius had been playing, he had not expected it to open for him.

"After all this time...?"

His words were a whisper, one instantly swallowed by the rush of noise coming from outside the study. Already Remus could hear Regulus' distress.

“Sirius, you idiot! You *promised*—look what you've done!”

The study doors burst open, and in swept none other than Walburga Black. She was flanked by four others; two men, one of which was older and had the same unsmiling expression as the man in the portrait, as well as two women, one blonde, the other a curly-haired brunette.

“You!” The brunette woman screamed, pointing a vicious finger at Sirius. It made him turn over, his confidant façade still stifled by the shock of the safe.

“Bella," he bleated, “Cissy, Uncle Cygnus—you're all here.”

“Of course we're here,” Bellatrix hissed. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I…” Sirius faltered for just a moment, then; “Heard we were throwing a party at the main house. Figured the invitation must've just gotten lost in the post, but if you're here to give me the bollocking of my life, then go ahead—let's hear it.”

“You wretched, little brat. Why we should have you arrested—”

Walburga raised her hand, silencing Bellatrix instantly. “Rudolphus, the door if you wouldn't mind.”

Remus had a feeling he knew which one was Rudolphus. He was Bellatrix's husband and the only one among them that didn't have the

Blacks' aquiline nose and glass-coloured eyes. He went to the door and shut it, cutting them off from any other guest bold enough to come spying. Afterwards Remus had expected Walburga Black to burst into flame on the spot—ready to damn them and send them straight to hell for even daring to set foot into her house. But she didn't. In fact, she didn't even look at them.

Hands clasped tightly ahead of her black dress, she moved across the room toward Regulus, who stood flinching by the remains of the shattered lamp.

“Regulus, darling, are you alright? We were so worried when you didn't arrive home on the train yesterday.”

She might as well have been speaking Chinese. Regulus floundered, as he always seemed to in front of his mother, and glanced very quickly at Sirius before looking away again.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled; “There... was a mix up at the station...”

Walburga stroked her son's head, caressing the curls that had grown just past his jaw. “Then why didn't you call us?” She asked, smiling as though she found it all very silly. “We would've arranged for you to be brought home.”

“I didn't want to bother you. Not with Father…” Regulus trailed off uneasily. “I didn't mean for things to happen this way.”

“He's lying,” Sirius whispered, quietly enough that only Remus could hear. In an attempt to keep him from saying it again, Remus took his hand; only he could tell by the sharp turn of her head that the blonde woman—Narcissa, Remus remembered—had caught the gesture.

Slowly his hold on Sirius' fingers weakened.

Across the room, Walburga pressed her smiling lips into a thin line. She was still petting Regulus' hair, only her fingers had tightened on the ends, turning almost white at the knuckle.

“I do wish you'd cut your hair like we discussed at Christmas, darling. It is so…” Then she, too, trailed off. “No matter. You're *home* now.”

With arms thin like a spider's, she smoothed a wrinkle from Regulus' suit and promptly embraced her son. Over her shoulder Remus saw Regulus' face turn ashen. He wondered if now Regulus regretted coming, but why should he? He was coveted, if not just merely cared

for.

One by one the other Blacks came forward to hug their cousin and nephew. Regulus hugged back sparingly, but when Bellatrix swept in for a cuddle Remus spotted the blatant look of satisfaction she was giving Sirius. Afterwards Walburga gathered Regulus to her side. She stared for a long time at the broken lamp and at the state of the opened safe, but her expression was calm; collected.

“I suppose thanks are in order.”

“Thanks?” Bellatrix echoed. “Aunt Walburga, you should have them arrested for breaking and entering!”

“For attempted robbery,” agreed Rudolphus.

“Sister, I too, think it highly irregular to allow for such a…” Cygnus licked his lips, “*transgression*. And at your husband’s funeral, no less. The proper authorities should be contacted.”

“In that case I would call Officer Digby at the Charing Cross station,” Sirius said. “Just spoke with him myself yesterday and if we’re gonna go this route then I’d prefer to expedite the process, if you don’t mind.”

Regulus visibly grimaced, but Walburga’s poised expression never faltered. Even if she held no love for her eldest son, seventeen years of practice was helping keep her emotions in check.

“Thank you,” she enunciated clearly; “for bringing *my son* home. Now I must ask you to leave.”

The gratitude felt more like a slap in the face, which Sirius took stoically.

“Alright,” he nodded, tongue pressed between his bottom lip and teeth; “Reg is back where he should be, we were just leaving anyway.”

With his hands shoved into the pockets of his suit, Sirius sauntered forward.

“For what it’s worth, I really am sorry about Dad. Heard it was quick. Pity... Suppose you would've preferred a more drawn-out, agonising ordeal. Something to milk the papers."

It was Bellatrix who reacted; “Get out! Get out!” She screamed, but by

then Sirius had already moved past his family and kicked the office door open. Skirting around the desk, Remus followed nervously while Rudolphus reached around and kept hold of his fitful wife. The self-effacing gesture must've brought something mean out of Sirius again, as he turned and hollered at the top of his lungs;

"Nice dress, by the way, Bella! I heard Rudolphus isn't even stealing your panties to wear into the office anymore. Oops—I hope that wasn't still a secret!"

The crowd that had gathered outside the office began parting around Sirius like the Red Sea, as though his disownment were an illness to be caught. Behind them Bellatrix continued to rage, cooed at gently by her sister and husband. Ignoring Bellatrix's fury, Sirius glanced openly to his left, where an old woman was glaring at him from beneath the rim of an enormous black silk hat.

"Aunt Belvina! Oh, I told Reg you'd be here." He swept in to give the woman a grand kiss on either cheek, to which she shrieked and began batting him with her oversized purse. Sirius bowed out graciously, before leaping toward another relative.

"Cousin Leo! Blimey, I thought you were dead. Did you not break your neck in an awful polo accident a few years back? No, just the tailbone? Lucky, that. Though I imagine the healing time sucked ass… And Aunt Margery, how lovely to see you again! Is it true you're still pumping the stem cells of poor, orphaned children into your face to avoid wrinkles? Well, it's not working very well, is it? And holy—you're shitting me—is that the old prime minister? Tell me, Mr. Wilson, when you were drafting that Lavender List of yours, did you consider putting that Oswald Mosley chap on the list? I have a feeling he'd have appreciated the title of Knight Commander of the British Empire."

It was like watching a spectator sport where the only goal was to insult as many people as possible in the least amount of time. Sirius went around to all of them, digging up dirt people didn't even know they had. Finally, Walburga had had enough. She marched out of the office, with Regulus tight on her heels and gestured to her brother;

"Cygnus, call the police."

Sirius' hands shot up in surrender. "Hey, I'm going, Mum—I'm going! You can't very well blame a guy for wanting to catch up with his family. After all, it's been *sooo* long. And to meet again under such

terrible circumstances—*tsk*. Why, it just gets me so choked up."

As Sirius made a show of wiping away imaginary tears with his middle fingers, two more guests came up behind him and grabbed him by the arms. Remus was moving instantly, but as it was, Sirius did not need his help. He removed both sets of hands by completing a quick duck and slide manoeuvre, getting behind both men and pushing them forward into a stumble with a quick slap over the back.

"Nice try," he tsked, "but you really shouldn't be putting your hands on the Black heir in his own home."

It was the straw that broke Walburga Black's back. Instantly she was fuming, making everyone leap half a foot into the hair when she shouted;

"Regulus is the heir—you are disinherited!"

Sirius yawned, feigning disinterest. "Mm, right… forgot about that bit. Ah well, I can still try and show my appreciation for the old man after his death, can't I?"

There was no need to wonder what Sirius meant. He turned and flounced back through the crowd, into a grand atrium-like room with tall floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the back courtyard. The crowd followed like a swarm of pigeons, too curious about the train wreck that was quickly unfolding in front of them. The entire room was outfitted in tables decorated with buckets of iced champagne and bouquets of red and white carnations. There was a large portrait of Orion Black arranged on a pedestal at the far end, and just before that, an impressively sleek grand piano.

Sirius stood before the beast, and then flapped the back of his suit jacket as he took a seat at its bench.

"No!" Walburga screamed, coming into the room behind Remus with the rest of her family. "I forbid you from touching grandfather's piano! *I forbid it!*"

"He may be your heir," Sirius shouted back, pointing directly at Regulus; "but *no one* can do what I can do. So just this once—all of you can shut up and listen."

They might as well have been back in the office, whispering about portraits and inheritance. The room fell deadly silent as Sirius lifted the piano's key lid, and Remus recalled that the last time many of

these people had seen Sirius take to a piano, it was likely when he was pouring 100-proof vodka across it and lighting it on fire. What Remus wouldn't give to have seen it.

Sirius chose Beethoven. The piece was probably easily recognisable for anyone who enjoyed 'real music' as the snobs would have it, but Remus only recognised it thanks to a few weeks spent in twelfth-year music when Sheila had attempted to rally the class together for a formal symphony. It hadn't ended well—there was very little room in Beethoven's finest for a bass guitar and they'd only had a single competent violinist—but Remus remembered:

Symphony No. 5, written in C minor.

The piece was polyphonic, derived from a fancy Greek word meaning "many sounds". In a formal orchestra it could feel as though you were listening to two warring tides, pushing and pulling against one another in endless tandem. Messing up even a single harmony would ruin all of that, and that was what made the piece so difficult to play. But Sirius didn't need to worry about pushing or pulling; he was only one man and thus the only thing he needed to harmonise with was the war raging on inside his own head.

Watching Sirius, it was clear the song was weighing on him. He bent over the instrument's keys like some grotesque, twisted thing; nothing like the boy who'd sat needle-straight and kissed him over their school's piano all those months ago. He came at Beethoven with all the bloodlust of a ravenous hound—striking the theme's iconic first notes; ***dun, dun, dun, dunn! Dun, dun, dun, dunn!*** It was awe-inspiring, but Remus knew that what came after was Sirius' true bread and butter.

The soft transition started, and his cadence slowly increased like rolling thunder clouds spreading out over a sparkling green meadow. His fingers pounded against the keys, doing the job of an entire orchestra. Where Remus imagined his own fingers would have begun to ache, Sirius only grew faster; faster and faster until it just didn't seem human anymore. Around the room, his spectators were slack-jawed. Even Regulus appeared shocked, but Walburga Black was not impressed. She stood by the doorway with a severe purse in her lips. Hearing it—seeing her—Remus felt anger swell inside his chest.

"Do you finally hear him now?" He demanded, having to shout just to be heard over Sirius' climactic performance. A few in the room managed to tear their eyes away from the piano long enough to glare

at him, but Walburga wouldn't dare. Regulus stared at the floor.

"You're monsters!" Remus wailed, driven by the staccato-like fury in Sirius' music. "You're all monsters, and I HOPE YOU ROT!"

A few women gasped into their champagne flutes; some of the men gave dirty looks that said they wanted to knock him on his ass. Remus would have welcomed the fight just about then. He could feel Sirius' coda like a rush in his blood, working and playing double-time at a speed that should not have been humanly possible. And when the coda came—well, that was that the most beautiful 'fuck you' Remus had ever heard.

With a final slam of his fingers, Sirius was finished. He sat huffing on the piano bench, sweat pouring off of his face and neck. Remus could feel his heart hammering from across the room, but it didn't stop Sirius from turning to address his audience.

"Sorry for rushing," he panted, "can't seem to break the habit."

No one said anything as Sirius stood up from the piano and went to one of the nearby tables, wrenching a fresh bottle of champagne from its silver ice bucket. Remus was already at his side, grasping Sirius' arm and feeling the way his hands shook.

"Are you alright?" He whispered.

"Peachy."

Back with the others, they watched as Regulus made to step forward. He might've said something to Sirius—*for* Sirius—but his mother never gave him the chance.

Swiftly abandoning the rest of her family, Walburga stormed straight toward them. She only came up to Remus' shoulder in the end, but he knew from experience that she did not need to be able to reach all of someone to cut them deeply.

"You are a disgrace."

"Oh," Sirius cooed, "I love it when you're so thoughtful, Mummy."

"You may have your hooks in Regulus now, but trust me, it will not last. One day you're going to lose it all, and when that day comes…"

She never finished; she didn't need to. It was enough for her that

Sirius knew he wasn't invincible, and that he would never have her approval.

"You will leave this house now," she said, deadly low, "and *never* come back."

Sirius held up a pinky in promise, and then pried the cork out of the champagne bottle with his teeth and spat it across the room. There was a loud *pop* as he did so, and the chilled champagne sloshed across the marble floor at their feet. Walburga jumped backwards, lest he soil her dress.

"Now that you've all witnessed what will surely be the only moderately interesting thing that'll happen to any of you for the next twelve months, I think we will be bidding you *adieu*." Sirius went to turn away, but stopped at the last second; "*J'espère que vous brûlerez tous en enfer.*"

Remus had no idea what he said, but judging from the vein bulging in his mother's forehead and the gasps of shock going up from the rest of the room, it wasn't exactly a fond farewell.

Champagne in one hand, Remus in the other, Sirius strode straight out of the atrium, making faces at his family and blowing kisses at the rest. They didn't stop for Regulus, nor did the brothers say anything as they passed each other; Sirius simply kept walking.

"Are you sure you want to just leave?" Remus asked, as he was pulled toward the front door and adjoining main staircase.

"You mean Regulus," Sirius said stiffly, then; "I think the clever git can last a few minutes on his own. After all, they *like* him. We should do our own thing for a little while—in secret."

Remus hadn't the chance to ask what the secret was before Sirius was tugging him away from the door and up the massive stairway. They emerged on the second floor, then the third, passing crystalline windows and marble statues and—*was that a suit of armour?*

"Sirius, where are we going?"

"Don't you remember?" Sirius giggled. "I said I've always wanted to shag in my own room."

To say that Remus was surprised would've been an understatement, but he didn't stop Sirius as he led him down the manor's labyrinthian

hallways. No one was around to stop them, but the walls had eyes enough. Portraits of other Black family members followed them everywhere, as well as the occasional baroque painting of a flower scene or whatnot.

“My great-grandmother collected hundreds of paintings from the great Dutch masters,” Sirius explained. “ ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’? That’s on loan to The Hague from the Black family’s personal collection.”

“Bloody hell.”

Sirius sniggered again, and suddenly they were standing outside a single door. It didn’t look any different from the rest, save for the name plate reading “Sirius” and the massive “ROCKS” carved haphazardly into the wood beneath it.

“Reg’s says ‘sucks’,” Sirius confessed, before grasping the door handle. “Shit. Mum must’ve locked it.”

“I didn’t bring anything with me,” Remus said, patting his pockets. “You still got that hair pin from earlier?”

“No need,” Sirius said proudly; “I know this door. You just jiggle the handle a little to the left and—got it.”

The door fell open with a faint creak, revealing a handsome bedroom with velvet curtains and a vast four-poster bed.

“You have a chandelier in your bedroom...?”

“You act like it was my idea.”

Sirius pulled him inside and shut the door. It was dark with the curtains drawn, but it wasn’t hard to make out the poor state of the walls. Bits of shredded wallpaper and what appeared to be posters of scantily-clad women went all over the room. Remus didn’t have to ask; Sirius had told him the story about the nudie magazine ages ago. He’d thought it proper funny then, but now—seeing it up close—Remus felt a chill.

“I’ll bet Mum wanted it locked up for good. Old cow... Did you notice how she didn't even say my name? It's like she couldn't. Or wouldn't... I suppose.”

Sirius turned and began running his finger over one of the bed posts. It was unusually cool inside, and there was a fine layer of dust on

everything. Remus wouldn't have been surprised if some of the books on the bookshelf had begun to mould.

"It's cold in here."

Sirius took the observation as a challenge.

"Well then, allow me to warm you up."

Taking him by the shoulders, Sirius spun Remus around until his back was to the bed. He didn't push him down until they'd cleared away the grimy covers, but afterwards Sirius relieved him of his suit jacket and together they fell upon the bed.

"Are you sure?" Remus asked between kisses. "Mhm—your family is downstairs."

"Fuck 'em. I need to feel something."

Perhaps that should've been the first indicator that something was wrong. Sirius was the most *feel* sort of person Remus knew. He was always feeling things—good or bad. Sirius had enough feeling inside him to sink a warship, if only he knew how to direct it.

Remus wouldn't lie, getting busy below the waist in his boyfriend's childhood nightmare room felt rather unsettling. He couldn't imagine ever wanting to do the same in his bedroom back at the estate, but—as he stupidly remembered—they had. Over and over and over again. Back then it was about feeling like they were the only two people in the world, and now it felt like they were there just to get back at Sirius' parents, dead or alive. Despite that, Remus didn't complain. He knew what he was like at his lowest, and if this was Sirius' way of lashing out then so be it. After all, he and Sirius had never been cut from the same cloth; they simply matched each other, and that was enough.

They took things slow, coddling each other with feverish touches and tender kisses that made Remus feel like he was coming apart at the seams. Sirius stitched him back together again every time, kissing along his jaw while twisting two fingers into the chain at his throat. At some point Remus thought he could feel him trembling, but every time he went in search of the source, Sirius would capture his hands and pin them back against the covers.

Sirius' tongue was as deft as it usually was, dividing his lips like wildfire and making Remus want to beg for more in a language he

couldn’t even put words to. Without his shirt, the planes of Sirius' torso were smooth and flushed with heat. Only his left side bore any real texture, the burn scars he’d carried since he was eleven—now fading—having left him more blighted on the inside than he was on the out. With gentle kisses, Remus made his way down Sirius’ torso, caressing every uneven ridge and divot with his tongue. He had always loved Sirius’ scars for what they were; a reminder that he had survived horrible things and made it out the other side better—not made it out *for* them or *because of* them, but because Sirius had decided that that is what he would do. Seeing him now—touching him—Remus was sure he’d never known a braver person.

Brave, even as he shook himself to pieces in his hands.

“Sirius?” Remus leaned away, attempting to pry Sirius off of his neck. “Sirius… Sirius, stop. You’re shaking.”

“I’m not,” came a mumble. Remus felt a tongue skim along the edge of his ear, but when he went to grab Sirius by the hips he felt him flinch.

“Sirius, what’s wrong?”

“Who says anything’s wrong?”

There came another nip at his ear, and this time it was Remus who flinched away. When he turned to look at Sirius, he found tears streaking down his cheeks. They caught the faint blue light peeking through the bedroom's heavy curtains, turning his face pale and white.

"Sirius—"

"I don't care," Sirius warbled, his voice becoming raspy and thin. "I don't... I don’t care if I’m bloody shaking, I don’t care if the whole damn world is shaking—I *don’t* want to do this anymore.”

Remus cupped his cheeks for him, wiping away tears with the pads of his thumbs.

"Then don't."

It was like a curtain had come down over Sirius' face. Relief, despair—Remus didn't know. But he recognised the far away look in his eye, and knew that everything from the summer before their final year to Regulus showing up alone and cold on their doorstep, had been building to this single moment.

"I hate him, Moony," Sirius said softly, shutting his eyes as if he could visualise it. "I fucking hate him... I hate the whole lot of them. Every day I wish that they'd burn, that they'd poison each other to death. They tell me to get over it but I can't, and even if I could, I wouldn't. So why...? Why now? Why make my wish come true now?!"

And then Sirius opened his eyes, red-rimmed and bluer than a winter's sea.

"Why'd *he* have to go and die now? Him—He was supposed to live! Live and be miserable. Live and see that I can do shit all on my own—that I don't need them or their arrogant, elitist fucking family! He was supposed to live so that he could see that I *belong to me!* That I'm untouchable. Because when I'm out there, where everyone can see me—they can't even get close! He was supposed to see that—*He was supposed to* ***live!"***

Sirius was shouting now, but at least he was starting to make sense. In his fitting he'd pushed Remus' hands away, reaching up to knot his fingers in his hair himself and pull from the roots. Aching, Remus went to cup his face again—and then again when Sirius pushed him off the second time.

"Hey, hey! Sirius, it's alright… I'm here."

But Sirius was still shaking, and now he had angry tears in his eyes;

"Nah, now he's dead! And all those fucking people downstairs, I hope they die too. I hope they all get onto a boat and that that boat sinks and they all fucking drown! I wish that Regulus had never come to me—I wish he'd never bothered to ask for my help."

"You don't mean that," Remus urged, getting flashbacks of the two of them stuck in that jail cell. "Regulus came to you because he trusts you."

"Dunno why. All I do is fuck things up for him. Or—make him heir, I suppose. Shit... Such ironic bullshit!"

A second lapsed between them, in which Sirius turned and punched his old headboard. It must've hurt, as he groaned through his teeth, cradling his fist to his chest. Scooting closer, Remus took his hand and placed a gentle kiss along his knuckles.

"I used to wish for it too, you know," he confessed, slowly stroking the red flesh. "When I found out my mum was dying, a part of me wished

she'd just hurry up and go. Like it'd make it easier or something... Then when she was gone, I wished it'd been my dad instead. I told him that... That it should've been him."

"Maybe it should've," Sirius said lowly. "He ruined your life... S'only fair."

Remus shrugged. "I know I blamed him for a long time, but really I think now that it was just a way to avoid blaming myself. It's like, if I could be so mad at him that I wanted him dead, then maybe there wouldn't be any space left to hate myself. It worked for a while... but hate rarely works forever. There's always a bottom, Sirius."

"Is that what this is? Bottom...?"

"It's you, torturing yourself for something you're not responsible for. You gotta stop."

"Responsible," Sirius echoed—sardonically like a bad joke. "Sorta like how you're not responsible for Lee turning out to be a complete waste of oxygen?"

It felt like left field, but then Remus followed Sirius' gaze down to the splotchy bruises that mottled his stomach. Seeing them, Remus began to smile sorely, sadly.

"... What a pair we make, huh?"

Sirius chuffed lightly, his running nose making spit strings between his perfect lips. He reached out to touch the bruises, and Remus held in a breath.

"This is supposed to be a dream come true," Sirius whimpered, wiping the snot from his upper lip. "Why don't I feel happier?"

"Because..." And Remus covered Sirius' hand where it lay against his own stomach, knotting their fingers together; "Because you're human. And you're in mourning."

Sirius shook his head. "*No*... No, we're not supposed to mourn those who've hurt us."

"Yes, well... Mourning's never been for the dead anyway."

Despair surged forth and suddenly Sirius was moaning;

"Oh... *Oh god.*"

It took a long while for Sirius to calm down. In that time, Remus held him, stroking his long black hair and kissing his face until his shoulders had finally stopped trembling. They laid together on those cold bed covers, imagining all the ways fate had dealt them a poor hand.

"You know what's gonna suck the most?" Sirius whispered; "They're gonna think we had it easy."

"Who?"

"Them—everyone. The whole world is going to see us as proper little rich boys with nothing left to want. They're going to call us industry plants, and try to say that we don't belong. That we had everything."

Remus thought of his old friends; of Lee.

"We did."

"Yeah... and it's not fucking fair."

Life rarely was, it seemed.

“You were there earlier,” Sirius said eventually, breathing into the skin of Remus' collarbone; “Back at the piano. How did I sound?”

“Brilliant. If not a bit mental.”

He felt Sirius’ shoulders move with a chuckle. “You didn’t try to stop me.”

“Yeah, it felt like your moment. I couldn’t be the one to stop you.”

Sirius sighed, turning his face so that Remus got the feeling he was also staring up at the underside of the ornate four-poster.

“I hope we never have to come back here again.”

“Next time we’ll just torch it to the ground. We can start with that awful office and work our way out. Make it so every last piece is unsalvageable.”

He’d been expecting another witty retort, maybe an offer of agreement followed by some harebrained idea they’d never actually see through to fruition, but instead Sirius merely unattached himself from Remus’ embrace and sat up.

“I’ve just remembered something.”

He was off the bed in an instant, rushing to the far corner of the room where he collapsed to his knees next to the window. Remus sat up in alarm.

“Sirius?!”

“I know it’s here somewhere.” Sirius began pushing his hands against the floor until one of the boards eventually gave way. He stuck his arm in, but came up empty. “Ugh. Figured she would’ve cleared it out, but I bet she missed one thing…”

Lowering himself until he was almost completely flush to the floor, Sirius gave a little grunt and continued straining his shoulder until finally he was sitting back up on his heels, a single photograph clutched in his hand.

“Stuck it to the underside of one of the boards, just as a little precaution,” he explained. Dusting himself off, he brought the photo back to the bed for Remus to have a look. There Remus found himself staring down at an image of four happy boys, no older perhaps than thirteen or fourteen. Each of them were covered head-to-toe in mud, but they beamed back at the camera proudly anyway. There was Sirius, with his tongue out and two fingers dragging down his lower eyelids in a taunt; James with an arm around a fair-haired Peter, both yet to lose the baby-fat in their cheeks; and a fourth boy Remus recognised only by omission.

“Is that… Miles?”

His tone rose at the end, honestly surprised, and Sirius took it as permission to smile.

“Yeah! You see, we’d just gone on a hike for gym class, ‘cept it was March so it’d been raining the entire week and the whole path was soaked in mud. We—er… well, I can’t really remember who pushed who first, but we all ended up belly-sliding down the hill.”

“Bet it was you who pushed first.”

“Ha… probably. Hooch was furious when we got back to the school. Gave us a week's detention each.”

Remus clutched the photograph tightly. It was hard to tell because of all the mud, but he thought Miles’ hair might be brown. His cheeks

were ruddy and he stood taller than Sirius but shorter than James. There was no way of knowing whether it still rung true; several years had passed since the photo had been taken, and in all his time at Hawkings, Remus had never once gone in search of evidence of Miles' existence. James had once told him there was a team photo hanging in the gym atrium from the single term Miles had tried out for the football team, but Remus had told himself that he needn't bother. Miles was gone, and no amount of 'oohing' and 'awing' over old pictures was going to magically bring him back.

And that was perhaps the only reason Remus didn't feel bad as he passed the photograph back to Sirius.

"I'm happy you found it," he told him; "It sounds like a good memory."

Sirius smiled—one of the handsome sort, concentrated out of the corner of his mouth. Then he leaned forward and kissed Remus softly.

"Don't ever go anywhere," Sirius whispered, when their lips parted.

"Never."

Their clothes were wrinkled and dusty by the time they'd retrieved them from the floor, and when it was time to leave, Sirius did not bother giving the room a second glance.

"Can't wait to be out of here," he said, rubbing his arms as if he felt a sudden chill up his spine; "This place has always given me the heebie-jeebies, 'specially when the portrait's eyes follow you. Truthfully, I think it's haunted. Gotta be, what with how many of my family members died within its walls."

"Let's just not think about it anymore," Remus said, purposely not making eye contact with a nearby painting. They were making their way back down the main staircase when they were finally caught, though thankfully this time it was only by one Black.

Standing firm at the base of the staircase, Narcissa crossed her arms and scowled prettily at them. Remus knew she and Sirius must be related, as only the Blacks could scowl *prettily*. Sirius had spotted her first and nearly yelped, before sagging into Remus out of relief.

"Cissy! Wow, am I glad to see you. It's been so long! Loving the new hair colour by the way—they say aviation blondes are all the rage in Europe these days."

“You were supposed to be leaving,” Narcissa said, her tone less shrill than her sister’s, but not any less foreboding.

“Yes, well, we were just picking up a few things,” replied Sirius. “Now we are, in fact, leaving, so if you could so kindly step out of the way…”

She did not move, but rather came towards them. Every stair she took made Sirius shrink slightly, until she was standing directly below them and yet still at eye-level.

“I want you to do something for me, Sirius. A favour, you might call it. And I forbid you from speaking a word about it to anyone.”

“At all?”

“At all.”

“So what’s this then, like—a secret favour?”

Narcissa scoffed like he was no more than an irritating child. “I need you to take these letters to Andromeda for me,” she said, producing a small bundle of letters from the clutch purse she carried. Sirius eyes the letters suspiciously at first.

“Why don’t you just take them?”

“I haven’t spoken with my sister in years. But you? You must see her all the time.”

“Not *all* the time,” Sirius admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “More like… every other month or so?"

Narcissa's eyes narrowed.

"But yeah—totally! *Ooofff couuuurse* I can do that for you. But I am a bit curious as to what’s inside them...?”

“That’s none of your business, and if you don’t want me going to Aunt Walburga so that she can have you arrested for trespassing then I suggest you take the letters to my sister—*unopened*.”

“Right...”

Sighing regretfully, Sirius held out his hand and let Narcissa push the envelopes into his palm. Then she lingered a moment longer.

“Your shirts are misbuttoned.”

Remus and Sirius both looked down, alarmed to find that she was right. At least two of Remus’ buttons were misaligned, and Sirius had mistakenly clasped his suit jacket with the interior buttons facing out. As Sirius rushed to fix them, Remus glanced back at Narcissa, who was peering at them with the same scrutinising look as she had back in the office.

“Goodbye, Sirius," she said. "I doubt we’ll be seeing each other any time soon.”

Sirius nodded, jacket hanging open as he tucked the letters safely into his breast pocket. “Have a lovely rest of the funeral, Cissy." He winked. "You always were my favourite cousin.”

“And you always were a liar,” said Narcissa, as she turned and began marching primly down the stairs to rejoin the party.

“Not gonna lie,” Sirius laughed, as the pair of them burst out onto the manor’s front steps, “thought we were goners back there for a moment. But I should’a known—Cissy’s always been good in a pinch. So long as she wants something, a’course.”

“Speaking of wanting something, what do you think is in those letters?”

“Dunno. Maybe Uncle Cygnus and Aunt Druella are trying to disinherit Andy again. Can you disown someone twice?”

Remus shrugged, busy digging around in his pocket for the car keys.

“All I know—!” Sirius declared, raising his hands to the sky in an effort to soak up the sun that had just started to peek through the clouds; “is that this is the best I’ve felt while visiting home in a long time. Maybe we should do this more often—a biannual family get together where we’re not just celebrating some dead relative we all secretly hated.”

“And if that’s too hard you could always just start murdering your family members on the regular,” Remus suggested. “I’d start with that awful grey-haired bloke that was standing behind Bellatrix in the atrium. He smelt like if mothballs could rot.”

“You mean Uncle Cadmus? Nah, he's only related by marriage so he's got no real money. If you’re really gonna bump someone off then it

should really be Aunt Bel—AH!”

They’d been rushing to get back to the car, a hurry they soon came to regret the moment they rounded the side of some fancy Italian coupe to find Regulus sitting on the hood of their rental car.

“Where are you going?”

“Home!” Sirius babbled; “Back to London where we belong, thought it'd be obvious. What about you—what are you doing out here?”

“I knew you couldn’t have left if the car was still here," Regulus mumbled. "I went looking but Narcissa said you’d gone out to the gardens.”

“Yeah? Well, Cissy’s a liar. We weren’t in the gardens we were—” Sirius faltered slightly and Regulus rolled his eyes.

“You were doing something you ought not to be doing—yeah, I figured.” Regulus pushed off the car lazily. He had something in his hands he was playing with, and Remus realised with no small amount of surprise that it was one of the cigars from his father’s office. “I also figured that if I asked to come, you’d take me with you.”

Sirius blinked in confusion. “You... You want to come with us?”

The question seemed to stump Regulus. A year ago, he might’ve refuted it outright, but they’d all done some growing up in that time. They were different people now.

“I don’t want to stay here," he said, twisting his hands over the cigar. "I told Mother I was leaving. With you."

"You—You did?"

"Yes. And I also told her that she was wrong about you. That you're a good brother."

"You're shitting me."

A trace of what might've been a smile grazed the corners of Regulus' mouth. "I'm not you, Sirius. Hoping that it'll all just work out no matter the consequences."

"But you'll try?" Sirius asked.

Regulus licked his lips. "I could maybe... be somewhat convinced to

try, yes."

It was a Regulus sort of answer, but it was enough, and Remus knew without asking that Sirius was already sold on the idea.

But that didn't mean he wasn't going to tease...

"You sure?" He grinned, shoving his hands into his pockets and leaning over Regulus tauntingly. " 'Cause there's no backing out later. When you become a Marauder you're in it for life."

"I'm not joining your stupid band, if that's what you mean."

Sirius covered his heart. "Ouch. You know if you're going to be our roadie then you're going to have to show a bit more enthusiasm than that."

"Not a roadie," Regulus corrected, cheeks flushed. "This is temporary. Just until I go back to school."

"Okay, so you want to hang out with your big brother for a few weeks, I get it. But then what?"

"Then... I guess I just hope that it all works out."

There wasn't a hint of Sirius that could've refused him. Grinning ear to ear and entirely too pleased for words, he took his brother by the shoulders.

"You can stay for as long as you like."

Regulus nodded, his lower lip giving the barest of quivers, and then he passed Sirius the cigar. Beaming, Sirius set it between his teeth and turned back to Remus;

"Well, Moons? Ready to go home?"

"After meeting your family?" Remus replied. "Yeah, think I could use a stiff drink."

"Oh, then what the hell are we waiting for then?" Sirius exclaimed, wrenching open the Morris's passenger side door. He ripped off his tie with the same motion and tossed it across the windshield of the Italian coupe. "Come on, lads, let's go get disgustingly drunk!"

* * *

Feel the bile rising from your guilty past,
With your nerves in tatters,
When the conch shell shatters;
And the hammers batter down your door;
You'd better run!

- "Run Like Hell" Pink Floyd, 1979

It took Regulus almost the full two-hour drive back to London to realise that they had no plans to go home straight away.

"But what about our clothes?" He asked, as Remus pulled the Morris back into the rental yard.

"We'll get new clothes. Ones that aren't going to make you look fresh off the Prada runway."

It was an exaggeration, but as Regulus frowned, Sirius twisted around his seat looking nothing but eager.

"Come on, Reg! Haven't you ever wanted to see the city for yourself? I mean, really go where the culture is?"

"Culture and crowds are not synonymous."

"You see, Moons? Told you he was smart. He's onto us already."

Remus put the car into park. "Ah, well. To Portobello Road then?"

After getting rid of the car, they hopped the tube—actually *hopped* the turnstiles, Regulus was horrified—toward Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove, where they had plans to take the London-newbie through the nearby market stands. They got a few looks for their formal dress, though most seemed to dismiss them as a few fresh-out-of-business school wash-ups merely late getting into the office.

It was a Monday, and already being late into the day, the market was slowing down. Early morning shoppers had come and gone, leaving behind picked-through vegetable stands and a cafe dinner rush that smelt of fresh bread and coffee. It wafted out onto the street to merge with the smell of tarmac and nearby perfume vendors, making Remus' stomach growl and his nose itch at the same time. Around them there

were Sikh families running stalls stuffed full with glimmering silk and cotton caftans, next to awning-covered shop fronts selling t-shirts of American sports teams Remus had never heard of. They passed street musicians and weary men peddling tables ladened with tarnished silver, as well as brick walls covered with every sort of poster and flyer one could imagine.

Weaving through the cars and people, Remus almost felt nostalgic. His fondest memories of Portobello were that of the times Tomny had brought him. Back then it was like a game between all the lads—who could fill their pockets the quickest and with the best stuff without ever being caught. Remus partook occasionally, of course he did, but he was never as bold as the rest of his friends. He still had Giles' wrath to fear back then. Now he was grown, and had since made new memories there with Sirius. They'd filled their kitchen cupboards with old china bowls purchased off a kindly Korean woman that spoke almost no English; their bathroom rug had come from one of the charity shops and Remus had spent hours poking through the volunteer-run bookshop on the corner. It was a bit jarring to think of how differently his life might've turned out had Lyall not decided to send him north to Scotland as a last-ditch effort to clean up his son's act, but that was the funny thing about fate—sometimes things tended to work out where you'd least expected them.

"Mmm, take it all in, Edge!" Sirius said, taking a deep breath for emphasis. They'd passed beneath the A40 Westway into the north end of the market and a lorry rattled overhead like thunder, making Regulus jump.

"Take what in? The pollution?"

"Would it kill you to not be so literal for once?"

Ignoring their grumbling stomachs, the first task at hand was to find something decent for all of them to wear. Regulus had whinged over returning to the flat so he could retrieve his trunk, only Sirius had refused to let him wear anything that required a decent pressing beforehand. Instead they took to the busy streets, wandering through the stalls until they'd found themselves standing outside an old charity shop with its usual array of well-loved toys, picture books, and 'famine relief' adverts displayed in the front window. A bell chimed as they walked inside, and Remus caught the familiar whiff of dust and musky old clothing. A shop attendant was going through boxes of old hoover parts up by the front desk and there was a rack of over-stock sitting by the door, mostly made up of men's winter coats priced as

low as two quid. Moving up the rack, Regulus paused before an old bomber jacket with orange and yellow stripes and began thumbing one of its sleeves. It only lasted a few seconds before he caught them staring.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Sirius said with a small smile. “See anything you like?”

Regulus rolled his eyes at them, then turned and stalked further into the shop. After he’d gone, Sirius went to the bomber he’d been eyeing and pulled it off the rack. “Just in case,” he told Remus, winking.

Because he had no real preference for style, it didn’t take long for Remus to find himself something to wear in the cluttered shop. Sirius repeatedly tried to pawn various items off on him, muttering things like ‘imagine how it’ll look on stage’ and ‘you and your half-a-mile long legs’, but Remus rejected most of them on the grounds that he didn't feel like dressing up as an Elton John impersonator for the rest of the night. Sirius was not impressed.

When he was finished, Remus had traded his suit for a pair of canvas trousers and a faded chore coat. Once paid for, he found Sirius browsing the shoe section, Regulus nowhere in sight.

“Please tell me you’re not thinking of buying this?” Remus held up a paisley-printed dress shirt he’d plucked from the pile Sirius had amassed next to him. Sirius scoffed and snatched the shirt back.

“Piss off, it’s camp. Not that I’d expect you to know what that means.”

“I know camp,” Remus maintained. “Like Bowie.”

Sirius shook his head, "Hopeless," then he looked him up and down. “Is that really all you found? You look like you’re on your way to the glue factory.”

“So like the average Londoner, then.”

“There is nothing admirable about being ‘average’.”

Deciding that this was not the hill to die on, Remus glanced around. “Where’s Regulus then?”

“I dunno, he was in outerwear.”

On cue, Regulus came tearing around the end of the aisle, nearly

knocking over a stack of half-dressed mannequins as he raced back towards them.

“I think I saw a rat,” he gasped. “O-Over there! It was hiding inside those disgusting fur coats.”

“It’s quite possible,” Remus said; “Pretty sure they come inside when it rains.”

Regulus was clearly appalled.

“You said this was a charity shop, not a refuse.”

“Try dialling it back on the negativity just a titch, okay, Reggie?” Sirius sighed, moving away from the shoes to hold a shirt up against Regulus’ torso. “Sometimes you can find some really cool stuff in here.”

“Yeah, like syphilis.”

"Don't be a snob." Sirius switched the shirt for a pair of jeans. “Now these might not be too bad. Why don’t you try ‘em on?”

“These look like they haven’t been washed in years.” He checked the tag; “And they’re *women’s*.”

“Don’t knock ‘em ‘til you try ‘em.” Sirius grinned, then began piling several more pairs into his brother’s arms. “Here, take these. Dressing rooms are that’a way, there’s a good lad. And don’t you worry, I’ll keep looking. We’ll have you a whole new wardrobe before we’re finished.”

Regulus went—with no small amount of grumbling—and Sirius turned back to Remus, who’d been leaning over an empty rack with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.

“You did look good in those jeans."

“Knew you were looking at my arse," Sirius smirked. "Here, found something for you too, even.”

With a victorious smile, Sirius held up a pair of crimson-coloured Chuck Taylors, size eleven. One of the laces was broken but aside from that they fit perfectly. As Remus was testing them out, Regulus came back out of the dressing room, looking awkward in a pair of baggy jeans and his undervest.

“You’ll need a belt,” Sirius nodded, “but look here, I’ve found you the perfect shirt.”

He held it up and Regulus’ eyes widened.

“No. No way.”

“Aw, don’t be such a fuddy-duddy, Reg! This is *just* the thing for what we have planned next, trust me.”

When it came to clothing, Remus was pretty sure Regulus didn’t trust Sirius as far as he could throw him, but either to make his brother happy or because he couldn't stand spending another moment inside the manky shop, he took the shirt.

By the time they were finished, Sirius had outfitted his brother head-to-toe in second-hand chic and had even found a new stylish Harrington jacket for himself. When Remus began complaining of starvation, the three of them popped into a local cafe for a spot of supper. Mostly Regulus appeared weary of city's preference for fusion cuisine. Watching Sirius attempt to coax him into taking a bite out of one of his pakoras was like observing a mother as she tried to convince her picky eater of a child that eating solely chips for supper did not make for a well-rounded meal.

“Quick,” Sirius urged after, hurrying them toward the nearest entrance to the Underground; “I wanna get out there before the sun sets.”

"Out where?" Regulus demanded.

"You'll see."

It was another short ride, for which Sirius sat on one side of the train and insisted on playing a game of footsie with Remus across the aisle. Every now and then one of them would pause long enough to gauge Regulus’ reaction, but if he was bothered, he never let them know with more than a light scoff. Instead Regulus watched; not them, but others—people on their way home from work, teenagers on their way home from school. He stared at those folk who’d fallen asleep drunk on station benches and peered at the back of newspapers as others read the periodicals. Watching him watching other people, Remus would’ve given just about anything to see what was going on inside Regulus’ head.

“I don’t get it,” the younger Black brother said later, when they’d reached their next destination only for it to turn out to be little more

than your average zebra crossing. “They just stood there for a photo, and now it’s like some sort of national monument? What a waste of time.”

“I swear, you’re so uncultured,” Sirius huffed, ushering Regulus into the middle of the crossing. “Stand there and act like you’re having fun.”

“Why do I have to be in the photo?”

“Because, Potter’s never gonna believe me without any proof. Now smile.”

“Don’t forget to show us your shirt,” Remus called, raising the instant camera he’d borrowed off a Japanese tourist. Regulus scowled at him, but there were other people waiting for their chance in the famous crossing and Remus refused to take the photo until he’d opened the bomber jacket Sirius had gotten for him and showed everyone what was underneath. When he finally did, several nearby tourists began to snigger, and a passing woman in a green peacoat gasped scandalously. Sirius only grinned.

Teens want Beatles, the shirt read, *not Jesus!*

“Right. Now say, ‘Helter Skelter’!”

In answer, Regulus raised his middle finger and Remus took the photo while laughing. It felt like a culmination of sorts, but there was so much to see, and they were only just getting started.

“Come on, Reg, run!”

They tore across the pavement outside of Regent’s Park, dodging pedestrians and cackling as the sun set over the tops of the buildings. Their bus was leaving without them and they were determined to catch it. Remus reached it first, hailing himself aboard the back platform of the double-decker. He was followed swiftly by Sirius, who’d taken a running leap and nearly landed straight on top of him. Still panting, they turned around to find Regulus running full-tilt behind the bus. They screamed at him, waving their arms;

“So close—”

“Just a bit more!”

Reaching his hand out, Regulus grasped the silver pole and—with one

final *oomph!*—dragged his skinny arse onto the bus's rubber platform. He nearly wobbled when he went to stand, but Remus caught him by the shoulders—Sirius by the front of his jacket. Behind the bus, the bike-bound police officer that'd been pursuing them since Regent's Park blew his whistle indignantly. For a moment it looked like he might actually catch them, but he was foiled after being caught in a pedestrian crossing. Sirius was already celebrating.

"OH!" Regulus exploded; "You just HAD to spit in the fountain!"

"It's a cultural thing," he cackled. "Think of it like a rite of passage."

"Everyone does it," Remus said, as the bus dinged to its next stop.

They rode it back into the city, arriving not long after the sun began to set. What they were left with was the twinkling lights and buzzing neon that the more popular high streets were known for. Unused to such a busy place, Regulus eventually got better at dodging the crowds and taxis, remaining silently enamoured with it all. They made sure to tease him every time they happened across one of the less savoury sex shops, and for supper it was fry-ups, straight from the nearest greasy spoon's grill. Regulus seemed dubious over the fact that they were still serving breakfast foods so late, but he was hungry and tired enough not to complain.

"So what next?" Asked Sirius, sipping coffee as he spread a sightseer map he'd nicked from a local newsstand. "All the touristy places'll be closing soon I suspect, but there's always always the theatre."

"Hyde Park's just around the corner too," Remus mused, "we could see if the pigeons are up for a photo."

"No!" Regulus huffed, busy ham-fisting his fork. "No more bloody photographs… Christ, when you said we'd go around the city, I thought you meant we'd do something exciting."

"What—running from the cops not exciting enough for you?" Sirius said.

"Exciting and illegal are *not* mutually exclusive."

"Maybe not where you're from."

While Regulus began complaining that he and Sirius were, in fact, from the same place, Sirius leaned over to Remus and whispered in his ear. He was not expecting him to propose such a mad idea, but in

hindsight, Remus knew that Sirius had been obsessed with the idea ever since he'd told him the story of how Tomny had talked him into it at just fifteen.

"You do realise it was one of the single stupidest things I've ever agreed to?" Remus said. "We were pissed to hell when we did it."

"He said exciting!" Sirius urged. "Can't think of anything more exciting than that."

Or prone to accident, Remus thought.

He glanced at Regulus, who was still shovelling spoonfuls of beans and fried tomato into his mouth. What Sirius was suggesting was idiotic and reckless, not to mention dangerous. If they got caught they'd certainly be arrested, but Regulus *had* said exciting, and *well…*

They had to make their way back toward Shepherd's Bush to get there. On the way they stopped back in at the flat to warm up and to share in a bit of liquid courage. Frustrated that neither would tell him what they were up to, Regulus initially turned his nose up at the hooch.

"Trust me," Sirius said, pushing the bottle into his hands, "you're gonna want this."

It was late by the time they'd reemerged, and knowing what they were about to do, Remus kept expecting to turn a corner and find an enraged Lily ready to tell them off for such an idea. She was *so* going to kill them when she got back...

Arriving at their destination, Sirius paid the cabbie and then began skipping along the pavement, pulling a full flask from his jacket pocket for yet another swig. Already shivering in his jacket, Regulus walked along beside him and groaned dramatically when he realised what it was they'd come all this way to see,

"You mean you spent ten pounds on a cab just so that we could come see some barmy old bridge?"

"Calm down, it was only like three quid," Sirius replied, passing the flask along to Remus, "And this isn't just any bridge. This is the Barnes Railway Bridge."

Regulus didn't look any more impressed at the declaration. He glanced over the entrance to the bridge's footpath, peering at a scratch of

graffiti that read things like ‘BOB FENDER IS A CUNT’ in big, bold lettering. Smirking, Remus offered him the flask, which he rebuffed at first.

“We already had a full bottle back at the flat.”

“I know but I reckon you’re gonna need a bit more.”

Regulus sighed and took the booze, hands fidgeting at his sides. Further down the bridge, the sound of a zipper could be heard as Sirius undid his trousers and began pissing off the side of the footpath into the shallow water below.

Regulus choked around the flask, covering his mouth; “That’s fucking disgusting.”

“Wow. I never thought anyone could be a bigger prude than Moony,” Sirius sighed. Once he’d finished relieving himself he zipped up his trousers and wandered back over, slapping Regulus on the arm encouragingly. Regulus gagged in reply, and Sirius got a sharp punch in the arm for it.

It was pitch dark when they finally made their way out onto the bridge. Aside from the moon, the only light came from the windows lining the row-homes off the street running alongside its southern end. The air was chilly, but not unbearable when one was suitably drunk, which Remus supposed they would have to be to even consider the stunt they were about to pull. He hadn’t been to Barnes Bridge in years, not since Tomny had set down proper roots in the End. Back then he’d have run amuck with just about anyone, desperate for a thrill and a good time. The most famous of them was named Patrick, but everyone had called him Plucky after one of his favourite pastimes —playing chicken with the oncoming trains out in the Clapham rail depot. Remus had never gotten to witness it himself, but according to Tomny, Plucky could be seen taunting up to five trains a night. It was all a very neat party trick, but then one evening the lads went down to the rail yard after having a bit too much to drink and Plucky forgot to lace up his boots.

After hearing the story, Remus had never looked at a Battersea train the same way again.

“Ready to do this?” Sirius asked, practically jumping up and down in place. Remus laughed, too nervy to do anything else as he peered down the adjoining train tracks expectantly. Doing so, he was reminded of Plucky, but told himself this wasn’t nearly as dangerous

because they wouldn't be running, only... "hanging". Meanwhile Regulus was watching the river, humming to himself and still sipping from the flask, apparently unbothered.

"What are we waiting for?" He asked. "Hope it's not for you the two of you to grow a brain. In that case we'll be out here all night."

"Oh, you'll see, brother dear," Sirius drawled, leaning against the wrought-iron railing that separated the tracks from the footpath. Remus figured they'd have no issue climbing over it; it was what came next that was the tricky part.

"Do you guys do this a lot?" Regulus prattled on. "Come to the middle of nowhere and wait for nothing?"

"As a matter of fact, I've never even been here before," Sirius told him. "But I've wanted to come ever since Lupin told me about it."

"Right—Lupin. You're just full of exciting stories, aren't you?"

"I've been known to dabble. Why? Are you curious?"

Regulus stuck his tongue out, and Remus chuffed. He watched as the younger boy turned back to the water, lazily reaching his arm out and tipping the smallest bit of booze out of the flask to watch it fall onto open air.

"Don't waste it," Sirius chided, taking the flask. "You wanna drop something, you use your spit—OH! That's it! We can teach you how to spit!"

Regulus made a face. "I know how to *spit*."

"No, you don't," Sirius laughed, already steering the both of them toward the railing. "Go on, Moons, show him how it's done."

Tipsy and entirely too eager to please, Remus took hold of the railing with both hands and hocked a large wad of phlegm straight out over the water. Sirius clapped for him, but Regulus looked about as offended as a sixteenth century woman asked to show off her petticoats.

"Your turn now, Edge. Give it a try," Sirius encouraged, welcoming the dirty look it earned him.

"I am *not* spitting in the river."

“You have to! You didn't do it back at the fountain and it’s a rite of passage. Lupin taught me my first ever time in London.”

“No, not happening.”

“C’mooooooon!” Sirius nudged Remus, and together they took up a chant; *“SPIT! SPIT! SPIT! SPIT!”*

“God—FINE! Just shut up already!” Elbowing Sirius out of the way, Regulus readied himself on the edge of the railing.

“Oh, and don’t feel too bad if you’re awful at it,” Remus added. “Sirius couldn’t get past the tips of his shoes the first hundred times.”

“Shuddup, Moony.”

Flashing them his favourite glare, Regulus relaxed his shoulders and leaned as Remus had. Then he coughed deep in his throat, and with a sharp thrust, spat an impressive loogie straight out over the canal. It flew several feet before disappearing down into the darkness, and by then Remus and Sirius were already cheering.

“I knew you could do it,” Sirius keened, shaking his brother by the shoulders. “My little hooligan!”

“Yeah, yeah, just pass me the booze.”

Together they shared another round, and when the flask was mostly depleted, Sirius tucked the little bottle away and clapped his hands together.

“Right. We’ve waited a decent while, figure it’s about time to get this show on the road. Moony, if you’ll please.”

Remus linked both hands together, creating a little platform for Sirius to fit the bottom of his boot into. Regulus eyed them, shuffling closer.

“What are you doing?”

“Going over the railing, what’s it look like?”

“You’re going to jump into the river?!”

“Not *that* railing, silly. This one!”

With a sharp ‘oomph’ Sirius had hauled himself over the wrought-iron and onto the edge of the train tracks. He wobbled a bit before finding

the correct footing, and Remus reached through the bars to grab him.

“Careful. Mind the gaps.”

“I got it,” Sirius assured him. “You coming over?”

“Yep.”

As Remus carefully stretched his long legs up over the bars, Regulus grabbed hold of the railing and began to bark at them;

“What are you doing? Get back here!”

“C’mon, little bro,” Sirius grinned, reaching an arm out to steady himself on one of the vertical beams. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“You’re going to get hit by a train!”

“Do you hear a train?”

Regulus blanched, and Remus held out a hand to him.

“Here. I’ll help you.”

It wasn’t in his nature to accept help—from anyone—but either because it was late and they were drunk, or because he’d already thrown caution to the wind just by coming with them, Regulus accepted.

“There,” Sirius said, when all three of them were on the other side. “Isn’t this just exciting?”

“Thrilling. Now can we get off?!”

“In a bit.” Sirius began skipping up and down the track, open air hovering dangerously between every joint. Remus kept close, unsure if he would even be able to catch him were he to fall. They'd survive if that were the case; it was only about a fifteen foot drop to the water below, twenty at most now that it was winter, not that Regulus seemed comforted.

“You okay, Edge?” Sirius called, when Regulus refused to let go of the bridge’s main arch. “Don’t tell me you’re scared of heights now?”

“I’m not scared of heights!” Regulus snarled. “But I’d rather not drown in a filthy, sewer-ridden river!”

“You won’t drown, you’ll just get a little wet. Now come over here. Let go, you won’t believe how good it feels. It's a total rush.”

Regulus flipped him off, only to panic when he realised that he no longer had two hands on the metal beam. Watching him, Remus stepped onto the same joint as Sirius so they were shoulder to shoulder.

“Maybe we should stop here.”

“No way,” Sirius whispered. “He’s braver than he thinks he is.”

Remus didn’t have much to say to that. He hung back as Sirius trotted back toward the railing and stopped right beside his brother, leaning in so their foreheads nearly touched and their dark curls melted into one another under the light of the moon.

“Reggie, listen to me. Just take a deep breath. You’re alright—you can do this, you only need to let go.”

“No, I’ll—I’ll fall.”

“You won’t, promise. You won’t, cause I’ve got you.”

Sirius offered his hand, palm up, and Regulus eyed it with a reluctant expression. Several seconds passed, but when he finally reached out and took it, Remus exhaled.

“D-Don’t let go!” Regulus babbled.

“I won’t,” Sirius promised again, already carefully guiding him out onto the middle of the rails. “There—just there. Put your foot there… Good! You’re doing so well.”

Regulus winced, the wind lapping at his hair and gently pushing it across his pale forehead.

“Shit… Fuck, I-I’m doing it!”

“Well done!”

Regulus smiled, then caught the tip of his boot against the next joist. He flinched sharply, but Sirius was there to steady him, just as he said he would be.

“There," he said, as they both straightened up. "Not so bad, now is it?”

Slowly, Regulus released his brother's hands and was able to stand upright, breathing deeply. “Hell," he panted, "I can’t believe you idiots do this every night.”

“That’s a bit generous,” Sirius chuckled. “We try to save the really exciting stuff for special occasions. Like funerals and blood moons.”

Regulus laughed, giddy like a kid on his first rollercoaster. *Up, up, up!*

“So what now, we just stand here?”

“If you’d like. I expect the waiting’s the worst part, ain't it, Moony?”

“Waiting—what waiting? Waiting for what?”

“Shh!” Remus pressed a finger to his lips; “Do you hear that?”

An unsettling feeling overcame all of them, and Remus glanced down at the metal rails beneath his feet. They were quivering slightly; somewhere down the tracks, a faint rumbling had started that was getting more noticeable with every passing second. Then, the loud blaring of a horn burst through the night, and Regulus’ question was answered.

Honestly, he should've seen it coming. What went up always came... *down, down, down.*

“Fuck! We gotta go!” Regulus gasped, whipping his head around. “W–We gotta get off the tracks!”

“We will,” said Sirius, “just gotta *hang tight* first—heh.”

“ ‘Hang tight’?!”

“Moons, how d’ya do it?”

“This way.” Remus bent down, carefully shifting himself around so he was sitting on the metal joist, his legs dangling down over the river below. Sirius matched him, and they both turned to look at Regulus. The train horn blared again, louder this time. Closer.

“Well? Hurry up, Edge!”

“Sirius, a *train* is coming! We stay here and we’re gonna die!”

“We're not gonna die! Not if you do as you’re told, anyway. Now just sit down on the bar like we are. Don’t worry, Lupin’s done this

before."

Once, about five years ago, Remus thought dismally. He watched as Regulus glanced between Sirius and the safety railing, as if measuring the likelihood of death as it hurtled down the tracks toward them. He must've decided it was too far a distance to risk on his own, and so he squatted down on the bar next to his brother and slowly got his feet beneath him.

"Sirius, if we die out here I'm gonna kill you!"

"Now that's just cliché."

"Just stay calm, Regulus," Remus told him. "You gotta stay calm."

"Oh, fuck you, Lupin!"

Another blaring horn, and Regulus looked about as far from calm as one could get. All around them the bridge shook while the now-visible headlamp of the train's engine reflected around their backs like a glowing full-body halo. They had a minute at most, and then the iron beast would be right on top of them.

"Both of you, listen to me!" Remus called over the noise. "Now you're going to see another rung just beneath the joist ahead of you! Lean forward and grab onto it, and then when you're ready, slide off and hold on tight!"

"Hold on?! LUPIN, ARE YOU CRAZY?!"

"Do what he says!" Sirius bellowed. "It's either that or jump!"

Another horn call, and this time Regulus screeched with it.

"AH! I–I CAN'T REACH IT! SIRIUS, I CAN'T REACH IT!"

"Just lean forward a bit more!"

"AH-UGHH! AH—I got it! I–I got it!"

"Good! Now let *go!"*

They fell like dominos, one after the other. First Remus, then Sirius, and finally Regulus, until they were all dangling over the canal by the skin of their fingers. For a moment it was easy, but then the adrenaline inevitably wore off and Remus remembered how it felt to wake up that morning, battered as though he'd been laid out by a

road sweeper. This was twice as bad and every bruised muscle screamed out in protest, though none as loud as Regulus' bellowing.

"I HATE YOU!" He screeched. "YOU'RE AN IDIOT, SIRIUS—YOU'VE MADE ME INTO AN IDIOT!"

"YEAH, EDGE! WAAH-HOOO!"

The train was upon them before Sirius had even finished his victory cry. It rattled overhead like a jet on the runway, so loud that Remus could barely hear himself think. Sirius kept screaming, as did Regulus—though his sort was distinctly less enthusiastic. It occurred then to Remus that he had no idea how long these London freight trains could go on for. He'd once heard Lily say that the passenger trains like the ones they'd rode into school on could get up to a half a mile long. How long would half a mile take to cross over a single thirty-foot bridge? Longer than they could hold on for, surely.

"Sirius! … *SIRIUS!"*

"Yeah?"

"I may have forgotten one tiny little detail about the first time I did this!"

"And what was that?"

"That I walked home in wet clothes!"

He could only see the back of Sirius' head so he couldn't be sure, but if he wasn't crying, then the sound Sirius was making was certainly laughter.

"Right—well! That's brilliant! My advice is to try and avoid the warm spots, 'cause I might just piss myself!"

As the seconds ticked by, Remus began to feel his arms grow more and more tired. Ever since the charity shop he'd been more aware of his injuries, and hanging off the bottom of a bridge certainly wasn't doing anything but aggravating them. Aside from having to bear the strain of his entire body weight, the metal bars they were clinging to were freezing and every passing train car shook the bridge to an unvarying degree. They'd set themselves up for failure—glorious, glorious failure.

"I can't!" Regulus was moaning. "I can't do it anymore, Sirius!"

“Hold on, little bro! Just a bit longer!”

Emboldened by Sirius’ surety, Remus tried to calm himself by counting the cars, but his brain was muddled from the pain and it was all he had just to cling on. Then, when it seemed as though he couldn’t bear a second longer, the final railcar passed overhead and just like that, the noise fell away.

“We did it!” Sirius cried. “Ha! We did it! Reggie, you did it!”

“Okay, but now what?!”

“Moons?”

“Uhh…” Remus looked around—even stupidly checked his feet; nothing but dark water. “We just have to—er… pull ourselves up!”

“We can’t do that!” Regulus yelped. “My arms are gonna rip out of their sockets!”

“Well, gentlemen, looks like there’s only one thing to do.” Sirius let go of the bar with one shaky hand, raising it to his forehead in a salute. “It’s been a pleasure hanging with you.”

“Sirius, *no—!”*

And just like that, Sirius Black was flying—straight down into the drink.

There was a splash but Remus barely heard it. He too, had already let go. The soles of his shoes hit the Thames with a great slap and instantly he was seized all over. Water rushed him like a zap, invading his mouth and nose as his legs flailed desperately beneath him. When his head finally broke the surface it was met with all the aches and pains of his injuries as well as a chill wind that licked up off the water. He felt as though he'd gotten flatted by the road sweeper all over again, and yet the adrenaline made up for all of it.

“Sirius?" He called, splashing through the pitch-coloured water; "… *SIRIUS!?”*

“I’m here, Moons!”

A shape moved toward him in the darkness—Sirius, with his black hair plastered to his cheeks and forehead in inky rivulets. He paddled forward with a grin not even chattering teeth could tarnish, and

together they reached for each other.

“Where’s Regulus?” Remus demanded. In answer, Sirius pointed up toward the bridge overhead, only to gape when he realised that Regulus was gone as well. Suddenly frantic, the two of them whipped their heads around, splashing through the surface of the water as though Regulus might appear out from under them.

“Reg?! Reg, where are you?”

“Regulus!”

Somewhere not far off, a voice had begun to wail. They paddled forward to find Regulus flailing near the banks, face screwed up and chin barely out of the water as he moaned.

“No more! No more!”

“Reg! Reg, ya big ninny, open your eyes!”

“I can’t!” He moaned; *“I can’t!”*

“Yes, you can! You’re an utter ledge! You did it, now open your bloody eyes or your big brother’s gonna have to—!”

A sharp splash caught Sirius in the face, leaving him sputtering.

“I don’t have a brother!" Regulus wailed. "I have an *insurance liability!”*

It was somehow colder on the shore, a revelation Remus had while he was dragging himself over the rocks and fighting against stiff clothing and stiffer limbs. The taste of dirty bilge water lingered in his mouth and his hair dripped down into his eyes with an icy sting. Fuck—His entire body hurt. Next to him, Sirius was still laughing, lying back on the shore with his feet barely out of the water. Was mania a side effect of hypothermia, Remus wondered? Regulus certainly wasn’t fairing much better, though he was on his feet at least. On his feet and panting like a dog.

“You…! You fucking… *LUNATICS!* You should be medicated—both of you! We could’ve—we could’ve fucking died! OOH—It’s a wonder that… *eugh*… That you’ve even lasted this long! How you haven't been arrested for endangering the public, I'll never know!”

“Arrested? HA—Where do you think we spent the night yesterday,

Edge?”

There was a lapse in Regulus’ shouting as he took in the information, obviously trying to deduce whether Sirius was lying or not. Before he could come to his conclusion, Sirius had rolled over and staggered up the bank.

“Here, Edgie,” he said, pulling the flask from his pocket; “Take the ‘edge’ off a bit.”

Regulus did take the flask, but rather than open it, he wrenched his arm back and flung it into the canal. Remus watched it disappear with a splash, and frowned.

“Cool… Wasn’t like that was mine or anything…”

“Oh fuck off!” Regulus slumped back down on the rocks with his head in his hands. He looked so pathetic, all sopping wet; Remus almost felt bad. “I think I've become stupider,” he moaned. “I can actually feel myself losing brain cells by the minute. Christ, mother's gonna kill me. I have to go back there soon, and when she finds out I… *crap, shit—fuck!”*

“Sod this.” Sirius kneeled down on the shore, wobbling as his wet shoes slid along the rocks. “You don’t have to go anywhere you don't want to. Especially not back there.”

“Easy for you to say, it’s not expected of you. You—*Sirius*—live in this great fucking bubble, content as long as you can play your shitty music and see your shitty friends. What responsibilities could *you* possibly have?”

“I could be responsible for you. Come live with me, Reg.”

Sirius might as well have dunked him in the river again, for all the look Regulus was giving him.

“What?” He blanched. “No! No, don't be ridiculous, I can’t live with you!”

“Why not? It's not like we've never lived together before.”

“I have school to finish, for one.”

“Alright, I’ll pay for it," said Sirius firmly. "Then you come and live with me. I’ll let you do whatever you want—anything. You can go to

university, you can work—I don't care! As long as it's what *you* want."

"And what if I don't want to live with you?"

"You don't?"

Regulus' snappy retort died on his tongue.

"I can't," he whimpered. "I can't live with you. You and me—we just don't… And there's still mother—"

"No," Sirius swore. He fell forward, clasping his brother by the shoulders. "This isn't about what *she* needs. It's about what *you* need—what *I* need. I need my brother, Reg."

"And what if I'm not your brother anymore?" Regulus demanded, throwing off his hands. "What if I never was? I'm not just some little kid anymore. I'm not just gonna follow you around forever—I mean, what if I'm not everything you want me to be?!"

"Then I won't ask you to be anything! Just be here. And if you can tell me honestly, that you'd rather be back there, with all those people who don't give two shits about the real you—then fine, I won't ever ask you again. But you have to say it here, right now—*to my face!"*

There was a sharp silence, in which Regulus dropped his head once more. When he looked up, his eyes found Remus as he stood silently just over Sirius' shoulder. Seeing him wet and pathetic, it was like he was fifteen again. Fifteen and stealing Sirius' Black Sabbath tapes in hopes that it would get his big brother to look his way for even a moment longer.

"You went into the water, Reg," Sirius pleaded. "Please don't come out the same."

Slowly, Regulus' eyes shifted back. Remus didn't know what it was he found there, in those grey eyes so alike to his own, but whatever it was, it must've been enough.

"I don't want to go."

A relief. An exhale. A sad smile—and Sirius was nodding.

"Okay."

"I don't want to go back."

“Okay.”

“You’ll be disappointed eventually," Regulus whispered. "You’ll be ashamed…”

At that, Sirius shook his head.

“That’s what they never told us, Reggie… No one’s ever died from a little bit of shame.”

With a miserable sob, Regulus buried his face in his knees. He shook for a little while longer, but once Sirius had moved up the bank to hold his shoulders, Regulus slowly lifted his head.

He wiped a hand beneath his nose.

"... I’d like to go home."

It was enough for Sirius, who took his brother’s arm and pulled it across his shoulders to help carry him across the stones. As the brothers started their wobbly ascent up the bank, Remus came in close and took up Regulus’ other arm. They were almost to the stairs that lead back up to the street when Regulus spoke again;

“Sirius?"

"Yeah, Reg?"

“Please, no more bridges…”

“You're really tying my hands there, Edge, but alright. No more bridges.”

* * *

All alone, or in twos,
The ones who really love you,
Walk up and down, outside the wall;

Some hand in hand,
And some gathered together in bands,
The bleeding hearts and the artists make their stand;

And when they’ve given you their all,
Some stagger and fall, after all it’s not easy,

Banging your heart against some mad bugger's wall…

* * *

"Lupin? Black? I'm home! … You're here, right? The two of you didn't murder each other, did you?"

Peter rounded the corner into the living room with his bags, and found Remus standing in just his pants and vest, an extra-large mug of coffee in one hand.

"Hey, Moony. How was the holiday—"

"Shh," Remus whispered, finger to his lips. "Still sleeping."

He pointed to the sofa, where a head of black hair could just be seen peeking out from beneath a blanket.

"Blimey, what's he doing? It's past noon."

Remus shrugged, and Peter began pushing up his sleeves.

"Oh! Step back then, Moony. I got this."

It was hard not to laugh while watching Peter creep steadily up to the top of the couch. He started by leaning over the sleeping bundle, fingers splayed and at the ready.

"C'mon, Black. Time to rise and sh—"

Regulus turned over with a haggard scowl, and the next thing Remus knew, Peter had fallen backward over the coffee table.

Chapter End Notes

'Rushing' in music is when you play the tempo of a piece faster than it is written.
The 'Lavender List' was a satirical name for Prime Minister Harold Wilson's controversial 1976 Resignation Honours; PM's could bestow titles and honours upon people of their choosing when leaving office, and this list caused controversy as many of Wilson's chosen recipients held political views that went against his own Labour Party (think right-leaners and capitalist bastards).
'Pakoras' are a deep-fried vegetable dish originating from India and often sold by street vendors and restaurants in the UK. Sooo

delicious.

⏰⏰⏰ New Update Schedule: I will now be posting updates on **MONDAYS** with chapter 103 coming out next week on Jan 9th, we then **SKIP** a week (I'm moving continents, it's a long story), and then start up again with chapter 104 on Jan 23rd, 105 Jan 30th, 106 Feb 6th, and finally 107 on Feb 13th.

And o h m y g o d — I DO NOT ENDORSE JUMPING OFF THE BARNES BRIDGE 🧔

Chapter 103: Spectre Records

Chapter Summary

Remus has a few surprising run-ins.

Chapter Notes

The song I've written for this chapter was written to the melody/ beat of "The Stroke" by Billy Squire. If you're interested in "listening" while reading, wait until Sirius begins singing in the chapter's first scene and go ahead and follow that link. It makes for pretty good vibes, I promise. And as always, please excuse any facsimile between the two songs.

I don't think this chapter has any C/W. Let me know if you spot something that should be tagged, but for the most part it really is just a fun little [long] romp!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Are teenage dreams so hard to beat?
Every time she walks down the street;
Another girl in the neighbourhood,
Wish she was mine, she looks so good;
I wanna hold her, wanna hold her tight—
Get teenage kicks right through the night!

- "Teenage Kicks" The Undertones, 1978

End of March 1979

In a timeframe that would've made any sane bride dizzy, and with the fervent help of Mrs. Pettigrew and a slew of other hired hands, Lottie had gotten the grand wedding she'd wanted. They'd picked a Wednesday—the first Wednesday of April—and though it felt like an odd day for a wedding, all of the Pettigrews' closest friends and family would be in attendance. Remus was informed later that it was the only day they could book the venue on such short notice. Naturally, he felt that the entire thing felt more than a bit rushed, but since only Peter seemed to share the sentiment, he kept the thought to himself.

The girls were very busy those days; Lily appeared to have run herself entirely ragged between all the dress fittings, hen parties, studying, and classes. Sirius of course teased her over it, loudly anticipating the day it'd be her walking down the aisle in a lovely white gown of her own, but Lily was abstinent. She was far too busy to even consider such things. If she and James did get married, it would not be for a long, *long* time.

And so, as his friends went about settling back into their usual routines, Remus steeled himself to do the same, only now the Marauders had their eyes on a bigger prize.

It'd started with their triumphant return to the stage. Ray had called—the Shoestring needed its favourite act back, and they were hardly in a position to deny him. Coupling as a slightly-belated birthday celebration for James, the five of them plus Regulus all piled back into the Minnie van with their instruments and made the short trip across the city. Despite the excitement, the atmosphere inside the old Volkswagen had turned anxious before they'd even made it to the opposite bank of the Thames. After all, it'd taken less time for bigger bands to be forgotten by those who'd once cheered their name, and they were still newcomers on the scene.

"They probably won't even care," Peter anguished, making Remus recall their earliest days at the Shoe, where they'd played to audiences of as little as four people merely there to drown themselves in their pints. But then, if there was anything a small, local pub was known for, it was the loyalty of its patrons.

Upon their arrival, Ray met them at the back doors and they were welcomed back by the kitchen crew with open arms. Ray offered them drinks to celebrate—just the cheap stuff—and when they emerged into the rest of the bar with their gear, plenty of people craned their heads to get a look. Some friendly faces tapped their pint glasses approvingly, others cheered—*finally a good show!*

Just like that, Remus knew they were home.

"This is really where you play?" Regulus asked warily, peering around the spit-n-sawdust pub as though a disease might leap off of the nearest bar stool and bite him.

"Expecting a concert hall, were you?" Sirius leered, stopping to dramatically breathe in the smell of cigarette smoke and spilt hops. Regulus didn't reply; it was clear by his scrutinising expression that

the Shoestring was not what he'd been expecting. After nearly a week in London, he'd given up on the stiff black slacks he'd brought from home and had instead taken to borrowing whatever pieces from Sirius' wardrobe that offended his eyes the least. Now, with a pair of plain jeans and his usually neat hair hung loose around his face and ears, he was starting to look like any other seventeen year-old kid.

They found their usual table near the stage empty and waiting for them, with their name and the word 'reserved' written clumsily across a paper napkin. One of the r's was backwards, turning it into 'RESEЯVED'. When Sirius saw it, he scooped up the napkin and offered it to Remus.

"Could make a half-decent song."

"For a great big industry plant like us?" Remus smirked. "Maybe."

By the time the Marlene, Dorcas, and Mary had shuffled in to join them, it was peak hour and the bar was slammed. Drinks had been pouring for hours, and would continue to pour until Ray gave last call, which usually waned later, considering it was a Saturday. After organising their gear and doing a quick sound check, Remus stepped off the stage with the others and found Mary practically throwing herself over Regulus out of excitement.

"Oh, I missed this handsome face!" She simpered, clamping both hands across Regulus' cheeks and mashing them together like playdough. "You came to see me, didn't you? Oh, just say it. I'll forgive you for forgetting to call—you *cheeky* thing!"

As Regulus almost toppled off of his chair, begging for sense and personal space to reassert itself, Sirius leaned over and shoved his hands between them.

"I'm sensing some blatant favouritism," he pouted—before Mary took a threatening swipe at his cheek that left Sirius to leap away or else risk ruining his pretty face.

"Oh, shut it you. I can look at your smug gob whenever, but this one —*oh*. You really know how to keep a girl wanting for more, don't you, Regulus?"

Remus had never seen someone go so red without passing out first, but luckily for Regulus, the girls' drinks had arrived and Mary was suitably distracted. As she offered him little sips from her cocktail, Dorcas shuffled over to Remus with a fresh pint.

“Right, so do you want the good news or the bad news?”

"There's bad news? Blimey, start with that then, I suppose,” Remus replied, already feeling dour over the unfortunate smirk she was giving him. He didn’t know what it was he should be expecting when she leaned in to whisper in his ear, but it certainly wasn’t—

“Sacked?” Remus gaped at her. “What do you mean I’ve been *sacked?!”*

“Sorry babs, but Phil asked me to pass word along. Apparently he didn’t take too kindly to us switching shifts. Call it a wounded ego if you must, but he’s already hired one of his mates to replace you. Some bell-end named Geordie.”

“That prick,” Remus growled. “He’s never cared when we’ve switched shifts before. Five quid says he was probably just looking for a reason to get rid of me… buggar… I knew he never liked me! Ain’t my fault he can barely string a guitar.”

Dorcas leaned in, pinching his mouth and jaw together with two fingers. “He never liked you because you’re tall and good looking. It was starting to piss him off—seeing as half the customers came in just to ogle you."

"They did *not*."

"Ha. Right. Well, if you ask me, there are worse things to lose a crappy job over.”

“You gon' tell me the good news now?”

She smiled, releasing his face and tapping him fondly on the cheek. “I’ll do you one better. Come by the shop on Monday during Phil's lunch break and I’ll show ya.”

Remus drank the pint she’d offered—bitterly—and by the time the glass was empty, couldn’t give half a shite anyway. Since the incident with Fletcher, he’d managed to squirrel a small bit of money away, though it was nothing to live off of. He’d meant to put it toward a second amp to boost their sound, or maybe a decent wah-pedal for James to use on stage so they could finally get their riffs to start sounding like the way they did in Remus’ head. For now it’d have to be collateral, but at least as long as he was unemployed he’d have more time to focus on the music. He could tell Sirius and the others later.

Just before they were scheduled to take the stage for their first set that night, Lottie arrived wearing a beautiful satin skirt and a blouse with a Chelsea collar. She appeared a bit overdressed when compared to the pub's other patrons, but didn't seem to notice as she weaved through the inebriated throng. With T-minus three days until the wedding, she'd nearly backed out of coming, but had made the effort to clear her schedule when Lily had informed her of Regulus' sudden arrival.

"No, you *must* come to the wedding," she gushed, going as far as to take both his hands in hers for dramatic effect. "It'll be such a party, I swear you'll have fun! You are Sirius' brother, after all, and that makes you family. Oh, please say you'll come!"

Regulus didn't stand a chance. He'd caved almost immediately, and even Remus had felt some semblance of pity for him. Lottie was hard to say no to on a good day, but ever since getting engaged she'd become even more sure of herself. More… nubile, almost. She often went out with Roger's mother—first as a guest, and then slowly as a member of all the high society circles she'd been dreaming of since she was a little girl. Combined with that and the new demure style of dress, it'd quickly become obvious; Lottie wasn't just preparing for a wedding, she was in training to become a wife.

"You sure you don't want Marauders to play on your big day, Lot?" Sirius asked, as he leapt up onto the edge of the stage in preparation for their incoming set.

"Yeah!" James called, already above them and swinging his amp cable around. "We could totally do it. I'd even acquiesce to some Elvis. Presley or Costello—take your pick."

"Sorry, boys," Lottie hummed; "Maybe if the four of you hadn't been so busy tearing pieces off of each other, Roger and I would've considered it, but I'm afraid the act's already been booked."

"It's not that Rod Stewart impersonator you were talking about, is it?" Peter grimaced, appearing behind her from the direction of the loo.

"He's not a—Petey, your fly is down—he's not a Rod Stewart impersonator! He just happens to look a bit like him."

"*And* sound like him," Peter scoffed. "If you ask me, I say that if it acts like a duck, dresses like a duck, and quacks like a bloody duck… Well, then it's probably a Rod Stewart impersonator."

“Good thing no one’s asking you!”

Peter shrugged indifferently, setting his drumsticks between his teeth long enough to do up his zipper and clamber up on stage. Finishing his second pint, Remus stood up to join them. Already the crowd was pushing in, growing louder; he could taste their excitement and he wanted more.

As he followed his friends up onto the stage, Remus overheard Regulus shouting to Mary over the crowd’s noise;

“Where’s that Evans’ friend of yours? Figured she would be here for Potter’s birthday.”

“Lily had a late meeting with one of her lecture groups today!” Mary hollered back. “They finish their term in April so she’s been really busy. She’ll be by later though… She said she’s bringing a surprise!”

Regulus nodded, then looked upwards at Remus. He hadn’t realised he’d stopped with one foot on the stage.

“What are you staring at, Lupin?”

"Nothing. Just didn't realise you'd missed Lily so much."

"What's this about Lily?" James asked, appearing between them.

"Regulus was just worried she was going to miss your birthday party, Prongs."

"Shut up, Lupin!" Regulus snapped. "When are you two going to start this ridiculous show of yours?"

Suddenly the pub's overhead lights began to dim.

"Right about now, I suppose," James grinned. "Try not to cheer too loudly for us, Regulus. Get's distracting."

It might've been the lighting, but Remus thought that Regulus' face had somehow turned even redder. Could Regulus have a thing for Lily, he wondered? No, certainly not. If he did then it couldn't have been anything more than a school yard crush. What was it they said—distance makes the heart grow fonder?

"Come sit over here, Regulus!" Mary called.

Watching him stalk away, Remus tried to recall an instance where

he'd witnessed Regulus and Lily interacting with one another, but nothing came to mind. Surely he was just reading too much into things.

As the lights continued to dim, Remus looped his guitar strap over his head and felt the familiar weight of his bass settle over his right shoulder. The crowd whooped—anticipation for what was to come—and Sirius began looping the microphone cord around his wrist. What came next was James and Peter—launching themselves into a boisterous cover of a Thin Lizzy song just to get the audience hooked while Sirius played his role as frontman perfectly, rousing the audience from whatever daze had accompanied them along their everyday lives. He already looked the part, wearing a red military jacket he'd picked up at a costume store and a pair of white trousers that felt distinctly Freddie Mercury-esque. Sirius was looking more and more like a queen every day now; not that anyone would've gotten away with insulting him for it.

After they'd wrapped up the cover song, Sirius swung his mike around and caught it mid-air. He was panting, but Remus knew it was from excitement.

"Shoestring," he bellowed; "have you missed us?!"

Cheers went up, an answer;

Yes!

"Now I know you can do better than that—*SOUTH BANK, HAVE YOU MISSED US?!"*

YES! YES! YES!

"Now that's more like it! How's everyone doing out there? You alright? You staying cheeky, hm…?"

Some replied—YES!—and a few more made fun of the posh way he pronounced every syllable. It was a common enough reaction, one that Sirius accepted wholeheartedly. He played with them, loved on them, and they adored him right back.

"We missed you too," he told them.

"Took a little break, is all."

"But we're back."

“—Better than ever.”

“In fact we have a new song for you.”

“Would you like to hear it?”

Yes!

The room began to clamour.

“You would?”

Yes!

"I'm not so sure."

YES! YES!—More!

“Well then... Let’s have some fun, shall we!?”

It started with a clap. Then a stamp. Then a thundering that reached all the way inside of Remus’ rib cage.

They’d never played the song in front of the audience, it was too new. You wouldn’t have found it on those butchered tapes from Fletcher. Here, they were delving into new territory—if anything it was a chant. One to clap along to, one to stomp your feet.

One that could fill an entire stadium.

“ 'Now everybody,
Listen in close;
Did they make you play the part,
Of that old man’s ghost?”

Chills, from the very first word. Remus could still remember the day he’d scribbled the lyric down in his book. And now it was *this.*

“ 'Won’t pull no punches,
Better read ‘em and weep;
Gotta stay, be patient,
Keep your ass in that seat!”

Just like that, he'd hooked them. Such was the way of a master; Sirius swung his hips—*WHOO!*—and the music moved with him. He whined but they were the ones begging for it. *More, more!* their eyes wept, their hands reaching for him.

" 'Young boy grows up, puts his name in the race,
But it's hard to win, when you're running in place;
Breathing in pollution, choke on your own tongue,
They say keep your head up, have your fun and—

" 'Watch your temper!
You're the man of the moment till the shots ring out;
Watch your temper—
WATCH!"

The crowd didn't know it yet, but the next part was for them. Sirius thrust his fist into the air on the words— *WATCH! WATCH!* —and it only took them a single try to remember it. The room sweltered, but the chorus wasn't finished.

" 'Watch your temper,
'Doomed generation' is the cry they shout;
Watch your temper,
Save a couple million while the will of the children runs out…"

Up, down—Peter twirled his sticks, squinting like the lights were too bright. Ahead of him, James swayed before his backup mike—*Watch! Watch!*—smiling and pointing at the audience as if he could make them scream louder. Funnily enough, everywhere James pointed, cheers erupted like several dozen bombs going off at once.

" 'Night on the town, end at dirty brick lane,
Tear 'em down, till the red hand stains;
You say you want me, then you make me cry,
When I come up empty, ride on by and—

" 'Watch your temper!
Put down that rock, we'll tell you what it's all about!
Watch your temper—"

“WATCH! WATCH!”

“ 'Watch your temper,
You behave pretty well for a sinner, boy;
Watch your temper,
Save a couple million while the will of the children runs out!”

They were caught up. Their fists pounded the air above their heads like a glass ceiling waiting to shatter. Every note was a calling—culling—culmination of something else.

Fuck Fletcher.

Fuck Exeter.

Fuck anyone and everyone who’d ever said the words **you can’t.**

Because they would.

They will.

Just watch, fucker.

“ 'Watch your temper—”

“WATCH! WATCH!”

“ 'Watch your temper—”

“WATCH! WATCH!”

“ 'Save a couple million while the will of the children runs out!”

And that was the end. The entire pub cheered for Peter as he shattered his cymbals, and for James as he slid up and down his strings with a final flourish. A girl reached for Sirius and he bent down to kiss her hand. Her friend did the same, begging for another, then another. Remus had never enjoyed the feeling of sweat on his back so immensely.

After their first set, they stumbled off the stage feeling haggard and vibrant. They wanted to go again—they *would* go again—but first, alcohol.

Their drinks were paid for—by who, Remus didn't know. Marlene made him scarf down some food so he wouldn't throw up, but then one of the kitchen lads had some dexies. Remus took two, which was probably two too many, but he'd missed the feeling. It was like drinking thirty cups of coffee all at once. It made the sad things less sad, and the happy things euphoric. If anything the alcohol ruined it. Made him feel heavy. The pills would've been a perfect high had he not been so greedy, but the pint was right there in front of him!

Waste not, want not…

They were due for their second set to start any minute when Remus found himself drifting back across the pub. The booze had turned him sentimental, while the uppers made him dauntless. He could do it now —commit the call he'd hadn't been able to make since those failed attempts before Christmas. *He could do it.*

There was only one callbox at the Shoe, and he had to wait his turn before he could use it. By then he'd started chanting the number under his breath, half afraid he'd forget it when finally facing down that silver number pad. Stupid; there weren't enough drugs in the world to make him forget *that* number.

The line rang. Remus considered what to say. It was April, perhaps 'happy *birth*-day?' That would be funny. But was the baby due in early April or late? Shit…

I'm sorry—he could start with that. And also; *I'm an idiot. I don't even know why I said it. You're totally right. I'm a stupid fucking prick. I miss you. Skylar didn't deserve it. Forgive me?*

The telephone line fell silent, unanswered. Unreplied.

Tomny didn't have a messaging machine.

Remus was disappointed. He had so much to say! Tomny was a prick, never picking up like that… Fucking asshole. *Hope you enjoy your new life! With your new fucking baby! Fucking pisshead… Fucking bastard!*

"Moony! Get your fit arse over here!"

It was Sirius, calling out to him from across the bar. His voice should've been swallowed by all the noise, but Remus' ears were too keen. He'd hear Sirius over a hailstorm, probably.

Hanging up the phone, Remus shambled over to his table where

Marlene ruffled and kissed his hair and Dorcas pressed yet another drink into his hand. As it turned out, Sirius had been trying to inform him that Lily had arrived. She came into the pub with her full bag of school things, though it was the girl trailing closely behind her that had them instantly all curious.

“Didn’t miss too much, I hope?” Lily said, brushing her wind-ragged hair from her face as James helped her out of her jacket. When she was suitably presentable, Lily stood back to introduce her new friend.

“Everyone, this is Sybill. She’s part of my surprise.”

Sybill was a flighty thing, that much Remus could tell. She had hair the colour of wheat that sprung up from behind a beaded headband like she’d stuck a fork in an electrical socket when she was very young, and she wore glasses so large that her eyes seemed to bulge out like a cartoon character. Standing next to Lily, she kept a colourful folder clutched tightly to her chest as though it might shield her from whatever fallout might come. Not that she needed it; the girl wore so many crystals and talismans around her neck, it was a wonder she hadn’t fallen over from the weight of them.

“Sybill and I met in our media law class,” Lily went on. “She’s studying journalism. And in her free time she—”

“I also make zines!” Sybill burst out, thrusting the paper folder toward Sirius while simultaneously falling into a near ninety-degree bow. Sirius glanced at the folder dubiously before taking it and flipping it open.

“What’s a ‘zine’?” Lottie queried, getting up on a chair so she might take a glimpse over Sirius’ shoulder herself.

“A zine is a small, curated publication of just about anything,” Sybill recited, still bent over at the waist. “But I—” She raised her head, *only* her head; “make zines to expose hypocrisy and supply my audience with all the tools required for revolution and anarchy.”

"And music, on occasion," Lily added cautiously.

Weirded out, and perhaps standing a bit too close to the strange girl for comfort, Remus wandered over Sirius and squeezed in with the rest of his friends. Inside the folder, Sybill had stuffed several tiny pamphlets ranging in size and severity. Most were printed in black and white, with their letters hand drawn or else cut from other magazines like some murderous ransom note. The titles were absurd—

Windsor Poo, Erectile Conjunction, Slasher Chick—but they were nothing compared to the content.

“People actually pay for these?” Regulus muttered, as Sirius flipped open to a page that seemed to feature John Lennon’s head pasted onto the body of the Virtruvian Man, the words ‘We Can Wank It Out’ scribbled across his chest.

“They only ever make enough to go toward the next issue,” Sybill tittered honestly, finally straightening up. “Most of those are collaborations with local artists, but with your permission, I’d like to feature your band in this month’s issue.”

“Us?” James echoed in disbelief.

“Yes. You see, I’ve actually seen you play before. I was going to do a feature on you anyway—purely for research purposes—but then Lily told me she knew you personally."

"It was quite serendipitous," Lily nodded.

"You’re not exactly the normal sort we’d feature," Sybill went on. "To be honest I'm not sure how well our audience will take to you, but I like keeping things fresh. And you four are particularly bombastic.”

She seemed to say this with pure wonder in her eyes, or maybe it was just the unintentional bug-eyed effect of her glasses. Either way, Sirius passed back her folder and Lily swooped in;

“We have one more surprise actually,” she said, shooting a keen glance in the eccentric girl’s direction. “Sybill, here, is actually the vice president of the events committee at UCL, and if you’re interested, she’s said that she can probably get you guys into the rotation. See about letting you play on campus.”

“You mean you want us to play a concert at the university?” Peter gaped.

“Lots of up ‘n coming bands do it,” Sybill said, blinking off in the direction over Peter’s head as though she’d suddenly found the wall more interesting. “We hosted the Human League last month. Before them it was the Spandau Ballet, then Dick Damage and the Dilemma… Next week Duran Duran is showing.”

Sirius made a face, before mumbling under his breath; “What the fuck kinda name is ‘Duran Duran’?”

"Sounds like an aftershave," James agreed.

“They say, having breezed right past ‘Dick Damage’,” scoffed Dorcas, making Marlene snigger into her palm.

“Well?” Lily urged. “I know it’s not the Marquee or anything, but it could be a stepping stone. Haven’t you guys been saying you wanted to play more shows anyway?”

Lily was right. Sybill might’ve been a bit odd, but she had connections, and aside from general know-how, connections were the only things the Marauders were in dire need of.

“Best birthday gift—*EVER!”* James announced, after he’d swooped in to lift Lily straight out of her shoes. “God, I love you.”

The comment made the hairs on the back of Remus’ neck stand on end, but when he turned toward Regulus, he found him hesitantly flipping through Sybill’s zines, while the bushy-haired girl sat next to him and pointed out the political context for every eerie collage and cartoon. He would’ve expected anyone who had a crush on Lily to be more perturbed seeing her so in love, but Regulus didn’t seem to care much at all.

Almost disappointed, Remus felt his shoulders deflate before one of them was being poked by Sirius.

“Hey, who was that you were talking to on the phone?”

Remus nearly started. The almost-phone call already felt like a lifetime ago.

“Uh… no one. Couldn’t get through.”

Sirius nodded, though it was obvious he didn’t believe him. “You ready to get back on stage then?”

“Yeah. Yeah, go on.”

The second set went might like the last, albeit slightly sloppier and more sloshed ‘round the edges. Not that their audience seemed to care; they too were pissed off their asses, all save for Lily who’d volunteered to drive the van back to Shepherd’s Bush.

“You know us, we know you,” Sirius had recanted into the microphone; “but for those who’ve just arrived, I’ll do one final

introduction."

Pete began with a drumroll, to which everyone cheered. The crowd was familiar to them now, and no longer shy. They pleaded for noise and fever. *No*—they demanded it.

"On drums, we have the Marauders' effervescent everyman, Peter Pettigrew!"

Whoo, Peter! Yeah, Peter!

"On guitar, you'll find the illustrious James Potter, poster child for Huggies nappies and boy scouts everywhere."

Ow-ow! Hey, Potter! Nice arse, Potter!

"The unassuming brooding giant with the bass guitar is our dearly beloved Remus Lupin, lover of sappy songs, boring books, and married women everywhere. Better lock up your mums, everybody, this one's dangerous."

Remus! You can have me, Remus!

"And finally, your main course for the evening, my name is Sirius Black, and we are—***Marauders."***

The night finished without a hitch, their first in many months. The audience screamed and chanted and knew their names and for a while Remus couldn't decide whether it was real or just some lucid dream he was having. Such an obvious success with the promise of more had him finally reassured, but when the show was over and the lights had turned on, Remus finished his final pint and went home to his bed in busy little Shepherd's Bush. The next morning when he remembered the dexies and the zine and the almost-phone call, he was left feeling sick.

For once, he was glad Tomny had not picked up.

* * *

Monday 2nd April 1979

Remus wouldn't realise it until later, but being sacked from his job at

the music shop along Tin Pan Alley would come to be one of the most insignificant moments in his entire musical career. When Dorcas told him of his sudden loss of employment Remus' first inclination had been anger. The drink he'd sunk at the Shoestring had led him next to acceptance, but as he rode the tube over to Tottenham Court Road, his acceptance quickly turned into trepidation. He didn't want to have to rely on Sirius or his friends for money, and with all the strikes still going on in everything from private unions to public sectors, job prospects within the city were bordering on slim to none. He'd be lucky if he could find work in some meat processing and packing plant. What a swell gig that ought to be, coming home smelling like the inside of a cow's intestines every day. God—Sirius would never kiss him again.

"Look, Remus, ya know I like you. But I can't just let employees do as they please all the time. I'm your boss! I need to be respected. And I needed you here last week to help with those new shipments, but where were you? Nowhere to be found apparently."

"Come on, Phil," Remus urged, following his old manager further into the shop. "I got Dorcas to cover all my shifts, and you and I both know that she's loads more useful than I am. If it's the repairs that's the problem, then Bo can easily handle—"

Phil swung around; "Bo called in three times last week on account 'a his back! As far as I'm concerned he's on bloody probation. I've got orders piled out the back door, and customers breathing down my neck twenty-four-seven! And don't even get me started on the bloody manufacturers… Those bastards are only late on shipments until we're behind! Now I'm sorry, Lupin, but I've made up my mind and them's the breaks. I mean, hell—I've already found your replacement."

Phil gestured languidly toward the store's guitar wall, where a peaky-looking guy in a Che Guevara t-shirt was sitting on a stool and polishing one of the sunburst Ibanezes. He waved when Remus turned around, and the guitar nearly took a header into the wood panel floor. Phil made a yelping sort of noise when it happened, but the guy only sat back on the door and gave each of them a half-witted smile.

Remus turned back around. "You've got to be joking."

"Er… Geordie's still in training."

"Oh come on, Phil! You're shitting me! That guy looks like he's got an order against him saying he can't be within a hundred feet of any

school or public park. I mean does he even know anything about music? Does he know how to restring a bloody guitar?"

Phil did not look amused. He puckered sourly, then crossed both arms and Remus knew he was finished.

"You can pick up your final cheque from Grace Jones on your way out," he huffed, already turning away. "Oh, and tell your little friend there, our policy is you break it, you buy it."

A few feet away, Regulus turned away from the six-piece Ludwig drum kit he'd been admiring and flipped Phil the finger. Phil looked astonished, but when he turned on Remus expecting some reprimand, Remus only shrugged.

"Them's the breaks, Phil."

There was not much left to be said after that. Once Phil had returned to his office, old Bo came out from behind the repair counter to shake Remus' hand and offer his condolences.

"We're gonna miss you 'round here, kid."

"Me too." Remus glanced bitterly toward the office; "Most of it, anyway…"

"Want my advice? Forget Phil, he's a right little cunt. Always has had it in for the handsomer lads."

Remus smiled, bashfully; "Dorcas told you to say that," and Bo pulled him in for a friendly clap on the back.

"Make sure you come back and visit," he told him. "Maybe I'll do some custom work for you when you're big and famous. Blow those mass-market hacks outta the water."

"I'd like that, Bo."

When he meandered back to the front of the store, he found Dorcas waiting for him by the cash register.

"I see you brought the spare along," she mused, gesturing to Regulus, who was drifting back and forth between the stacks of amps.

"Yeah. Promised Sirius I would babysit seeing as I'm out of a job and all. But don't tell Regulus that."

Dorcas smirked and slid the drawer to the cash register shut. She had a lolly in one hand, which she fit back into her mouth as she turned to him.

“Right, so let me get this straight then. Your boy’s little brother shows up on your doorstep *after* the two of you had just gotten out of the clink, but he’s supposed to be six-hundred miles away, going to some whoop-dee-doo school in the middle of Scotland—‘cept their dad popped his clogs, so really he was on his way to the funeral and just couldn’t bring himself to go any further. Which wouldn’t be so worrying, save for the fact that he and Sirius get along about as well as two squirrely cats in a rubbish bin. So now he’s freeloading for who knows how long, ‘til he either decides whether he’s going back to the posh school where his she-devil of a mum can get her claws in him, or stays here and lives on your couch. That about right?”

“Don’t forget about Lottie’s wedding. She already made him promise to go. And to be a flower girl. Though, I might’ve dreamt that bit.”

“Oh, Lupin. Someone should write a book about you. They’d make a mint.”

"Nah, no way anyone would ever pay to hear about me."

Dorcas smiled, leaning her elbows on the counter. "How's the kid doing then? Looks miserable."

"Regulus? He's always miserable. But his school's gonna be going on Easter break soon. Reckon he'll decide what he's gonna do after that."

"Have you invited him to join the band yet?"

"Twice. But he doesn't seem to fancy Sirius' offer of letting him play the harmonica."

“Could you two idiots please stop talking about me as though I’m not standing right here?” Regulus snapped, glaring at them from behind an aisle of music books. “It’s bad enough Lupin’s been dragging me around town all day. When are we going home?”

“Oh, it’s ‘home’ now, is it?” Remus smirked, glancing back at him. The look Regulus gave him was venomous, but before he could lash out again, Remus began rifling around in his pocket for some loose change.

“Here, Edge, why don’t you pop over to the shop on the corner and

buy yourself something sweet. I'll meet you there when I'm finished."

Regulus snatched the money, then flipped Remus off for good measure and promptly turned for the door. They waited for the tell-tale chime to come before laughing, and by then Dorcas was slipping her lolly back behind grinning teeth.

"Mouthy little thing, inn'he? Can't get over how much he and Black look alike though."

"I keep doing double-takes myself," Remus agreed, as Dorcas slid his final pay stub across the counter for him to sign.

"It's gonna be such shit without you," she said, grumbling around the sweet. "Pretty sure Geordie's got about as many brain cells as a ceramic garden gnome. Did you know that yesterday I asked him to receive one of the incoming shipments while I handled this customer? Well, when I came back he was organising the fuzz boxes by the number of knobs."

"At least you know he can count."

Dorcas sighed, haggardly, then pressed her tongue to the side of her cheek in a poor attempt to hide a smile. "Yes, well, considering I'm the only one around here who knows how to handle the bloody shipments, I don't feel so bad giving you this."

Remus cocked his head in question as Dorcas peeked back toward the office—assumedly to check if Phil was spying—and then disappeared below the shop counter. What she came back with was a large box, big enough to make a heavy thump when she set it down in front of him.

"What's this?"

"It's the good news from the other night," she smirked. "Consider it a belated birthday gift. For you and Potter."

Already intrigued, Remus began inspecting the box keenly. It was black, with what looked like a picture of a very large calculator on its front. Then he spotted the metres, along with the dials and multi-tracks.

"Is this… Is this what I think it is, Dee?"

"It's better," she told him, before swinging the box around so he could

read the label. “What you’re looking at is the best in brand-new, top of the line technology. They call it the ‘Portastudio’. This American company just put them out on the market for professional use—you can’t even buy these in the shops yet! They let anyone record up to four different tracks right at home *and* cut and mix your own tapes directly onto any cassette. All you need is a pair of headphones! Look, I found it here.”

With an eager thrust, Dorcas handed him a copy of a print catalogue, already flipped open to an advert displaying the same machine. *Introducing the first at home 15” by 18” recording studio,* it read; *The TASCAM Model 144 Portastudio is built for the musician on the go! Add special effects or fix a flat note from anywhere in the world, all with the ease of smooth, multi-track recording.*

Remus was speechless.

“How did you get your hands on this?” He demanded, flipping the page to find layers and layers of different control specs.

“I do all the ordering, duh. All I had to do was put the shop’s name on some list and the company sent one right over. It’s supposed to be a display model—you know, so we can sell them—but Phil doesn’t even know it’s here so I figured he wouldn’t mind if I leant it out to you first.”

“This is amazing… Do you know how to work it?”

“Ha, no,” she snorted. “You’re on your own with that one, babs, but there’s a manual. I’m sure if you put those four public school brains together you’ll figure it out eventually. Five—if you count your new stray.”

Remus beamed down at the Portastudio. “This... Shit, this is amazing! Thanks, Cas. You don’t know what this means.”

He reached across the counter to hug her—something Remus Lupin would never have done in any regular circumstances—and Dorcas accepted, albeit awkwardly.

“Go on then,” Dorcas said after, ushering him out; “before Phil comes back from his third lunch break and we’re both out of a job.”

"I'll be seeing you at the wedding then?" Remus called.

"Wouldn't miss it."

It was raining when Remus walked out of the shop, arms clasped tightly around the Portastudio's awkwardly-large box. Having unfortunately adapted Sirius' poor habit of never bringing an umbrella with him anywhere, he cut quickly down the street and slipped into the nearby corner shop before the rain had had time to seep into his hair. The shop attendant gave him a funny look when he walked in with his armful, but said nothing as Remus shuffled toward the magazine racks, where he found Regulus passively flipping through a copy of the *New Musical Express*. Regulus didn't bother giving any indication whether he noticed him, rather he turned the page in his magazine;

"Evans' weirdo friend writes better music reviews than this shite. 'The revolution will be dyed in peroxide'? What a load of bollocks." Huffing, Regulus set the magazine back on the rack and then did a double-take at the Portastudio. "What's that?"

"Our golden ticket," Remus grinned.

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Are you finally ready to leave? Traipsing across the city in the rain wasn't on my to-do list."

"Yeah, just gimme a sec. Wanted to pick up some more fags before we go. Sirius finished off my pack last night. You want any?"

Regulus just looked at him.

"Right."

Adjusting his grip on the Portastudio, Remus turned and approached the shop's front counter. "Packet of Embassy Number One's," he grunted, setting the large device down on the counter.

The guy fetched the cigarettes, punching in the numbers on his register. "Nice typewriter," he said, eyeing the large box as he doled out Remus' change. After pocketing the coins and fags, Remus took the heavy device in his arms again and spun around, only to narrowly avoid running into a man who'd come upon him from behind. He was dressed in an expensive-looking overcoat, with a thick moustache and goatee. He barely glanced Remus' way as he mumbled a quick pardon as slipped past. It might've been the end of the interaction, had Remus' jacket sleeve not caught on one of the pick 'n' mix displays, successfully knocking a large bucket of fruit jellies to the floor. The sweets promptly scattered in every direction, and he heard the attendant behind the counter give a moan.

“Sorry! Sorry, my bad…”

"You're gonna have to pay for that."

"Uh—right..." Remus looked for a place to set down the Portastudio.

“I’ll pay for the kid’s gaffe,” the other man said impatiently, before pulling a twenty-pound note from his wallet and slapping it down on the counter. “Just give me a double pack of JP Special, I’m in a rush.”

Torn between apologising and thanking the man profusely, Remus began backing up toward the door, his face red with embarrassment. He might’ve fled the shop entirely had Regulus not grabbed his arm and pulled him down the front aisle toward the magazines.

“What are you doing?” Remus hissed, stumbling after him and almost taking out a second display.

“Saving your stupid career, idiot!” Regulus shoved his earlier copy of *NME* in his face. "Look!"

Remus nudged the magazine aside with his chin, struggling to keep a hold of the Portastudio. “Jesus christ, Reg—What’re you on about?”

“You told me before that this used to be a famous street, right? So that stands to reason that famous people would sometimes come here, yes?”

"I... I guess!"

“And do you know who Gaz Spectre is?”

Remus scoffed; “ ‘Course I know who Gaz Spectre is. He was the guy who discovered Jeff Beck. That was until the Yardbirds came along and—”

Suddenly Regulus was smothering him with a hand. “That was a rhetorical question, you fucking dolt,” he hissed, flapping the magazine in his face once more. “Here. Shut up and read the first few lines.”

Remus obeyed—albeit reluctantly—and Regulus dropped the open magazine down over the top of the Portastudio’s box. It was just a small article really, tucked in between the likes of ‘The Secret Life of Captain Sensible’ and ‘The Sins of Siouxsie Sioux’.

But there it was;

Indomitable producer, Gaz Spectre of Spectre Records, retains his title as 'producer with the world-wide reach' after the company's latest signing of new Australian rock band Rosencraft. The band's first single, "Poor Excuses" has been steadily rising in chart popularity since its February release, while their debut album is set to hit shelves and stations in early September. This addition of the 'New Boys Down Under' comes as a follow up to the label's already impressive lineup, which includes various modern power-houses such as the Swedish punk group Ultraculture, as well as London-based groups The Weird Sisters and De Facto Regime. When asked for comment, Spectre only had this to say: "I don't sign bands, I sign phenomena."

"So he sounds like a nob," Remus drawled; "so what?"

"So what?" Regulus hissed. "That *nob* just paid for every little sweet you knocked on the floor, shithead!"

It took several seconds for the words to register, and by then Remus had already glanced back down at the magazine article. What he found was a photograph of Spectre, hands folded neatly as he glared at the camera lens from behind a huge studio desk. He wore aviator sunglasses like Elvis and there were at least half a dozen gold records hanging on the wall behind him. When he squinted, Remus could just make out a package of John Player Superking cigarettes lying open next to the ashtray.

Holy shit…

A sharp door chime drew Remus from his stupor. It was like getting hit over the head with one of those gold-plated records.

Gaz Spectre! Triple-gold standard record producer Gaz Spectre was strolling down the corner shop aisle!

Holy shit!

Unaware of the shock and turmoil that had overcome them, Spectre glanced at Remus and Regulus rather indifferently, popping a raspberry fruit jelly into his mouth as he passed. There was another chime, and the shop's door inevitably fell shut behind him. Gone.

"Hey…" Called the attendant. "You have to pay for that magazine, you know…"

Suddenly Remus couldn't breathe.

"What are you doing?" Regulus seethed, practically shoving him. "Aren't you gonna go after him?"

"A–And say what?"

"How about, 'hello, my name is Remus-shitface-Lupin and I have a shitty band you might want to sign to your shitty fucking music label that'll make both of us a bunch of shitty fucking money'?!"

"Is this really your idea of a pep-talk? Because you suck, mate!"

Groaning at Remus' obvious incompetence, Regulus turned and grappled onto the edge of the shop's window display. What came next was a Spectre play-by-play;

"He's lighting a cigarette… Now he's walking down the street… He's —He's getting into a car! Lupin, it's now or fucking never!"

Shit. Shit. Shit—fucking—shit!

The attendant had come around from the counter. "Hey, you have to pay for that—*OI!"*

But there was no stopping him. Before he could realise what it was he was doing, Remus had half-tossed the Portastudio at Regulus and swept out of the corner shop. It didn't occur to him that he was still holding the magazine until he was outside and being lashed about by the heavy rain. What started as that morning's simple April shower had quickly turned into a torrential rainfall, soaking Remus down to his skinnies. Up ahead, he could see Spectre stopped next to a lavish black sedan. He had a driver next to him who was holding up an umbrella as the producer lingered on, smoking his cigarette. Remus was still twenty paces away by the time he flicked the ash and butt into a nearby puddle. Then the driver reached for the door, and Remus felt his chance begin to slip away.

"Uhm, pardon me, sir? … M–Mr. Spectre, sir?"

The man in the black coat didn't turn around, and in his nervousness, Remus nearly gave up. What if Regulus was wrong and he was just chasing after some random guy?

No—he pushed the thought aside and called out a second time, and when that did nothing, Remus took another step forward and forced

himself to swallow his fear. Better to be wrong than to miss out on the chance of a lifetime.

Marching up to the side of the sedan, he planted his two feet and raised the magazine up over his head to block the rain.

“Excuse me," he called in a wobbly voice; "but are you Gareth Spectre? As in ‘Gaz Spectre’ of–of Spectre Records?”

"Maybe. Who's asking?"

"You don't know me, but my name is Remus Lupin and I've been following your work for a while now. M-My friend saw you back in the shop? I knocked over the sweet display..."

A pathetic beat passed, then;

“Sorry, kid, but like I said earlier, I’m in a rush.”

It was a dismissal, and yet still a shred of hope had bloomed in the centre of Remus’ chest.

“But you are Gaz Spectre!” He gasped, as the chauffeur opened the door and the man readied himself to climb inside. “You’re the producer who signed—”

Suddenly the chauffeur rose up, looming toward Remus with shoulders like a bull’s. “Don’t touch the car!” He roared, nearly sending Remus spiralling as he pushed him back toward the pavement.

“John!” Spectre yelled; “What’d I tell you about shoving ‘em? Do I look like I need another lawsuit?”

“Sorry, boss…”

“I have a band!”

If it were any other moment Remus might’ve keeled over from the embarrassment of it, but as it was, he was desperate. His cry made both of the men give pause for only a second, but that second was all he needed.

“I have a band,” he repeated breathlessly, spitting rain from his mouth as it poured down the sides of his face in fat rivulets. “We’re really good! We—We write our own songs and everything—we started it in school. We can show you, all I need is a few minutes."

“And this band of yours,” Spectre mused, like a cat toying with a ball of yarn; “I suppose you think you’re the greatest thing since Christ came back to life to make a watered down chardonnay?”

“Well, I–I…”

“There’s a million bands out there,” the producer scoffed; “So many, there ain’t enough stages in the world to fit them all. Now the radio's full, kid—I don't need any more bands."

"That's shite."

The comment slipped out before he could stop it, and Remus clamped his mouth shut as Spectre whirled on him.

"What was that?"

Screwed and completed out of his depth, Remus glanced down at the soaked magazine. It wrinkled under his hand, and he imagined walking back to Regulus with nothing else to show for it. He could do that. He wouldn't.

Remus squinted down at the blurry words.

"Phenomena..."

Spectre took a step forward, shouting over the noise of the rain; "Speak up, man!"

“Phenomena!”

Spectre blinked, and with nothing else, Remus threw up the magazine.

"You want a phenomenon, don't you? Well, the Marauders *are* a phenomenon. Just listen to us play once and you’ll know! We’re a family—we need each other more than we need the air in our lungs, and we're good. Our lead singer, Sirius, you—you haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen him! And James, our guitarist, he sees colours—like actually *sees* them. We have a drummer too that'll knock you on your arse and me—I'm...” Remus sighed, furiously wiping the rain from his face. “Look Gaz—I–I mean, Mr. Spectre, sir… I swear—you take a chance on us…? We won’t make you regret it.”

He was panting by the time he'd finished, and the reaction he got was little more than dismissive. Remus watched as Spectre sighed and brushed away the drops of water that had slid down the umbrella and

onto his shoulders.

“ ‘Marauders’, huh? … S'a shit name.”

“You once signed a band calling themselves ‘Body Pyle’,” he grumbled. “And if memory serves right, you only got the one single out of ‘em before the lead singer was arrested for dealing heroin outta his mum’s basement.”

“Do you deal heroin?”

“Nah… kicked the habit.”

It might’ve been a trick of the light, but Remus thought he saw Spectre smirk.

"What'd you say your name was, kid?"

"Remus. Remus Lupin."

“And what sorta music do you play, *Remus Lupin?”* He looked Remus up and down appraisingly. “Are you a punk?”

“Not really.”

“Yeah, didn’t have the look about you… New wave?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“We’re…” Remus glanced at his hands, hapless. “We’re rock.”

Spectre shook his head. “Nice try, tosspot. You see, that used to be worth something—*used to.* Now everyone’s gotta have a shtick.”

“We don’t have a shtick, we're just us,” Remus said, with as much conviction as he could muster whilst looking like a drowned alley cat. If he'd had to guess, he would’ve assumed he’d botched it already. He was good at getting second chances, but first ones? Now those were a bit harder to come by. He waited while Spectre smoked his second cigarette, knocking ash into the puddle between his feet once—*twice—three times—*

“That was a shit pitch,” Spectre said, then; “You got a tape for me?”

Remus felt the air leave his lungs all at once.

“N–Not on me, but—”

“Then how am I supposed to know if you’re so ‘good’?”

“Come to a show! We play at the Shoestring pub out in—”

This time it was the driver—or bodyguard, Remus couldn’t tell.

“You think Gaz has time to wander around some waster’s pub?” He demanded, then; “Go on, piss off, kid. You’re done here.”

He shoved Remus again, albeit more gently, but this time Remus wasn’t taking the abuse sitting down. He grappled for the driver’s arm, holding on as if it was a life raft, and rejection was the sea he would otherwise drown in.

“We can get you a tape!” He begged. “Just give us a week!”

Spectre shook his head, brushing rain from his suit jacket. “I fly to New York on Wednesday, s’gotta be sooner than that. Can you get it to the office by noon tomorrow?”

No, Remus thought.

“Yes,” he said.

“Fine. Johnny,” he jutted his head toward Remus; “give the idiot my card.”

Johnny didn’t look too happy to be doling out his boss’s card to a nobody kid on the streets, but he did it without complaint and afterwards Spectre flicked away his final cigarette and got into his car. He stopped his chauffeur just as he went to shut the door, and raised a single finger toward Remus in warning.

“Listen here, tosspot, you should know the only reason I stopped to hear you out is because you look so pathetic standing there in the rain, but I don’t tolerate anybody dicking me around. I ain’t no Danny-fucking-Fields, right? You drop that tape off and it turns out shit—I’m throwing it in the bin and billing you for my wasted time.”

Remus nodded, positively thrumming from head to toe, and watched as Spectre gave him a final side-eyed glance, as though he were still working out if he’d made the right decision. Either way, he gestured soundlessly to the chauffeur, who shut the door and left Remus to stare back at his own sopping reflection in the window's glass. By the

time the car was pulling away from the curb, Regulus had come out of the shop to meet him, trainers splashing through puddles as he struggled to balance his umbrella and the Portastudio.

“*Well?* What’d he say?!”

Remus grinned down at the damp business card in his hand. “He told me to bring a demo to his office by noon tomorrow.”

“Do you even have a demo?"

Remus shook his head. “But we've got something better."

* * *

There was quite literally no time to waste. Before he’d even taken off his wet clothes, Remus was shooting toward the flat's phone and calling around to each of his friends’ places of work. He ordered them to get their sorry arses back to the flat as soon as possible, and when they asked why, Remus told them it was an emergency. To no surprise, it was James who arrived first, tired and out of breath after running the entire way from the tube station.

“ALRIGHT—” He wheezed; “WHO DIED?”

“I’ll tell you what died, Prongs! Your parents’ hopes and dreams of ever seeing their only son become a lawyer!”

“... Huh?”

Remus confessed to everything, and could tell by the look on his face that James didn’t entirely believe him. When they finally made it home, Sirius and Peter were also sceptical, but if Regulus’ corroboration wasn’t proof enough, Spectre’s business card certainly rid them of the rest of their doubts.

“A demo?” Sirius echoed, as the three of them fought over the card. “Where are we gonna get ourselves a whole fucking demo in less than twenty-four hours?!”

“From this!” And he planted the unboxed Portastudio down before their feet. Flummoxed, Sirius looked at James, who then looked to Peter, who asked;

“Why did he just hand us a plastic suitcase?”

It was not a suitcase, and from the moment Remus explained himself, nothing else mattered aside from the demo. Knowing that they were going to be up working until the sun rose again the next day, James and Peter both called into work feigning colds, whereas Sirius simply called Ray up at the Shoestring and shouted down the line; *We’re making a demo, can’t make it into work tomorrow, don’t sack me!*

It was a new step in the journey, that was for sure, and Lily appeared supportive—general concern notwithstanding.

“I just don’t want you to put all your eggs in one basket again,” she cautioned, as they ripped into the Portastudio later that night. “Remember what happened last time?”

“Don’t worry, Daisy,” James told her; “At least this way we’re making our *own* demo. If Gaz Spectre don’t want us then we’ll just go over his head. Who knows, maybe EMI will still want a taste.”

Despite what Dorcas’ catalogue had claimed, the Portastudio quickly proved to not be as user-friendly as they were expecting. There were four tracks, but Remus couldn’t for the life of him figure out how to switch between one without copying over the work he’d just finished on the other. As he attempted to scan through the horrendously complicated manual—*metres, faders, and overdubs, oh my!*—James and Sirius went blundering ahead on their own, as per usual, messing around with the microphone tracks and record button.

“Testing, testing,” Sirius drawled, nearly yawning into the microphone. He’d just discovered the master faders when his face lit up for a second time; “Oh shit, look! This button plays it backward.”

He stamped a finger down over the right button, and what followed sounded a lot like his voice set to helium, unintelligibly muttering the words;

'Gnit-set, gnit-set!'

“I wanna try!” James grabbed the microphone. “Prongs is the best Marauder.”

‘Re–nar-arm tss-eb eht-si sig-norp!’

“Wicked.” Sirius held the mike out to Peter. “Hey, Pete, think you can let one rip?”

It turns out that a fart played backward sounds a lot like a fart played forwards, but to four immature boys it was still worth a few cheap laughs. After that Lily ushered them out of her living room, claiming a need to study, and the boys excused themselves to the basement without argument. Setting the mini record studio aside for a while, they got to work on their songs, tweaking every strum and note until they had something polished enough to be proud of, but not too polished as to not belong on a rock and roll record.

Early on, Regulus had reluctantly joined them downstairs. He slumped back into their dingy band sofa with a book in his lap, pretending as though he weren't interested and occasionally called out helpful directions such as "You're dragging," and; "One of you's off tempo, five pounds if you can guess who it is." After about three hours of this, Sirius picked up the heavy Portastudio and dropped it at Regulus' feet.

"We get it, Edge, you're very funny, but we have less than twelve hours to get this thing done, and believe it or not, your little voice-over isn't helping! So here, why don't you actually make yourself useful and sort this headache out for us."

Regulus gave him an eye-roll, but eventually picked up the thick yellow manual. It took him less than an hour to know the machine inside and out, and after that they were forced to listen to him as he dictated orders like an unofficial sound tech.

"Have you even decided which songs you're going to put on this thing?" He asked, scribbling notes in the margins of the Portastudio's manual like he was studying for A-Levels.

"Reckon all of them," James called optimistically.

"All of them? You don't put *all* your songs onto a demo."

"He's right," Sirius said. "I don't know *how* he's right… but he is. Fucking Fletcher had us doing everything wrong. A demo's supposed to be a taste—a piece of what we can do, if you will. There'd be no point in paying us if we just handed them the entire cake for free."

"Then which songs?" Asked Peter.

At that, they all seemed to defer to Remus.

"Well… 'Downtown Girls' for sure. It was our first real song, and I stand by it."

“ ‘Hail Mary’ should be on it,” James added. “I never get tired of that one.”

“Put down ‘It’s Hard to Be a Teen’,” Sirius told Regulus. “And ‘Doomed Generation’. We’ve just finished it—make it a grand ol’ ‘fuck you’ to Fletcher.”

Regulus glanced up from his notes. “That’s four. Reckon more than five would be pushing it.”

“We still need a ballad,” Peter pointed out. “Should we do ‘How Nice It Could Be’?”

No one said anything, and again all eyes were on Remus. He knew exactly what they wanted.

“No.”

“But Moony—”

“It’s not a good song.”

Sirius bent down before him, grasping the neck of Remus’ bass. “It *is* a good song, Moons—I swear… It’s not just your feelings for her in there, it’s *you.* You think I could stand it if it weren’t? If you really hate it, then we’ll never bring it up again but…” Sirius sighed. “It’s a good song, and I think it deserves a spot on our first album.”

Remus hung his head. *Dammit.*

For so long, accepting that song had felt like accepting defeat. That she was really gone, and at the end of it all, she’d never really cared for him in the first place. It stung more after his falling out with Tomny—turned the defeat into mindless shame. But what came after shame?

Acceptance?

Compassion, a tiny voice said. It wasn't hurtful, or angry. It felt like her, and Remus ached. Maybe it was time then. Maybe with this, he could finally put Tonya's memory to bed.

“It can’t be called that,” he swore. “It needs another name.”

Sirius thoughts for a moment. “ ‘Midnight Dancer’.”

It felt right, and slowly Remus nodded his head in permission.

“Fine… but I’m gonna need a drink first.”

Staying long enough to kiss Remus over his hair, Sirius stood and gestured to Regulus and the Portastudio.

“Well? Blimey, what are we waiting for? Someone get this man a fucking drink so we can record these songs!”

* * *

Tuesday 3rd April 1979 — 11:14 AM

Someone was shaking him.

“Lupin! Wake up! Lupin! *Augh*… Sod it.”

SMACK!

Remus awoke with a start, shooting upright on the sofa so quickly, he nearly slammed his forehead into Regulus. Clamping a hand over his throbbing cheek, which now burned from the force of Regulus’ slap, he moaned;

“Blithering fuck—Regulus, did you just hit me?”

“Yes. And do you even know what time it is?” Regulus snarled.

“Time for you to work on your bloody bedside manner, I’d say.”

“It’s past eleven, you nob. Shouldn’t you four be on your way to deliver that tape? Or did you stay up all night working on it for nothing...”

Like shaking off the cobwebs, it took a moment for Remus to understand the gravity of what Regulus was telling him. He looked out over the basement, where his friends had all passed out, empty beer bottles and dinner plates strewn out between them. Horrified, Remus made a grab for Regulus’ wrist, turning it over so he could see his watch.

“Shit… OH SHIT!”

“That godmother of yours called again, by the way,” Regulus told him. “She left a message on the machine. I think she was looking for me.”

“Hope you said hi then,” Remus grunted, “save her the trouble of yelling at me.” He began scrambling for his socks and shoes, which had somehow ended up across the room. As he tugged them on he gave James a gentle tap on either cheek to get him going and eventually they were able to rouse both Sirius and Peter and get them on their feet as well.

“I don’t understand—how could we *all* have fallen asleep?!” Peter bleated as Remus rushed to free their homemade demo from the Portastudio’s tape deck.

“Who cares? We’ve got thirty fucking minutes to get this tape across the entire city!” Came Sirius, as he desperately attempted to tame the bed head he’d received from falling asleep with his head against the wall.

“I’ll get the van keys,” James said, only to come to a startling halt when Regulus raised the key ring on a single finger. “My hero!” He moaned, before snatching the keys and smacking a fat kiss on Regulus’ forehead. The move startled Regulus horrendously, but not before James had time to smile and disappear up the basement stairs, a quick *‘Thanks darling!’* following him out.

Unwashed, exhausted, and probably a little hungover, the other three Marauders hung close to James’ ankles, racing down to the corner where they could throw themselves into the old Volkswagen van. Poor Peter barely had the side door shut before James was ripping away from the curb.

“Where am I going?” He demanded. “I don’t bloody know where I’m going!”

“Moony—card!”

After struggling with his pocket, Remus reached forward and slapped Spectre’s rumpled business card into Sirius’ palm. “It says Barnsbury,” he told them. “Head toward Fitzrovia, Potter, it’ll be faster!”

James did so, and they whipped along London's Westway for a good while, but when the two lanes inevitably became a one-lane and they found themselves stuck behind a slow-moving milk float, Sirius nearly had a fit.

“For Christ’s sake, Prongs—GO AROUND HIM!”

“And where shall I go, Padfoot—up onto the pavement?! Shall I drive

into the row of parked cars? Or I know—is there a magical flying van button on the console that'll I've somehow missed? 'Cause if you could kindly point it out *I'd much appreciate it!"*

"Shut up!" Remus bellowed. "There's no point in ripping each other's faces off, we'll get there when we—"

But Sirius wasn't listening. From the passenger's side, he'd waited until he saw a gap in the parked cars along the road, then he reached over and grabbed the steering wheel, yanking it to the left. Everyone screamed—including Sirius—and James swerved around the milk float, narrowly avoiding slamming into the back of a taxi parked at a forward taxi rank.

"YOU IDIOT!" James wailed, beating Sirius with one fist and clinging to the steering wheel with the other. "YOU COULD'VE KILLED US!"

"Glory at any cost, Potter!" Sirius cackled.

They made it to North Barnsbury with little more than three minutes to spare, and after the quickest parallel park of James' career, the four Marauders began scurrying down the street with only Spectre's business card to guide them.

"Forty-four," Sirius said, "we're looking for forty-four!"

James counted the addresses; "Twenty-eight, twenty-nine…!"

"Uh, not to be a downer, but we did actually manage to finish the tape, right?" Wheezed Peter. "I can't remember anything after Sirius' sixth 'Hail Mary' overdub."

"No point in worrying now, Pete," Remus told him, with a similar feeling of unease in his gut.

It was quite miraculous that they actually managed to make it on time. They found the studio office on a very fine street, in a building that was made up of several floors and a spectacular amount of windows all interspersed with carved stone columns. The door marked "Number 44" was painted green, with an expensive knob that fell open under their hands like butter. They looked ragged and out of place when compared to the lobby's plush velvet furniture, but the secretary was away from her desk and thankfully no one stopped to question them as they legged it toward the nearest lift.

"Guys, I think I'm gonna vomit," James moaned, bending over at the

waist as the lift doors slid shut ahead of them.

Sirius groaned; “You always have to vomit."

“Try some deep breaths, James,” offered Peter.

"Ugh..."

Sirius sniffed the front of his t-shirt. “Moons, do I stink? I feel like I stink… Blimey, I can’t meet Gaz Spectre like this. I smell like a skip bin!”

“Everyone just shut up!” Remus snapped, hands in his hair and fisting it by the root. His stomach seemed to be dropping down a floor for every one the lift went up, and he had to pull the tape from his pocket just to keep his hands busy. On the front was the flat’s address and phone number, and on the backside was the band's track-listing:

MARAUDERS, APRIL 1979

03:14 Downtown Girls
04:37 Hail Mary
02:37 Midnight Dancer
03:22 It’s Hard to Be a Teen
04:03 Doomed Generation

It felt odd to see it spelt out so clearly. Three years of hopes, dreams, and work, all for one tiny tape. Madness, actually.

When the lift's bell dinged to signal their arrival, the doors slid open to reveal a long hallway interspersed with various offices bearing words like ‘management’ or ‘publishing’ or 'communications' on tiny metal plaques. Secretaries fluttered around like moths to a porch light, carrying stacks of paper and fresh pots of coffee and paying them little mind.

Unsure of where else to go, the four Marauders began moving warily down the hall. There they stopped before one of the first offices, where they could overhear someone shouting on the phone. There was a man inside pacing back and forth in front of the desk, practically strangling himself with the telephone cord.

“No—No! Now you listen to me, we *paid* for that airtime! Mr. Spectre signed a contract with the BBC at the beginning of the year that states

—what? … No! Listen… either you put my boys on the air, or you'll be out of a fucking job, right! You wanna know how many names I got working over at your bloody BBC? Enough to—bloody hell… Just—Just hold on…"

They'd been spotted. The man marched over to the door and might've imparted upon them a few choice words not appropriate for one's typical office setting. Only, he had forgotten to set the receiver down, and instead yanked the entire phone right off the desk with a glorious clatter.

"FUCK!" He spun on them; "Would you please—piss off?!"

The door slammed in their faces, each of them leaping back to avoid getting smacked in the face.

"Gee, sounds like someone's having a bad day," mumbled Peter, making all of them crack up.

They found the main office of Spectre Records—unsurprisingly—waiting for them at the very end of the hall. The room smelt of wood and cigarette smoke—not that far off from the musty smell of the catalogue rooms back at the Hawkings library. There were several cubicle-like desks, each taken up by a different office worker and their type-writer. As the chorus of clicking keys filled the air, Remus found himself drawn to the vibrantly-coloured paintings of various rock idols that hung on the walls. They had Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison, and every member of the Beatles.

Across the room, sat what appeared to be the main desk, where a young guy in a black turtleneck was going through a box of files, sorting them into different wire baskets. Behind him sat one final office, with a door bearing a single window made of translucent glass and the name 'Gaz Spectre' written across it in gold letters.

"At least we know we're in the right place," Remus murmured, as the four of them plucked up enough courage to go forward. They were spotted before they even made it to the desk, and the guy looked them up and down with a condescending brow before returning to his files.

"What do you want?" He muttered, clearly not that interested. None of them said anything until Sirius shoved Remus ahead of them like some half-assed sacrifice.

"Er, hi. My name's Remus Lupin, and uh… Mr. Spectre asked me—or–or us to drop off a tape for him. It–It's a demo… for our... band..."

He felt stupid—*Why did he always choke at these things?*—not that the guy seemed to notice.

“Right,” he said blandly; “Well, you can leave it there with the others.” He gestured languidly at a wire tray sitting atop the desk, already piled high with discarded tapes and envelopes that looked as though they hadn’t been touched in weeks. Seeing them, Remus baulked a bit and glanced dubiously at his friends.

“Sorry, but I think Mr. Spectre meant for me to give it to him directly.”

There was a short chuckle;

“The day Gaz Spectre wants some Woody Guthrie wannabe to hand him anything is the day he promotes me to company director—now if you don’t mind, we here at Spectre Records are very busy. Leave the tape if you want, but please go away.”

“Isn’t there any way we could meet him?” James urged, candidly. “Just for two minutes?”

“Even if I wanted you here for another two minutes, there’d be no point. Mr. Spectre flew out for New York this morning.”

The news was like a punch to the gut, and Remus instantly had his hackles up. It was one thing to stutter, it was another to take a shot lying down.

“He said he wasn't leaving until Wednesday,” he snarled. “We were up all night working on this damn thing. If you could just bloody give it to him then we—”

The guy had slapped the lid onto his filing box.

“Look, you can leave the tape there and go, or you can toss it in the bin for me and I’ll have security throw each of you out onto your rears. Now what’s it gonna be?”

Perhaps it was the lack of sleep, or the fact that he’d promised his friends salvation in the form of Gaz Spectre—whatever it was, Remus was about three seconds away from knocking that smug head off the top of his stupid fucking turtleneck. If not for the grace of Sirius, he might’ve. As it was, Sirius stepped forward and grabbed Remus by the shoulder. Eyes connecting, Sirius gave him a slow, knowing nod as he took the tape and dropped it unceremoniously into the wire basket.

“Thanks for the opportunity, mate,” he said, saluting the other guy before guiding Remus away from his own doom. Retreating back toward the lift, Remus could tell that whatever morale they’d walked in with was already fading. And it was all his fault.

“Now what are we gonna do?” Peter grumbled, as they rode the lift back down to the lobby.

“We’re gonna do exactly what we’ve been doing all along, I suppose,” sighed James. It made Remus want to punch him too.

“How is it you’re always so goddamn optimistic all the time?”

“Would you rather me be all dour and moody like you?” James asked, before reaching up and ruffling the hair at the back of Remus’ skull. “There’ll be other chances. That girl Sybill just got us on to play at the university last week, right?”

He was right, but because Remus wasn’t good like James, he turned around and nudged Sirius.

“You were unnaturally quiet in there.”

“I just figured letting you punch the guy and going to jail wouldn't be as conducive to meeting our goals.” Sirius smiled meekly, then stepped back to wrap his arms around Peter and James’ shoulders. “C’mon, lads, let’s not waste our time on sods like these anymore. We’ve got a wedding to get to.”

The lift bell dinged as they arrived at the ground floor, and all of them nodded respectively, though it was hard not to notice the air of disappointment that followed them out on their heels.

* * *

You’re gonna tell me sweet things,
You’re gonna make my heart sing;
And I’m gonna hear bells ring,
‘Cause I’m gonna love you too, oh!

- “I’m Gonna Love You Too” Blondie, 1978

Wednesday 4th April 1979 - Lottie's Wedding Day…

Sirius banged his fist against the bathroom door.

"Reg, come on, mate! I'm all for having a cheeky wank every now and then but do you think it can wait until after? We have somewhere to be, you know!"

"Fuck off! You did this on purpose!"

"And just how was I supposed to know the cleaners were gonna shrink your suit? Come on, mate… Pal…? Buddy…?!" Another bang. "Shit, Reg—quit being such a whinger! It's too late to go get another suit anyway, so put on those big boy trousers and come on out here like a man!"

"I said, piss—OFF!"

Sirius sighed, shaking his head haplessly, before glancing down at Regulus' ruined suit.

"Did the cleaners really shrink it?" Remus whispered, lifting one of the cuffs.

"Ha—no," Sirius snorted, before lowering his voice. "I paid the tailor to take it in a few inches in the chest and sleeves." He turned the jacket over, showing off the fresh seams. "Can't very well wear a suit that doesn't fit, now can he?"

Remus scoffed, dropping the cuff and mouthing; *You're evil.*

Sirius winked. Then he banged his fist against the bathroom door a few more times.

"C'mooooooan, Reg! Let's see the suit! You and I are blood—I know it looks good."

The door flew open, nearly taking off the tip of Sirius' nose. As he leapt out of the way, Regulus Black stormed out wearing none other than a powder blue suit, complete with a ruffled jabot collar and matching white loafers. Sirius had clearly outdone himself on the spectacular get up, but the look on his brother's face did not appear to be all that grateful.

"You know, I think I like it," said Remus. "You look like Bowie."

He and Sirius shared a cheeky glance, and then both burst out laughing as Regulus began to seethe.

“Oh, shut up,” he snarled, tugging viciously at the collar. “You two are really taking the piss if you think I’m wearing this out in public. I look like if Liberace and a tube of toothpaste had a baby.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Sirius scoffed. “It doesn’t even have rhinestones. If you really want to look like Liberace, you should try this.”

With a flourish, Sirius tossed him what appeared to be a plain black silk jacket. The suit might’ve been alright, if it weren’t for the embroidered inferno of bedazzled red flames and ostrich feathers zipping up its back.

“I cannot believe you wear this shit out in public," Regulus spat, throwing the suit aside with all the rest.

“Don’t be silly. Most of the time I just put it on and give Moony little fashion shows while he sits on the bed in the nude.”

"It's very breathy on the bits," Remus agreed, slouching back on their bed. Regulus scowled at him.

“I don’t even know why I have to go to this bloody wedding. It’s not like it’s *my* friend who’s decided to get married at eighteen.”

“You have to go because *we’re* going,” Sirius said, reaching forward to straighten out his brother's shoulder sleeves for him. “Can't very well sit around here by yourself all day, I won't allow it. Now Lottie’s been kind enough to invite you, so let's put on a brave face and go show everyone how spectacular you look in my clothes."

"One day, Sirius... One day I will strangle you."

Just then the bedroom door opened, and James strolled in wearing full black-tie. “Hey lads, just about ready to—CRICKEY! Wow, Regulus, you look great!”

For a moment Remus thought he could see steam coming out of Regulus’ ears. Shoving Sirius’ hands down, he bolted for the bathroom and slammed the door after himself. It made James baulk a bit, but by then Sirius was already hammering his fist on the door again.

“What the bloody hell are you doing now? It’s only Pot—”

“PISS OFF!”

It took some finessing, but eventually Sirius did manage to get Regulus out of the bathroom. He was not pleased to know that the rest of them would be wearing black, but didn’t have much other choice; Sirius was the only one closest to his size, and the only one with a spare suit at home.

By the time the car arrived, each of them was freshly showered and dressed, with their hair combed and faces neatly shaved—on Lily’s orders, of course. The ceremony was being held in a lovely church just outside St Albans, with the reception set to commence at a nearby country club straight after.

As they were arriving, Remus spotted Dorcas talking to one of James’ cousins in the church’s atrium. Rather than a dress, she had opted for a deep emerald pantsuit, with a fashionable neckline flared hem. She waved when she noticed them, and broke away from her previous conversation with ease.

“Nice suit, Meadowes,” said Sirius.

“You too.” Dorcas began fiddling with one of her earrings. “Blimey, has anyone got anything to drink? If I’m to spend the next six hours surrounded by this many rich old white people, I should think I’d need to be pissed first.”

They didn’t, it being a church, and Sirius smirked as he wrapped an arm around her.

“Hang in there, love. Plenty of time to get pissed later. And hey, I think the wine’s kosher too!”

Moving from the atrium and into the nave of the church, they passed several ushers handing out ceremony programs, as well as those waiting to escort the few older guests to their seats. Despite their close personal proximity to the bride, the only task the four Marauders had been given was to show up and make sure Peter made it through his reception speech, though that in itself was proving harder than anticipated.

“I dunno…” Peter stammered, as they filed further into the church with the other guests. He turned to look at Moira on his arm; “M–Maybe Simeon should do it, after all.”

"Don't say that, Petey."

“Yeah, isn’t Sim already doing the best man speech?” Sirius drawled. “You know, since Roger doesn’t have any friends of his own? You’d think that’d be ten times worse.”

Moira glared while Peter’s shoulders slumped, but it was James who leaned in with encouragement;

“Ignore him, Pete. Lottie asked you to give a speech because there’s no one else in the world she’d rather have speak at her wedding than her *twin* brother.”

“You don’t know that, maybe she asked me and I said no,” Sirius snarked, earning himself a sharp flick to the ear from Dorcas. He sighed then nodded at Peter; “Don’t know what you’re worrying for, Wormy, you’re gonna do great. Hell, you’ve been practising that speech of yours for days now.”

“Sirius is right,” said Remus. “Lottie’s going to love it.”

Peter nodded, albeit apprehensively, and just then Mrs. Potter came rushing up the aisle.

“Oh, boys, there you are!” She chirped, holding a hand to her chest and looking beautiful in a burgundy silk gown. “Petey, your mother’s still with the girls, but here’s your buttonhole. Take it and go to the back of the church with the other groomsmen, Simeon will help you pin it on.”

Nodding quickly, Peter took the little flower pin and shot back the way they’d come, leaving Mrs. Potter behind to catch her breath.

“Busy morning, Mum?” James asked.

“You have no idea.” She sighed and cupped her son’s cheek dotingly. “I do hope that you’ll give me more than just three months’ notice when you decide to get married.”

“Does this mean you’ve already popped the question, Potter?” Dorcas mused. “I should let Lily know.”

“Lay off, Meadowes,” James squeaked, obviously embarrassed.

“It's lucky for me, really,” chuckled Mrs. Potter. “Poor Jenny’s been barely sleeping, what with all the work it’s taken to get everything ready for today. She’s just lucky her daughter isn’t a pickier bride.”

“Well, I think it looks great,” Sirius said, turning his head to admire the church. “Whoever did the flowers bloody knew what they were doing. Moony, what do you think? Blue or yellow flowers for ours?”

“I think you’re lucky to have not burst into flames walking in here, Black.”

Smiling, Effie reached over and pinched Remus’ cheeks. “Oh, honestly! You boys get more handsom every time I see you. Remus, you’re as tall as a weed, and Sirius, your hair is truly a feat. And—And, who is this?”

They all came to attention at once, most of all Regulus, who Effie had stopped to stare at as though she were already dazzled. Adversely, Regulus looked as though he were ready to leap behind one of the pews, though that didn’t stop Sirius from reaching over and wrapping a proud arm around his shoulders.

“Mum, I'd like you to meet Regulus, my brother,” he announced. “Handsome tosser came as a spare. Bit last minute, but he cleans up well, right?”

“Regulus,” Effie echoed, breathlessly. “I’m so pleased you could come. And that we're finally meeting—*oh!"* She covered her face, and then her heart. "Monty and I have heard *so* much about you.”

Regulus dipped his eyes. “It's good to meet you as well, ma’am...”

“Are you here for long, dear?"

"He's not sure yet," Sirius answered, peering proudly at his brother. "He's on holiday from school. Couldn't resist coming to see his big brother in action."

Regulus glared at him, but Effie didn't seem to notice. Instead she clapped her hands together happily, making the bracelets on her wrists jingle.

"We should have you over to the house if there’s time, see about supper. Have you ever had kadhi? Do you like chutney? Sirius hates anything spicy, but I've hope yet. How about you?"

James slapped Regulus on the back fondly. “Hey, Mum’s a great cook!” He told him. “She can make anything—whatever you want! She’s brilliant with puddings too. She makes these magas for Diwali that just melt in your mouth.”

Regulus opened his mouth nervously, but before he could answer, Effie had grasped both him and Sirius by the cheek.

“My, the resemblance *is* uncanny, isn’t it?” She marvelled, turning their faces this way and that. “No mistaking you for brothers, that’s for sure.”

“He gets it all from me,” Sirius preened, turning to press a fat kiss on Regulus’ cheek.

Just then Mr. Potter arrived, along with a throng of other attendees. He informed them that the ceremony was set to start in a few minutes and that they should find their seats, which were toward the front of the church, on the bride’s side. As they were sitting, Mr. Potter turned to Regulus and smiled.

“I must say, that is a strapping suit, young man.”

For a wedding that’d been tossed together in only a few short months, the ceremony really was beautiful. Remus had never been to a wedding, and after Sirius’ multiple assurances that most of them were merely dull, tedious affairs, he hadn’t been expecting much. Lily and the girls looked spectacular when they walked down the aisle in their dusty pink bridesmaids’ dresses. Lily walked arm-in-arm with one of Roger’s younger cousins while Peter walked with Marlene, who was only slightly hindered by the extra three inches her high-heels had allotted her. After that came Simeon with Mary, who seemed pleased as punch with the man she’d found on her arm.

Finally it was the bride’s turn.

Not even the white veil could hide Lottie's smile as she began her descent down the aisle. The dress she'd chosen somewhat resembled a very puffy cake, but Mr. Pettigrew was too busy blubbering to notice how it snagged on the end of every other church pew as he gave her away. Roger had been rocking anxiously on the spot since the start of the ceremony, though luckily for him, it didn't appear as though his soon-to-be wife held any of the same reservations. Lottie strutted straight up onto the dais, and when the priest declared that it was time for the groom to kiss his bride, it was she who reached first, grabbing Roger by the front of his suit jacket and practically dipping him herself.

Lottie's bold declaration of love had set the tone for the rest of the evening. Just a short four minute drive from the church was the country club the Pettigrews’ had booked for the reception. Walking in,

Remus found a grand ballroom made up with several tables clothed in white linen. Stone columns held up the grand ceiling, each wrapped in swathes of white and blue flowers and crystal chandeliers hang overhead, reflecting off the lights like a million tiny disco balls. It was warm for April, and thankfully did not start to rain until most of the guests were inside. There they mingled, and soon Remus discovered that Dorcas was not the only of their friends to be invited.

Just ahead of supper, Remus had popped off to use the loo. On his way back he stopped by the cloakroom to fetch his lighter from his jacket pocket, only to run into Andy and Ted Tonks as they wandered in, looking the same as they had back on Christmas.

“I feel terrible for missing the ceremony,” Andy moaned, after rushing to embrace him. “It was so nice of Lottie to invite us, but Ted had work and of course Dora just had to throw a fit when we were about to leave. The invitation did say we could bring her, but…”

“But nothing,” said Ted. “Could you even imagine Dora at a wedding? She’d just as likely set something on fire. Now which way’s the open bar, Lupin? S’only reason I came.”

“That’s what I get for eloping,” Andy scoffed, shooting her husband a playful glare. “Do try and behave yourself, darling, at least until we congratulate Lottie and Roger. Have you seen them, Remus?"

"Head table."

They turned, and were almost through the door when Remus called out again;

“Uh, Andy—hold on a second! I think there’s someone you might want to see first…”

By now the ballroom was flush with guests of all sorts, all mingling and vying to give Lottie and Roger their congrats. A large table along the back wall had been dedicated to the collection of the couple’s opulent gifts, and waiters kept coming and going from the kitchen bearing trays of champagne and canapés. They found Regulus sitting at their table with Sirius behind him, an arm locked around his baby brother's neck. The pair seemed to be mid-argument, and though Sirius was laughing and Regulus appeared to be holding his own well-enough, Lily and Mary had still come down from their bridal table to fight in Regulus’ defence.

“Oh, Sirius, really!” Lily groaned. “Let him go!”

“Yeah, this is a wedding, not a boxing ring,” huffed Moira. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size!”

“He is my own size!” Sirius grinned. “In fact, I’m pretty sure the cheeky blighter’s taller than me now! I’m—*nghh*—I’m just doing my due diligence as a big brother and—*ngh! Hold still, Reg*—reminding him where he sits on the food chain!”

Regulus clung to Sirius’ arm, attempting to throw him off. When that didn’t work, he scrambled for one of the table forks and raised it threateningly above him, mere inches from his brother’s eye. This got Sirius to back off. Releasing him, he creased up with laughter until James came up from behind and grabbed him round the neck as well.

“You gonna impede on Edge’s honour like that, Black?! Well, how ‘bout I give you a taste of your own medicine!?”

The girls laughed as Sirius received his just deserts, but Regulus only appeared red-faced and frazzled. He pulled at the edge of his ruffled collar, finally noticing Andy as she surged toward him from across the room. The hug she gave him when she landed was twice as fierce as Sirius' headlock, and nearly had Regulus toppling from his chair.

“Regulus! Oh, it's really you!”

“An–Andromeda!" Regulus spluttered, practically eating her hair. "What are you doing here?!”

“They—were—invited!” Sirius grunted, finally peeling himself free of James’ bicep. “Dammit, Potter, you trying to kill me?”

James shrugged. “What’s a wedding without a few near-misses?”

“I’ll remember that when it’s you who’s getting hitched!”

No one seemed to be paying attention to them anymore; with her arms still encircling her cousin, Andy whipped around and called out to Ted.

“Ted! Ted—*ohmygod*—Ted, it’s Regulus!”

“Is it?”

Ted went to join them, and the entire time Andy spent introducing them, Regulus just appeared dazed. Remus had never had any cousins, so he couldn’t really relate, but he thought that if someone as

wonderful as Andromeda appeared out of thin air just to tell him how happy she was to see him again, he'd be a bit speechless too.

Glancing down at the drink in his hand, Remus just about missed it when Marlene hobbled up behind him, complaining of sore feet.

"Rough night, Cherry?"

"It's these bloody shoes," Marlene moaned, gesturing to the high-heels she'd been forced to wear throughout the ceremony. "It's like walking on an ice pick. I'm already a giant on my own, do I really need to be risking broken ankles too?"

"You could just take them off," he suggested. "It's a long dress, I'm sure no one would notice."

"Mary would notice. And she's even worse than Lottie—you should've seen her this morning, practically had to fight her off when she came at me with a pair of knickers the size of a baby's fist. Have you ever had to wear a girdle, Remus?"

"Surprisingly, no."

"Lucky bastards, all of you. Ugh—*shit*… Think I could get Sirius to trade shoes with me?"

"Maybe, but I reckon he'd have to be a lot drunker first." Smiling, Remus offered her his arm. "Shall I escort you to your table for supper, Miss McKinnon."

"Oh, yes please."

Remus had never heard a wedding toast done before, nor was he expecting so many tears. Mary was having to hand Lottie tissues by the handful, and after Mr. Pettigrew's speech there was hardly a dry eye in the room. This was promptly rectified by Simeon, who spun a story of a five year-old Lottie who'd come with a bullfrog she'd insisted was her Prince Charming that left everyone in stitches. Even Roger's parents made a speech, in which his mother projected his and Lottie's baby photos on the wall for everyone to 'ooh' and 'awe' at.

Finally it was Peter's turn. With everyone having already cried and laughed and awed, Remus could tell he was feeling the pressure. After wiping his palms on his trousers, Peter stepped up to the tiny microphone and cleared his throat.

“Hello, every—”

A sharp ring of feedback echoed through the hall, so loud it was almost comical. While all the guests winced and Moira covered her mouth, Remus and the others continued to watch anxiously from their table. Next to him, Sirius began muttering desperately under his breath;

“C’mon, Wormy. You can do it, mate, just a few words...”

When silence returned, the remaining three Marauders waited with bated breath for Peter to say something—anything.

“Right... So I’m Peter, b-brother to the bride and all that, but you probably knew that already…"

A few limp chuckles echoed from around the room, the loudest of which coming from James. It wasn't much, but after glancing toward his friends and receiving a thumbs up from almost all of them, Peter sighed, and finally crumpled his treasured speech paper in his hands.

"I’m not really one for speeches," he said into the microphone, more confidently than before; "In fact I'm not really one for public speaking at all. I nearly took Physics just to get out of it at school, but I figure I know at least one half of this lovely couple pretty well, so might as well give it a go.”

“Yeah, Pete!” Sirius whooped, prompting a few others to laugh and clap in support. At the head table, Lottie smiled and leaned into Roger’s shoulder. It took another second for Peter to gather his wits, but then he glanced at his sister and Lottie smiled, nodding him on.

Remus knew then that he’d be okay.

“You know, whenever anyone asks me when the best time of my life was, I always give 'em the same answer.” Peter paused to clear his throat; “September 21st, 1960, about four forty-five in the morning. Absolute shit time for my mum, but during those few minutes when Lottie was out and I had the whole womb to myself? Yeah… best fourteen minutes of my life.”

Everyone laughed—*thank Christ*—and Sirius gave another sharp wolf-whistle from their table.

“That was the last bit of peace and quiet I ever got. It's been nothing but *talk-talk-talk* ever since. But don't get me wrong, I love my sister!

Love her to death… Like literally, I could *kill* her sometimes. But she's always been there for me, like the time she let her gerbil get into the vents at our gran's house. I climbed in to get the bastard, only I got stuck and we had to wait for our dad to get back to help. Well, eventually Lottie got bored so she ended up going out for ice cream with a friend."

"That was me!" Mary exclaimed.

"—Yeah, thanks, Mary. They brought me back a Mr. Whippy with a flake though, so can't complain really... But then there was the time Lottie convinced me that boys got periods too, and that mine was late and I should be embarrassed! So get this, to fix it she told me to put ketchup on napkins and leave 'em in the bin as evidence of my 'manhood'. This went on for about six months—*Yeah!* Six whole months! Pretty sure the boys thought I was dying."

James leaned over and smacked Sirius. "You owe me five pounds."

More laughter from the tables closest to them, and then Mrs. Potter was shushing everyone.

"Lottie is important to me," Peter finished; "She's not just my sister, she's my twin—my literal other half, if you wanna get technical. I can't imagine a world without her where any of this shit works out for me. So to my sister, thanks for not eating me in the womb. To our Mum—thanks for making us both, and sorry for cursing. And to Lottie's new husband, Rog, please take care of her. Make her happy, in… Well, whatever she wants, really. 'Cause if you don't, I'm pretty sure she'll just make it happen without you. Like my dad used to say—it's Lottie's world, and we're just living in it."

The applause was grand, and when Lottie got up to hug her brother, she held on for a very long time. Afterwards, with the speeches done with and supper eaten, the happy couple cut their cake, and the rest of the night opened ahead of them like the final chapter of a good book. Lottie looked like a princess during her and Roger's first dance, and when the floor cleared to include everyone, the girls surged to join her. They'd hired a live band for the event, as well as a professional wedding singer who went by the name of Roy G. Lockman. The sod wasn't completely tone deaf, just a yuppy blonde who had more interest in flirting with the guests than doing his job. More than once Remus caught him staring down at his shoes mid-song, gyrating his hips as though he were trying to make love with the floor. It didn't occur to Remus until later that the dance floor was made up of

mirrors, and Roy was essentially staring at his reflection the entire time.

“I think it’s sort of great we’re not playing,” Sirius said, as he and Remus watched Roy begin what was his third Rod Stewart song in a row. “ ‘Least this way we can get as drunk as we want. Don’t have to worry about sounding sloppy!”

“You’re always sloppy, Padfoot.”

Sirius rolled his tongue, then looked at him sideways. “Wanna dance, Moons?”

“Maybe later.”

“But you promised.”

“Did not. Go dance with Mary.”

"Can't. She's already got a partner."

It was true. Across the dance floor, Simeon had Mary by the hips, spinning her loosely in time with the music. The two of them made a rather handsome couple, though they were not the only ones. Smiling ear-to-ear, Mr. Potter had gathered his wife by the arm and led her out onto the dance floor the first chance he got; the pair of them laughing and kissing each other's cheeks as though they were teenagers.

"Come onnnn, Moony. I won't even make you waltz!"

"Sorry, Padfoot, but Remus Lupin does not dance. You'll just have to find someone else. Maybe Moira'll give it a go."

"Now that's just being cruel." Sirius sighed irritably. “Fine then. If you're not going to dance you can at least make yourself useful and get me another drink.”

For that, Remus had no argument. Over by the bar, he found Regulus waiting on a drink of his own, looking annoyed and regretfully out of place in his blue suit.

“What’d you order?” Remus asked, having to raise his voice to be heard over the music and Roy’s near-constant bleating.

“Tom Collins,” Regulus yelled back.

“Oh, very manly, that.”

“My dad used to order them all the time.”

The smile on Remus’ face wavered, and he called out to the barman; “Two more Tom Collins!”

“Shouldn’t you be out there?” Regulus asked, jutting his chin toward the mass of frolicking bodies. “Don’t tell me my brother is sitting out.”

“Nope.” Remus pointed to the middle of the crowd, where Sirius and Lily were now dancing with their arms around each other. It made Regulus raise a brow.

“You let him dance with other girls?”

“Why not? It's only Lily." Remus paused, gauging the reaction. "Should he not be dancing with *Lily*...?"

"I don't care who he dances with," Regulus answered blandly. Remus had no time to think up a reply; the drinks had arrived.

"Lily's got a boyfriend, you know," Remus hummed, picking up his.

"Yeah, Potter. And?"

"I was just making sure you knew... She and James have been together for—like, three years now."

"Does this conversation have a point, Lupin?"

Remus forced a smile; "Nope," and then reached over to clink his glass against Regulus'. The band was still playing Rod Stewart, and Remus glanced back in time to watch as Sirius twirled Lily around and dipped her.

‘Tonight’s the night!
It’s gonna be alright,
‘Cause I love you girl,
Ain't nobody gonna stop us now…’

“Ugh. Does that idiot know how to sing anything else?” Regulus snapped, clearly not impressed with the chosen repertoire.

“What, don’t tell me you don’t like a little Rod Stewart, Edge?”

He wasn't expecting a big rebuttal, but when Regulus didn't respond at all, Remus was disappointed.

"Regulus, what are you staring at?"

He got his answer when he spotted James sprinting toward them from the sea of tables, his eyes wild and giddy. He had a drink in his hand that he nearly split as he rushed them, but stopped a few feet short when he realised he'd found who he was looking for.

"Moony! *Moony—Moony—Moony*—you'll never believe what just happened!"

"What is it?"

James set a hand upon his shoulder. "Pete just went up against his dad. They were arguing over the band, and Pete told him he could take his opinion and shove it up his arse."

"Really? Peter said that?"

"Uh-huh! Says that it's his life, and he's gonna do what he wants with it. Even if it means following us into *hell!"*

James said this last bit very passionately, in a tone that could only make Remus smile.

"I should like to be in hell," he grinned; "At least that means we've gotten somewhere."

James laughed, then nodded in agreement. "Doubt this is the last we hear of it, but still, our boy Petey's done it!"

"So Pettigrew's got a spine after all," Regulus said, swishing his drink around in its glass. James tapped him jovially, which made Regulus flinch away.

"Peter's always had courage," James insisted, "when it counts." He leaned into the bartender to order, and after the man turned away, stole several garnish olives from the small glass on the counter. "Olive?"

"No, thanks," Regulus said, rebuffing the offer.

"Ooh. Picky."

"I'm not picky, I just happen to not like olives!"

James shrugged, popping the olive into his mouth. “Suit yourself,” he said, then; "Lily hates them too."

Regulus bristled quietly, only enough for Remus to notice. James, meanwhile, was already collecting his drink and patting Remus on the arm.

“Alright, Moony, where’s Sirius? Bet he'll love congratulating Pete for telling his dad to piss off.”

“Dance floor. With your girlfriend actually.”

Remus gestured toward the front of the hall, where Sirius and Lily were still swinging each other around by the hips. Another Rod Stewart song had started to play, this one faster than the last. The upbeat tempo succeeded in getting most people out of their seats—even the old guests looking to feel young again. Sex just had that power over people.

‘If you want my body and you think I’m sexy,
Come on, sugar, let me know!
If you really need me, just reach out and touch me,
Come on, honey, tell me so!’

This was something Sirius could dance to. He swung Lily around happily, the pair of them shaking their waists back and forth in double-time. Next to them, Dorcas and Marlene stood on the edge of the dance floor, hands clasped as they spun around each other. They weren’t dancing any more suggestively than the song demanded, but they held each other close and kept hands on each other’s face and body, same as any other couple.

Only, they were both women of course.

“Really, it’s just deplorable!”

The voice came as a shrill squeak, like air escaping from a balloon. James had spotted them first, as it was, and scowled at the two old women like he could send them into hospice with the mere force of his glare.

“It’s unnatural,” one was saying. “Don’t they have any shame?”

“It’s disgusting, is what it is,” the other squawked. “No decency at all.

If this were my daughter's wedding, I'd have them thrown out on their rears."

"Wicked old bats," Regulus muttered, glowering down at his drink. Across from him and Remus, James was still staring icily at the women, a single olive now crushed in his tight grip. Finally he spun back around to face them.

"Does anyone feel like a dance?"

Remus' mouth fell open, then he raised his and Sirius' drinks haplessly. It left Regulus, who Remus was pretty sure would have rather glued himself to a chair for the rest of the night. But this was James Potter they were talking to, and those were his friends out there.

"Just one dance!" He urged, abandoning his drink on the bar top and taking Regulus by the hand. He left no time for argument, though Regulus did spare Remus a horrified look as James began dragging him in the direction of the girls. Both Marlene and Dorcas threw their arms up when they joined them, eager to integrate the boys into their suggestive bump and grind. Unwilling to touch either of them, Regulus remained stiff, practically standing in place as the others swayed around him. This might've been an issue for any other partner, except James was fluid enough for the both of them. He slid an arm around Regulus' shoulders and made him shimmy, and even when Regulus was pushing him away, James was smiling.

'If you want my body and you think I'm sexy,
Come on, sugar, let me know!
If you really need me, just reach out and touch me,
Come on, honey, tell me so!'

Down the bar, the pair of women looked appalled.

Remus didn't give them a chance.

"I'd be careful if I were you," he called, setting aside his empty drink; "I hear jealousy gives you wrinkles, and well—don't suppose you ladies can afford any more of those."

He strode away, leaving them aghast, and found Sirius looking for him by their table. He'd just handed him his drink when Simeon appeared, planting a kiss on both their cheeks. After listening to the bitter

women, it almost made Remus laugh.

“There you are—" and he dropped his voice; "If it ain't my favourite little queers!”

“Hey, Sim,” Sirius grinned, sipping his Tom Collins. “Loved your speech.”

“Thanks. But we both know Petey’s blew mine out of the water. He always was the more genuine one.” Simeon leaned back on the edge of the table, pulling out a cigarette which Remus leaned forward to light for him. “God, how is it you two have grown up even more since Christmas?"

"It's the beard," Sirius said, rubbing his decidedly hairless jaw.

Simeon smiled, pointing his cigarette at them. "So how's life been treating you, boys?"

"It'd be better if Moony let me hit it more than twice a week."

Remus smacked him. "Fuck off."

"What? You think Sim's interested in anything else?"

Remus pinched his nose bridge. "How's Oxford, Sim?"

Simeon exhaled, the smoke drifting up around his head. "Shit, I hate that question."

"Oh. Sorry..."

"Nah, nah, it's not you, Lupin. It's just what everyone asks. 'How's school', 'how're your classes', 'have you decided on law or business—business or law'... It's just a bit crap."

"Maybe you should drop out," Sirius said frankly. "Bet you'd be a great model in Japan or something."

Simeon smirked, pointing at Sirius again as though he were onto something. "You two," he chuckled; "You two were like my little passion project, y’know? Only for a few minutes granted, but alas—I still remember how lost Lupin looked when he came to me on New Year’s.”

“That was almost two years ago,” Remus scoffed.

“Even time cannot touch a memory like that, pet. As far as I’m concerned, you’re little more than babes in the basket.”

“Does that mean you’re done trying to get into Moony’s trousers?” Sirius snarked. Remus scoffed at him too, but Simeon only shrugged snidely.

“For now. But he’s got a whole life to live. I’ll be impressed if you two can hang on to each other forever.”

“Yeah, right. You’re just tired of being the one who has to stick it in.” He made a rude gesture, and Simeon threw his head back and laughed, smacking one hand along the table’s edge.

“Both funny,” he said after; “You suit each other. Almost makes me nostalgic.”

“Sim, are you drunk already?” Remus asked.

“It’s a wedding, and it ain’t mine—‘course I’m drunk!” Simeon knocked his cigarette ash onto an empty plate. “Though, I’ll likely be even drunker at my own, if it ever happens…” He sighed wistfully, then crushed the cigarette onto the plate entirely and jumped to his feet. “Listen to me mope—gonna miss the bouquet toss!”

Not long after, the crowd cleared as Lottie took her place at the front of the dance floor and all the girls rushed to line up behind her. Sirius played at joining in a few times before finally being pushed into the fray by Dorcas, but it was Lily who came up victorious. She spun around, bouquet in hand and red hair flying, and found James’ eyes from across the room. Everyone in the general vicinity began to give him a hard time for it, teasing over when they should be saving the date. He was a good sport though, and afterwards, strode straight up to Lily and gave her a kiss big enough to leave her blushing for the rest of the night.

Remus looked around, and found Regulus standing next to Andy and Ted as they clapped, his expression unreadable.

“You still owe me that dance! Scratch that—two dances!” Sirius demanded, a few hours and several drinks later. But before he could drag Remus out onto the dance floor, the bride herself appeared and took Remus by the arm.

“Sorry, borrowing this one for a bit!”

Lottie led him upstairs, onto one of the balconies that overlooked the ballroom. They could still clearly hear the music from up above, though it seemed as though Roy the wedding singer had finally run out of Rod Stewart songs to sing.

“Bollocks, I could’ve sworn there was a toilet up here,” Lottie grumbled. “Well, whatever. We can do it right here.”

“You’re not going to ask me to hold your hair or something while you vomit, are you? Because I tried that once for Mary and she never let me hear the end of it.”

“No, better! Now will you undo me?”

She spun around, offering him the back of her dress. Hesitating at first, Remus eventually leaned down and began fumbling with all of the tiny satin-covered buttons. He wondered why she didn’t just ask one of the girls for help—they were always going to the bathroom in packs back at school—and got his answer when Lottie turned back around, her hands pressed to the front of her dress.

“You’re not going to believe it,” she gushed, before promptly yanking the dress’s neckline down below her chest.

“WAH—*Lottie!”* Remus gasped, turning his face away. “I may be slightly drunk but I’m pretty sure it’s a faux pas to start cheating on your wedding night!”

“It’s not my entire tit, you ninny, now open your eyes!”

He did so—sceptical—and found himself staring down at the top part of Lottie’s breast. Then he saw it.

“Is that…?”

“A bap tattoo!” Lottie exclaimed, pushing her chest up further as though it might help him see. “Just like Janis Joplin, don’t you remember? We talked about it in year eleven. I know it was ages ago… but back then you said that we should do things for ourselves, and not just for others. Well, it took me a few years, but I did it!”

Remus was blown away. In all honesty, he’d forgotten the interaction, but seeing Lottie with the tiny little heart tattooed on the side of her breast brought it all back again.

“Lottie, it… It looks amazing.”

“You really think so?”

“Very you.” Remus nodded. “Have you shown Roger?”

“No, I’m not a slag!” She smiled, tugging her dress back up into place. “He’ll see it tonight though. And if he doesn’t like it, Daddy’s keeping a set of divorce papers in his desk back home.”

“No way he'd divorce you over a little tattoo."

"You never know. I remember how *glad* Sirius was to see yours."

Remus smiled bashfully, touching the spot on his chest where he knew Lily's initials were hidden just beneath his clothes. "He keeps talking about getting one of his own,” he confessed. “Some days I’m afraid he’ll just go out and do it.”

Lottie turned around and offered him the back of her dress, drawing her curls onto one shoulder for him. “What’s so wrong with that?”

“You know Sirius, he won’t stop until he’s covered head-to-toe.”

“You’re probably right on the money, there.”

As it turned out, the delicate little buttons were a lot harder to do-up than they were to do-down. Remus stood there cursing for many minutes, until his back was starting to twinge from leaning over far enough to reach them.

“How have you been, really?” Lottie asked eventually. “I feel like it’s been forever since I’ve seen you.”

“Good.” He was nearing the top now, only a few buttons left; “We recorded that demo—finally. And Lily got us a gig playing at her university next week.”

“I heard about that. Sorry I can’t come along. Rog and I are spending four weeks in Spain for our honeymoon.”

“So you’ll be putting all those Spanish lessons to good use then?”

“*Si, claro*,” she replied sarcastically. “I’ve forgotten everything. I’m forcing Roger to listen to my old books on tape with me. Ask Lily to take some photos of the show, will you?”

“Will do. Here’s hoping it’s not a pathetic turnout. I think Sirius’ll try pitching himself off the roof if we end up playing to only ourselves

again."

Lottie giggled; "And will… Regulus be there?"

"Should be. He and Sirius haven't really talked about when he'll be going back. After Easter, I reckon."

"Right, right… He and Sirius certainly seem to be getting along. I'm glad he came tonight."

"Me too."

Lottie hummed quietly, carding her fingers through her hair. "It's a funny thing, having brothers," she said. "Some days—like today, for example—you just love them so much you could burst from it. And others… well, it's all you can do not to throttle 'em."

"Yup."

"So how's your brother, Remus?"

Admittedly, most days Remus forgot to give Lottie credit for her own cleverness. She had a subtle way of prying the truth from you that he'd never witnessed in anyone else. You never expected her to be listening, and yet she always was; it was exactly how she'd guessed the truth about him and Sirius in the first place. Now, over a year later, her question hit him like a train going a hundred kilometres per hour. It took all his concentration just to fasten the last button, and when he was finished she turned around again, staring at him with those big blue eyes.

"Remus, you know Petey and I fight all the time. Like, *all* of the time —sometimes I could bash his face into the pavement! … But he's my brother, and I love him. I know you and Tomny are still on the outs— Lily's been keeping me up to date, you see. But seeing Regulus here with Sirius tonight, it occurred to me what a miracle that was! Like, I never thought I'd see the day when those two could reconcile their differences."

"It didn't happen overnight," Remus griped. Lottie smiled at him for it, and it was sad.

"I know you and I haven't really spoken since Christmas," she said softly, "but I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit, love. And I just think that if Regulus could forgive his brother, and Sirius could forgive him back, then there's got to be hope for you and Tomny

too."

His first instinct was to be angry with her. Angry at her bold assumptions, at the way she so easily pried her way into his life, despite the fact that they'd only ever been friends by association in the first place. *I don't have a brother,* he'd shout; *You don't know what you're talking about! If he was really my brother he would've come for me by now! He would've picked up the phone!*

But then he remembered what he'd done, and all Remus felt was shame.

"Don't be sad, darling," Lottie told him, reaching up to cup his cheeks. "Maybe it's the married woman in me, but it could just be time to forgive and forget."

He refused to let her see him cry, but he did let her hug him. All five feet of her—more if you counted the hair. By the time Sirius appeared, strolling down the hallway behind them with a glass of champagne in either hand, Remus was past the threat of tears.

"LLLLLLLottie! … You still trying to steal my man? Don't make me tell Roger…"

Remus straightened up, while Lottie placed one hand on her hip.

"Sirius Black, I do believe you're drunk."

"I'm not drunk, you're just sober," Sirius said, passing them both a champagne flute. "Why is that, by the way? It's your wedding night—shouldn't you be getting absolutely pissed?"

"I can't get pissed tonight," Lottie retorted. "It's mine and Roger's first night tonight together, I have to take care of myself if I don't want to look completely revolting."

Sirius' mouth dropped open. "No way. You mean you and Roger have really never…?"

"Not all of us have to rely on our bodies to attract potential mates, Black."

"Is that what you were doing then? Attracting my mate with your *body?"*

"Don't be jealous." Lottie crossed her arms, looking snidely up at

Remus. “I was only showing Remus everything he’s missing.”

“Har-har,” Sirius drawled, sucking his teeth as he took back the champagne. “In that case you should know that dear Roger and all his groomsmen were talking about taking a dip in that pond out front—y’know, the one with the golf balls and all the duck shit? Yeah, suh’spect it was those six bottles of Jack that did ‘em in.”

With a huff and a curse, Lottie picked up the hem of her dress and began marching back down the hallway. Far below in the ballroom, the music had begun to slow, effectively clearing the dance floor of everyone save the more romantic couples. Remus recognised the song, probably thanks to Marlene; Bloody Bee Gees.

‘I know your eyes in the morning sun,
I feel you touch me in the pouring rain;
And the moment that you wander far from me,
I wanna feel you in my arms again…’

Sirius raised a hand, looking at him slyly. “Nice try. You still owe me that dance, Moons.”

Remus looked around. They were alone on the balcony, too high up for anyone below them to have any hope of spying.

"Might as well."

After tipping back the champagne and finishing it in a single go, Remus set the glass aside. Then he took Sirius’ hands, smiling quietly as the two of them began to sway in the middle of the hallway. He let Sirius lead, same as every other time, and the two of them stayed like that for a long while.

“Who would’a thought it, huh?” Sirius mumbled after a while. “Lottie, a born-again virgin. Not slut-shaming! I’ve always admired that tenacity of hers...”

“Love makes you do crazy things, I suppose.”

Sirius hummed, his arms tightening around Remus’ waist.

‘Cause we're living in a world of fools,
Breaking us down when they all should let us be;

We belong to you and me…'

"Have you ever thought about it… Getting married?"

Sirius' voice was small, almost a whisper. Remus leaned his chin against his hair.

"Not really… Have you?"

"Only when I'm feeling sorry for myself."

It surprised him for some reason. Perhaps because they'd never really talked about such a thing. They had their rings... each other. Why should some stingy official have to declare them wed for them to mean something? For Remus, it was enough to just get to stay by Sirius' side.

"Would you want to?" He asked, a part of him reluctant. "If we could…?"

Sirius didn't answer at first.

'And you may not think I care for you,
When you know down inside that I really do;
And it's me you need to show—
How deep is your love?'

"Maybe," he said again, "if I didn't have such a shit example of what marriage should look like."

"And if we weren't both men?"

"Ha. Yeah, that too..."

Remus squeezed him tighter, and they kept swaying like that for some time. Sirius smelt of alcohol, of James' Farrah Fawcett hairspray and his own musky aftershave. He imagined them living in some house in the country, married and growing old, arguing over the television channels and whether or not they should spend Christmas at home that year or travel somewhere warmer. The picture fell apart when he began to consider kids—they were two men, and neither of them had any confidence as a father. But that was what people got married for right? To settle down, have a family… Surely the tax incentives

weren't that good.

"What're you thinking about, Moons?"

Remus responded to the mumble with a kiss on the hair.

"You, mostly. And… something Lottie said."

Sirius raised his head in question, and Remus knew there was no use in backpedalling.

"Do you think I should've tried harder to make up with Tomny?"

Clearly the question was not one Sirius had been expecting. He didn't let go of Remus, but he stopped swaying, straightening up a bit so they could look each other in the eye.

"Do you want make up with Tomny?"

That's the big question, innit?

"I don't want us to hate each other forever."

"Then I guess you have your answer."

Well, shit.

"Maybe it's a good thing," Sirius said after a moment. "He asked you to be godfather, and the kid's gonna be born this month, isn't it?"

"Surprised you remembered."

"Why? I have a good memory." He smirked. "I remember everything about you."

"Oh yeah? And what's my favourite colour?"

"Blue, of course. Give me some credit."

Remus smiled then, a quiet, knowing one, and then kissed Sirius deeply. By the time they'd parted, the two of them were swaying to the music again.

'How deep is your love, how deep is your love?
I really mean to learn…'

“I don’t think I’d make a good godfather,” Remus told him. “Or husband…”

Sirius shook his head; “Moony, you great fool…”

The music filtered off, but instead of getting upset, Sirius' eyes began to tighten at the corners, in that wry, wry way of his.

“Come on then. Don't forget, you still owe me another song.”

* * *

The Next Morning…

It was only half past eight by the time Remus was awoken by the sound of someone pounding on their front door. Turning over, he nudged Sirius, who only groaned and shoved him off.

"Sirius, the door."

"Ngh... tell'm to pishh off..."

The pounding continued, and finally Remus dragged himself out of bed. They were the only ones around after James and Lily had gone home with the Potters and Peter had hopped a very expensive taxi back to Moira’s place in Stratford.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

The pounding on the door had gotten worse in the time it'd taken for Remus to get down the rickety staircase that led up to their room. Rubbing his face grumpily, he took a moment to glance about the landing. He could distinctly remember leaving the wedding at around half-past two in the morning, but after that everything was a blur. Now the flat was a mess; Regulus’ powder blue suit jacket was still lying at the base of the stairs along with several pairs of shoes and bits of a ruined bouquet. When Remus stuck his head into the living room he found the privacy sheet they’d hung for Regulus in a pile on the floor. Regulus himself was passed out on the sofa, his limbs half-dangling off of the cushions.

“Couldn’t manage the door, Edge?”

There was a grumble that sounded a lot like ‘fuck you, Lupin’ and Regulus turned over and buried himself deeper into his blankets.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

“Fucking… Christ, hold your bloody horses… I’m coming.”

Almost tripping over a stray slipper, Remus stumbled toward the door. His hangover throbbed in the centre of his forehead, and the light temporarily blinded him as it came through the textured glass. The fist pounding on the front door had quickened even more, to the point that Remus had begun to wonder if it was the London Metropolitan Police he’d be facing down.

“Whatever it was, we didn’t steal it,” he muttered to himself, before yanking the door open.

It was not the police.

“WHERE IS HE?” Patricia MacDuff hollered as she barged past Remus, straight across the entryway. “That jobby-flavoured bawbag of a wankstain—*WHERE IS HE!?”*

Remus almost thought he was still dreaming, but then Trish turned around and sucker-punched him in the arm and he knew he must’ve been awake.

“Where—Where is who?!”

“REGULUS!” She roared, the picture of every Scot's fury. “REGULUS BLACK, YOU SON OF PISH-HEADED ARSEPIECE—GET OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!”

“She’s been like that since Glasgow.”

Remus whirled around to find none other than Barty Crouch standing in his doorway. He looked tired and unimpressed, and was still wearing his Hawkings-regulated school coat, but before Remus could begin to wonder what *the fuck* Barty Crouch was doing standing on his London doorstep, Trish had stormed into the living room. A second later, Remus heard it.

“YOU!”

Sliding around the corner behind her, Remus was rewarded with just enough time to watch as Regulus shot up on the sofa, a look of utter

horror in his eyes.

“Oh shit.”

“You stay there!” Trish told him. “Stay *right* there so I can fucking feed ye yer own lying tongue!”

It was like watching a pair of alley cats go at one another. Trish charged in, but Regulus had already leapt up from the sofa and launched himself over its armrest. They used the coffee table to incite a great game of keep-away, which would’ve been amusing had Trish not been aiming for more than a cheeky ‘you’re it’.

“You fucking cunt!” She snarled. “You absolute waste of a man! Couldn’t say nothing, could ye? Nae a word—not even a note! Just pissing off in th’ middle of the night like a fart in th’ wind!”

“I told Barty where I was going!”

“You told me you were going to a funeral,” Barty cut-in, casually coming around Remus’ side with his hands in his pockets. “Not that you were running away to join the circus.”

“How’d you even know where we live?” Remus demanded.

“Sirius writes a lot of letters,” Barty shrugged. “Followed the return address. How else were we supposed to find him?”

Gaping at the obvious betrayal, Regulus straightened up like he was going to give Barty a piece of his own mind. Too bad for him, Trish got there first.

“You jackass!” She howled, shoving him back into the sofa and promptly smacking the living shite out of him. “Do ye even ken how worried we’ve been? I should drown you in that filthy river, ye fucking bampot! M’on then, tadger! I’ll pound yer stupid face in!”

Every insult came with a fresh slap, until Remus was almost impressed with her stamina. He’d never seen anyone talk to Regulus like that before, but if anyone was going to do it, it made sense that it would be Trish.

“Moony? What’s all that bloody shouting?”

Never one to miss a dramatic moment, Sirius had appeared at the base of the stairs, his hair tangled from sleep and wearing naught but his

pants. He shivered in the draft let in by Trish and Barty's arrival and struggled for a moment while fitting one of Remus' buttoned shirts around his shoulders. His jaw dropped when he realised what was going on, but that didn't stop him from giving his twopence.

"Alright, what in the devil's sweet fuck is going on down here? Someone wanna tell me what Barty Crouch is doing standing in my entryway?"

"Believe me, Black, it ain't my choice. You think I wanted to spend my school holiday looking at your pale arse?"

"Still as unclever as ever, I see. Go on then, Crouch, maybe you'll feel better if you kiss it."

Sirius was puckering up when suddenly the phone began to ring, driving yet another ice-pick into Remus' temple and igniting the beginnings of what was absolutely going to be a prime hangover. As Trish continued to take swipes at Regulus from across the couch and Sirius and Barty took turns insulting each other in the doorway, Remus slipped over to the kitchen nook and picked up the receiver. He was hoping it'd be James or Lily with a possible solution, but it wasn't.

"Remus? Remus, is that you? It's Sheila."

Remus resisted the urge to groan. Just what he needed—Trish and Barty, and now his godmother come to nag. He was starting to think they'd planned this.

"Uh, hey, Sheila. Sorry, but now's really not the best time—"

There was a crash as Trish whipped one of the couch pillows at Regulus' head, missing by a quarter of an inch and taking out a stack of records that'd been sitting on top of the stereo.

"Those were first pressings!" Sirius wailed.

"Now what was that noise?" Asked Sheila. "Oh, never mind. Now Remus, you know I care about you, but you've been dragging this nonsense out for far too long and I really think that it's time to—"

"—YOU STUPID—LOLLY-HEADED—SON OF AN ARSE-LICKER—"

"Stop fucking throwing shit at me, you loon—and stop yelling!"

CRASH!

“I AM *NOT* YELLING!”

Now it was Remus’ turn to duck as several magazines came whipping over his head, narrowly avoiding a cup of day-old coffee someone had left on the kitchen nook counter. He heard Sheila in his ear—*"Remus, is there something you’d like to tell me?”*—and just like that the words slipped out before he could stop them;

“It’s just Trish and Regulus, they—”

“A-HA!”

Oh, the irony. Remus bit down on the phone cord in exasperation as Sheila began bleating in his ear about how she knew he’d been lying the entire time.

“Is he safe?” She shrieked. “Is he healthy?! Remus, put Regulus on the phone!”

“You’re not my bloody baby-sitter!” Regulus snapped, though he’d barely gotten his words out before Trish full-body tackled him into the sofa. Behind them, Barty was making a show of wiping his dirty shoes on the rug and Sirius was caught between telling him off and egging Trish on.

“Go on, MacDuff!—Oh, piss off, would'ya, Crouch!—Atta girl, right hook! Right hook!”

“I should’ve been born an only child!” Regulus hollered, words choking off as Trish wrapped her bicep around his throat.

Then the doorbell rang.

“Remus, do you hear me?! Put Regulus on the phone this instant—”

“SORRY SHEILA, GOTTA GO!”

He slammed the receiver down, feeling like he’d run a marathon. It was obvious Trish was merely playing with Regulus now—an angry cat and her mouthy ball of a yarn—but Barty and Sirius didn’t seem to be paying attention anymore.

“I wonder who’s at the door!” Barty cackled. Sirius went to chase him, but Barty merely picked up one of Trish’s stray pillows and threw it, catching Sirius upside the head in a daze. A second later and the two

had passed out of sight, veering into the entryway.

“Come on, MacDuff,” Remus sighed, reaching a hand out in an attempt to peel Trish off of Regulus before she did any real damage.

“Get her off, get her off!” Regulus was shouting. Then a yelp; “OW! Did you just *bite me?!”*

“You deserved it, twat-face!”

Remus stopped, his head pounding. A part of him wondered if he were to just give up, maybe he’d wake up in his bed with the realisation that it was all just a bad dream. But then Sirius yelped from the entryway and he knew it wasn’t a dream at all.

“Moony, crazy bird number two incoming!”

On cue, she came peeling around the corner into the living room with a look of pure fury on her face. Remus couldn’t believe it.

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking joking me…”

“Where is he?!”

It was Skylar. She stormed into the living room with her blonde hair frazzled, screaming her head off and looking about nine months pregnant. Startlingly, Remus realised that she *was* nine months pregnant. It was April, which meant the baby should’ve been due any day—*so why was she at their flat?*

“Where *is* he?” Skylar snarled again, tearing across the living room to throw a pile of blankets off the far couch, as if whoever she was looking for might be hiding underneath. “Where is that fucking asshole?”

Even Trish and Regulus had stopped fighting. They stared at her, crammed onto the same loveseat, and Skylar paid them no mind as she went instead to the kitchen pantry, throwing the door open.

“This happen to you guys a lot?” Barty mused. Sirius scowled at him for the sarcasm and began picking his way across the living room, holding a pillow over his crotch to hide the fact that he was still half naked.

“Moony,” he hissed, “is that really—”

“Skylar.”

Remus said her name like a call and she turned on them sharply, her eyes wet and an angry red. Sirius flinched in response, but if he was expecting her leap forward and tear their throats out like an angry lioness, he'd be disappointed.

"Where is he?" She asked, her voice much smaller now. "Where is Tomny?"

Remus shook his head; "I–I don't…"

There wasn't time to explain further. Before anyone else could say anything, Skylar burst into tears.

Chapter End Notes

The Portastudio was a real thing. Here's the advert.
A 'lift' is an elevator.
A 'gaffe' is a blunder; a stupid or innocent mistake.
Danny Fields was an influential American music producer/ journalist. He worked with the likes of the Doors, Stooges, and Ramones.
'Pudding' is just a broad term meaning any type of dessert.
A 'Mr. Whippy with a flake' is a brand of soft-serve ice cream with a chocolate bar shoved into it.

Lottie talks about getting a 'bap tattoo' back in Chapter 20. They were so baby back then *cries* literally fifteen!!

Songs featured in this chapter: "Doomed Generation" (written by me to the tune of "The Stroke" by Billy Squire - as mentioned in the chapter's opening notes), "Tonight's the Night" (1976) and "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy" (1978) both by Rod Stewart, and finally, "How Deep is Your Love" by the Bee Gees (1977).

Also that wedding singer and Australian rock band might be ones to watch *side-eye emoji*

⏰⏰⏰ Update Schedule: Again, I've switched my upload days to MONDAYS but next week I will **NOT BE UPDATING.** I'm moving to the UK for a semester which means my timezone will be changing. Expect chapter 104 sometime in the morning of Jan 23rd GMT time. In the meantime I'm still hanging around on tumblr @motswolo. I hope everyone has a wonderful next two weeks and I'll see you then <3

Chapter 104: Noise

Chapter Summary

> *“You’re not worried about sounding awful?”*
> *“Oh, I’m worried, but there are worse things than sounding awful.”*

Chapter Notes

> CW for this chapter: violence including threats and knives, but also a lot of general tomfoolery. The word "ponce" is repeatedly used. Remus is sorta sad, then really happy (!!!), then sorta sad again, lol.
>
> Also, for those of you more interested in the music aspect of this fic (that being following along with the "vibes" of certain musical scenes) you're probably going to want to play THIS when Rat Scabies starts asking for a 'sacrifice'. It's personally one of my fav live versions of the song xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We met when we were in school,
Never took no shit from no one, we weren’t fools;
The teacher says we’re dumb,
We’re only having fun;
You know, we piss on everyone,
In the classroom…

- “Stay Free” The Clash, 1978

Back when they were young and decidedly less queer, Remus had attended an Easter supper at Marlene’s house as her boyfriend. Marlene’s eldest brother John had been newly married and was just expecting his first child. Remus had only met the McKinnons the one time, but he remembered John’s small wife—her stomach ballooned to the point of obvious discomfort. She’d looked positively ill that day, like the smallest breeze might topple her. Marlene had talked his ear off beforehand about how pregnant women experienced a variety of horrific symptoms, including the type of hormones that tended to cause wild mood swings. At the risk of sounding like a misogynist, Remus had simply nodded along with little fuss, but now he wished he’d asked a few more questions. Namely, what to do when your ex-

best friend's girlfriend shows up on your doorstep nine months pregnant and won't stop sniffling into her tea.

It took several minutes for him to become convinced that Skylar was not, in fact, at risk of having a "stress baby" on his living room floor. Sirius and the others had already cleared out, and the two of them were able to sit down on the ratty sofa seats to talk. Remus almost felt like pinching himself. After their first disastrous meeting in Whitechapel he'd been pretty sure that he would never be seeing Skylar again. But then again, fate had always been a bit ironic like that.

"It's been five days," Skylar said, her voice more than a little raspy from crying. "How could 'e not come home? My due date's in less than two weeks, and this arsehole 'finks it's alright for 'im to go on a bloody *bender."* She rubbed her face with one hand, moaning in frustration. Meanwhile Remus had never felt more awkward in his life. A part of him wished Sirius had stayed behind to play mediator, but between Trish and Regulus' spat and the hangovers they'd both woken up with, he and others had peeled out of the flat so quickly Remus wouldn't be surprised if they'd left skid marks on the front rug.

"So when you saw him last, Skylar—"

"Call me Sky, right," she whined, pathetically blowing her nose into a kitchen flannel.

"Right… Sky…" Remus took a deep breath. "When you last saw Tomny, was he using?"

She shook her head no, then her face twisted in pain again. She shrugged miserably. "Oh, I dunno! We fought so much about it I 'fink he just started to hide it. But he'd been clean for two months before all 'a this."

Remus scratched awkwardly at the side of his neck. Clean or not, Tomny's entire life had been uprooted. He'd given up his work, the money, friends… Everyone needed a vice, and Remus was hardly the one to judge.

"Did he say he was leaving? Going somewhere, maybe?"

"No, 'e just left. We had a fight, sumfink about work—and he stormed out."

“Well, Tomny’s got a lot of friends, you know. He could’ve easily gone to theirs to cool off. He used to do that a lot, back when we were younger, right? Sometimes he’d get drunk and just go home with other people. You know, crash at theirs.”

“For *five* days?”

“Well, if it was a girl—”

“Yer saying Tomny’s off in some uvv’er girl’s bed?”

Remus winced, pinching the bridge of his nose. “No… No, he’s not like that.”

“I just don’t get why this’s so hard for ‘im,” Skylar went on. “I had ter give up drinking—*and* smoking! My entire body’s been fucked over by this, and all he’s got to do is be there. Why's that so hard?”

Now Remus *really* wished the others hadn’t left. He let her go on for a bit longer, and when it was clear she’d run out of steam, he offered her a real tissue. Skylar mumbled her thanks.

“You look nice,” he said instead, trying not to stare too long at her stomach. “Is the... baby healthy then?”

“For the most part.” Skylar glanced down at her stomach, stroking it gently. “Had a few rough months wiv’ the morning sickness but Tomny took me in for all them scans, right, ‘n’ the doctor said everything looked awright. He missed the last appointment though. Now I’m just ready for all of it to be over.”

Remus nodded, then; “Skylar, how did you know where I lived?”

She sipped her tea, eyes dry for the time being. “Tomny thought it would be smart to keep a list of emergency numbers on the fridge. O’course, it’s only got yers, un'all. I know you two haven’t been talkin' but I figured that if he was going to hide out anywhere it’d be ‘ere.”

Her words were like a stone sinking in his gut. It made Remus look down at his hands, and as he did so Skylar clutched her baby belly tightly.

“You don’t ‘fink sumfink’s happened to him, do you?”

“What? No way.”

"—'Cause I’ve literally been going out ‘a me mind."

Remus shook his head, adamant. “Tomny’s resourceful. I’ll bet… Well, I’ll bet he’s just too ashamed to face you right now. He’s probably out there beating himself up over it.”

Skylar scowled like she’d like to have seen it for herself, but Remus' palms were already sweating. He thought that when he’d finally be doing this, that the one he’d be facing down would be Tomny, but as it was Tomny was nowhere to be found, and he owed Skylar an apology.

“Skylar.”

She raised her head.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for… For what I said in the cafe. It was completely out of line. I–I don’t know why I acted like that, I just… Shit, I…”

“Tomny said that youse were different. Not like, different–weird, but that you didn’t judge, d’you know what I mean?” She pursed her mouth, looking toward Sirius’ stack of toppled records. “He wouldn’t talk to me about it afterwards, but I know he felt judged. I ‘fink you let ‘im down. Slated, innit.”

Remus nodded mutely, biting down on his bottom lip to keep it from shaking.

“I think something’s wrong with me,” he said eventually. “I think something was wrong with me that day, and I… Well, I took it out on you and Tomny.”

“Ain’t that the wey.”

Neither of them said anything more for a while, and Remus got the feeling that Skylar wasn’t all that interested in comforting him. *Fair enough*, he thought; he probably wouldn’t have felt like comforting him either. As he went on quietly moping, Skylar wrapped an arm around her stomach and winced.

"D'you mind?" She gestured to the room. "Walking's easier on my back. O'course if it ain't my back it's my feet..."

Remus beckoned her on, and she hauled her large stomach up from the chair and began wandering about the room. Perhaps this was just her way of snooping, Remus didn't care. He was busy racking his brain for anywhere Tomny may have gone. Doss was living in Cardiff now,

and as far as Remus knew, Seesaw was still in the Midlands. If Lee was to be believed, then Tomny had quit the gang, which meant those bridges were all ash and dust now. Shit... Vint? Donna or Cheryl maybe? No—no way Tomny was prick enough to go back to an ex-girlfriend with Skylar in such a state. Maybe he'd gone to Burrin then. He was his full-time boss now, but Tomny had never even let Remus meet the guy, let alone tell him where he lived. Suddenly it was looking like finding Tomny was going to be about as easy as finding a chipped brick in a council flat.

Dammit, Tom...

“I know that one.”

It took Remus a few seconds to catch on. At that point Skylar was already setting her cup of tea aside and picking up one of the albums Sirius had left in a cluttered pile next to the radio. *Harvest,* by Neil Young.

“My dad used to play this for me when I was little. This one—" She pointed to the track list; "He'd sing it for me 'n me mum."

Remus got up from his chair. “It belongs to my friend James,” he explained. “His dad likes Neil Young too... Would—Would you like me to put it on?”

She considered, then nodded and passed it along to him. Slipping the record from its sleeve, Remus had just about set up the needle when Skylar gave a short groan and bent over at the middle. Instantly Remus was panicking.

“A-Are you okay? Should I call an ambulance?” He’d dropped the needle’s arm in his surprise, causing a harsh scratch and effectively starting the album mid-song.

“No, no, ya melt, m'fine,” Skylar grumbled. “Baby’s just kickin’… Ugh, I swear, the bleedin’ wee shits know exactly where your kidneys are. Bloody ‘ave to piss ev’ry five minutes. Ain’t it enough that I’m riskin’ being ripped ass to twat?”

Remus looked away, trying not to grimace. Several deep breaths later, Skylar had righted herself and was running her hands along her stomach soothingly.

“Tomny always jokes that the kid’s gonna be some pro-wrestler or sumfink. Should’a seen him the first time ‘e felt the babe kick.”

Just please don't ask me to feel your stomach, Remus thought drearily. Luckily Skylar didn't seem to have any interest. They stood next to each other for a while, listening to the song. It was a nice one. Eventually Skylar began to hum along.

'I've been to Hollywood,
I've been to Redwood;
I crossed the ocean,
For a heart of gold…'

"Say, Remus?"

"Yeah?"

"You should know that your 'ouse is a bit of a mess."

"Oh, well, we weren't exactly expecting guests." Remus glanced around at the cluttered living room, then down again, to where Skylar was still stroking her belly.

"More tea, Sky?"

"Ah nah, whisky on th' rocks for me, thanks."

She smiled, and Remus finally began to feel himself relax.

A short while later the record had run out and Tomny had still not shown up, and so Skylar took that as her cue to leave. Remus had managed to flag down a taxi for her and even held her hand as she hobbled down the front steps of their townhouse. After helping her into the back of the cab, Remus handed the driver a few quid for the ride and stepped back to her door, peering in on her anxiously.

"You'll call me if he turns up, right?"

She nodded. "Cross me heart."

He thought he should say something that might comfort her in return, and so while white-knuckling the edge of the open taxi window, Remus did his best to smile.

"I wouldn't worry much, Sky. Tom can't keep away from home long anyway. Likes his flat too much."

"The flat? No, didn't you know, we—" She caught herself. "Oh, that's

right, you wouldn't have known."

His expression must've given away his unease, because Skylar rushed to console him.

"We moved, Remus. Back in January. We're up in Hackney Wick now… But it's a nice place. Tomny didn't want to go too far, and I couldn't very well force him to leave outright. He takes the car out to the track at Kempton Park for work. At least he was… Anyway, there's a lot of young families in our building."

"Have you been back to the flat then? Maybe he went there."

"O'course I went to the flat," she replied, sounding irritated now. "Tomny told me 'e passed the lease along to a friend after we moved out, but no one ever answered the door."

Remus swallowed. Tomny may have been a better guy than most but even he wasn't above lying. He could've easily passed the lease on to someone he knew like he'd told Skylar, or he could've been using the flat as a place to hide out. It worried him, but Skylar was nine months pregnant. She shouldn't have to be wandering around dodgy East London council estates looking for her missing boyfriend.

"I'll go. Maybe they just weren't home."

"You'd do that?"

"For Tomny? Anything."

She cupped his cheek. Her hand was warm.

"You know, I wasn't sure at first, but I think Tomny just might have been right for asking you to be godfa'vver."

His breath caught, but she'd already released him. Slowly Remus stepped back onto the curb. "Make sure she gets home alright," he told the driver, who honked his horn while pulling away. At the last second, Skylar stuck her head out the window.

"Remus, if you see Tomny, you send him home!"

"I will," he called. "Call if you need anything, Sky. I-I mean it!"

She smiled, blonde hair whipping around her face.

"By the way, it's a girl!"

She was still waving by the time the cab rounded the street corner and disappeared, leaving Remus stunned and speechless on the curb. It seemed Skylar was getting quite good at that.

A girl… It's a bloody girl!

His palms had begun to sweat again by the time a series of loud honks were echoing up the street. It was Sirius driving their beloved purple Minnie-van. He pulled the VW up to the curb and jammed the gear stick into park.

"So that was Skylar then?" He called, rolling down the passenger's side window so that Remus could hang his arms inside. "Seems like a nice girl. And you were *so* nasty to her. Tsk—tsk, Moony."

"Call me an arse," Remus sighed. " 'Least I got to apologise."

"Yeah? So you mean she didn't totally bite your head off?"

"More of a light nibble really. No less than I deserved…" Remus watched as Sirius scooped up a packet of cigarettes from the centre console. "Where'd you get off to?"

"Oh, only took these wankers for a little joyride. Managed to pick up a few things too."

Just then the van's side door opened and Trish stuck her head out, clutching a fat spliff between two fingers. "Look, Loonarny! Real London-grown weed!"

He heard Regulus groan—*"Bloody hell, MacDuff!"*—and Trish was unceremoniously dragged back into the van before anyone off the street could see or smell her.

"Say," Sirius smirked, lighting his infinitely more legal cigarette, "I was thinking—we *could* take these kiddos somewhere fun and normal like, oh, I dunno—back to Portobello Road and the like. *Or…* we could show 'em what the real London underbelly looks like."

"You don't know what the 'real London underbelly' looks like, you toff."

"I know enough, *inn–it*," Sirius said, teasing. Remus leaned his chin on the edge of the van's window.

"What'd you have in mind?"

“Saw in the paper that The Damned are doing a show over in Camden tonight. S’not too far outta the way. I already rang Prongs and Wormtail and they’re in, and MacDuff over there seems eager enough too, so whatcha you think? Crouch and shithead can wait outside if they’re not interested.”

A cry came from the back seat; “Fuck off, Black! We ain't waiting outside for your freak show to be over!”

"Zip it, Crouch, or I'll drive you over to Whitehall and dump your miserable arse. See if Crouch Sr. is looking for a visit."

At Sirius' threat, Barty flipped him the bird but did begrudgingly sit back in his seat, both arms crossed in defiance. Next to him, Regulus appeared unbothered, slowly flipping through one of Sirius' old *NME* magazines. Dave Vanian of The Damned was on the cover, rubbing a piece of raw meat into his eye.

"So, what d'ya think?" Sirius pulled a pair of sunglasses down from the van's visor. "I know them 'no wave' folk dress a bit like if your gran started snorting heroin through a chimney pipe but if we can handle the Sex Pistols then I reckon we can stand embracing some of their nihilism for a single evening. You?"

Remus shrugged meekly. “Yeah, Sirius sounds fun… but first, I— uhm…”

“Aw no,” Sirius sighed, tipping his head back against the seat. “I know that look. You’re about to do something stupid, aren’t you?”

“And just how is it you always know when I’m about to do something stupid?”

“I just do. You get this depressed little line in the middle of your forehead.”

“I do not.”

“Sure, you do. I can see it right now.”

Sirius flicked his cigarette carton at him, effectively knocking Remus upside the head with it. Remus chuckled, though it fell off toward the end, growing rather unenthused. Afterwards he picked up the cigarettes and began tapping one loose while Sirius smiled at him, knowingly.

“What’s going on, Moons?”

“If…" Remus gnawed on the end of the cigarette; "If I said you were right, and told you that I did want to do something completely stupid, what would you say?”

Sirius paused to consider. “Can we still go to the concert later?”

“If I survive, sure.”

“Right. In that case, I’m driving.”

"... Really?"

"Why not? It's like I already said—nihilists for an evening, yeah? And if life's already meaningless then I suppose there's no point in worrying how badly you're about to fuck ours up."

Remus reached for the van’s door handle. "Christ." *Thank god for Sirius Bl—*

“Black, can we hurry up with this stupid venture of yours?” Barty called from the back of the van. He’d pulled a stray beer can out from beneath his seat and was dangling it in front of his nose like a dead rat. “This car of yours—if you can even call it a car—is foul. I mean, where did you find it? A scrapheap?”

“Got it from your mum actually, Crouch,” Sirius drawled, adjusting the rear-view mirror. “Shall I tell you what I did to pay for it?”

Barty sneered, sticking his tongue out whilst tossing the can over his shoulder. “Still smells like ass back here.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re sitting in the same place Moony and I had sex last week.”

“Is that right?” Barty turned to Regulus, clearly delighted. “Shit, Regulus—you never told me your brother’s a poof!”

“You never asked.”

Whatever comeback Barty was expecting to give died before it even reached his lips. He glanced at Sirius—smug—then back at Regulus, who was still ignoring him in favour of his magazine. It took a cheeky brow-raise from Trish for realisation to begin dawning on Barty's face.

“You… You mean you and—you and… *huh?* ”

“Cat got yer tongue, bawbag?” Trish sniggered.

“You—and-and *him*—and—HUH?”

“Don’t tell me you’re prejudiced, Barty,” Sirius asked innocently. "Not after crushing on Lupin for all these years."

“Fuck off, I ain’t prejudiced, I just hate you! And you—” He pointed at Remus; "You—You fuck off too!"

Remus put his hands up. "What'd I say?"

"Is it true, bawbag?" Trish gaped at Barty.

"No! Now everyone just fuck off!"

"*Tsk*. He *must* be prejudiced."

"I ain't!" Huffing and red-faced, Barty gave Regulus a nervous glance. “I-I ain’t! Ugh… stupid—*ngh*... Fucking tosser...”

“Well." Sirius paused for a moment to yawn and stretch dramatically in the front seat; "Glad we’ve got that sorted. Now if you guys don’t mind, I prefer a bit of music while I drive.”

He began punching several dials on the radio, and suddenly Radio One’s top hits were pouring out of the speakers.

'You disturb my natural emotions,
You make me feel like dirt and I'm hurt...'

“That’s one way to tell someone you’re fucking your best friend,” Remus mumbled over the music, sliding into the passenger’s seat and shutting the door after himself.

“What can I say? I like being efficient.”

"I don't remember you being so 'efficient' when we were telling James."

"Hm, really? Don't recall. Must've been some other totally gorgeous knockout with black hair."

"Riiiiight."

'And if I start a commotion,
I'll only end up losing you and that's worse...'

Sirius dropped the pair of sunglasses down over his eyes before putting the van into gear. “Best put on those seat belts, kiddies," he said, "I’ve been known to be a bit of a wild card behind the wheel. Just ask, Moony.”

"Aye. Seems like there's a few things I'd like to ask him," observed Trish keenly.

Jamming on the horn a few times for good measure, Sirius grinned as he peeled back out into the motorway. In the backseat, Remus overhead Trish offer Barty a hit of her spliff, which he almost dropped into his lap upon realising;

“Wait… you... *YOU MEAN YOU REALLY DID IT BACK HERE?!”*

'Ever fallen in love with someone—
Ever fallen in love, in love with someone?
Ever fallen in love, in love with someone—
You shouldn't have fallen in love with?!'

As Sirius drove, Remus imagined all the ways what he was about to do could go terribly wrong. If, by some miracle, he did manage to find Tomny at the flat, what would he even say? *I’m sorry*, obviously, but then what? Go home? Cut the shit? Be the dad you promised you were gonna be? Remus wasn’t sure he had the right to say any of it. Where had he been these last months—not with Tomny. Tomny could sock him in the face and slam the door and Remus would still deserve it. But at least this way he could tell Skylar he'd tried. And fuck—that her boyfriend was bloody *alive.*

They were passing through Spitalfields, the radio’s usual midday disc jockey droning on, when Barty thrust his finger against the van window in awe.

“Oh man, look there! Manky old bloke's passed out on the pavement. Reckon he’s dead?”

“Have some respect, Crouch,” Trish snapped.

“Alright, if you’re so genuine why don’t you hop out and go help him? I’m sure he’d just love gutting a little girl.”

“I’ll gut ye, bawbag, if you don’t shut it!”

“Enough,” Remus called. “None of you are getting out. You’re staying right here.”

“What? You mean you drag us all the way to scrub-central and we’re not even allowed to leave the car?”

“That’s right, Crouch,” Sirius said, adjusting the radio’s volume. “Your boney arse isn’t leaving that seat, ‘least not until Lupin’s finished whatever business he's got with that big brother of his.” He glanced sideways to give Remus a wink, before turning the van onto Whitechapel’s Commercial Road. From there Remus had to give him directions. When Sirius finally pulled the purple VW van up to the curb, Remus felt his heart lodge itself in his throat. Of course nothing about the building had changed; still the same scuffed white brick, single-paned windows, rusted gate barely hanging onto its hinges.

“*This* is where your brother lives?”

“Bawbag, what’d I just say!”

There was a hiss as Barty took another one of Trish’s smacks to the shoulder, but by then Sirius was already undoing his seatbelt.

“Right. You twats stay here, Moony and I are gonna get this done and be right back. If you’re good, I might even say yes to a stop at Wimpy’s on the way home.”

Sirius blew the three seventeen year-olds a kiss as he opened his driver’s side door, but by then Remus was already gripping him by the elbow.

“What're you doing?”

“I'm coming with you, obviously," Sirius scoffed.

"No way."

"Yes way—you can't go alone. Don’t worry, I won’t crowd you while you’re talking to Tomny. I just wanna see inside.”

Quickly, Remus reached past Sirius to tug his door shut.

“Sirius, stay in the car.”

His tone ignited a fierce stare off, the kind that Sirius’ natural-born stubbornness usually won him, but Remus was unyielding. If coming there was only going to blow up in his face, then he didn't want Sirius to be anywhere near the blast radius.

“I won’t be gone long,” he told the others as he got out. “Just keep an eye out, and make sure you lock the doors and all that.”

“Don’t forget to watch the mirrors too,” Barty added snidely; “Don’t want anyone syphoning our petrol.”

The gate creaked as Remus pushed it open. There was a woman sitting on her ground floor balcony as he approached the intercom, smoking a cigarette and peering at him over the top of her newspaper. When Remus pressed the buzzer there was no sound.

“Squawk-box’s busted, lad,” said the old woman. “Door’s open, 'ead on in.”

“Thanks,” replied Remus, nodding his head at her kindness. He found the building’s door left ajar just as she’d said, propped open with a small brick. It let in a terrible draft, though upon reflecting the building had never been particularly well insulted in the first place.

Tomny’s place was on the second floor, flat 3. The door had once borne a brass plate indicating it as such, but now—like the VW’s missing hood ornament—all that was left was a faded outline of where the numbers used to be. The door was locked.

“Tom…?” Remus knocked lightly, his stomach in knots. “Tom, are you there? Is anyone…" *Fucking hell.* "It’s Remus. Tom, if you’re there, let me in.”

There was no answer, and after several long seconds of silence, Remus considered turning away.

Then he heard it; a soft creak of a floorboard.

Someone was inside.

“Tom!” He began battering the door with his fist. “Wake up! Tomny, I don’t care how pissed off you are at me—did you know I saw Skylar?

Yeah, she came to mind, you bloody oaf! Open the door and I'll explain everything. You—You know I can pop the lock... Oi, tosser! Don't make me force my way in!"

Again, no answer. He was starting to get frustrated. Surely if it was some stranger they'd have told him to piss off already.

With nothing else to do, Remus began rifling through his pockets for something to use on the lock. Before he'd even finished a thought occurred to him, and against all hope he reached his hands up to the top of the door frame. He didn't even know if they would still be there; it'd been Doss' idea to leave them behind. He'd placed them there for safe keeping. Remus had been too short to reach then.

He wasn't too short now.

Ting! T-Ting!

The paperclips hit the tips of his fingers and bounced off the frame's edge and onto the floor. Both were rather rusty, the steel corroded from years of disuse, but when Remus tested their strength against the pads of his thumbs, the metal held.

"I'm coming in, Tom!" He hollered, already pinching them into shape with his teeth. It was like muscle memory now—the first lock he'd ever popped. It took less than thirty seconds.

Remus pushed the door open.

"Tomny? I know you're here..."

He was still hopeful when he found the lights on, but walking inside—there was no one. All the usual stuff was there; the dingy couch, Tomny's recliner, even the telly. It was dirtier now than it had been when half a dozen guys had been living there, but at least Remus figured that the old furniture meant that at least someone familiar was still around.

He regretted being right the moment the door shut behind him.

"I told you that if you ever came back here I'd kill you."

The door bolt slid home with a deafening click. The feeling of hungry eyes on his back—*yeah*, Remus imagined this was what it felt like to be hunted. When he turned around he did so slowly, hands raised to show him that they were empty. Unfortunately for him, Lee's were

not.

“I *warned* you,” Lee said, his voice reedy and thin. He had a small knife trained on the middle of Remus’ chest and was using his free hand to steady his dominant arm as it trembled in mid-air. The blade was shorter than his thumb, but long enough to do some damage, though the look on his face was twisted in pain.

"Lee—"

Lee thrust the blade forward threateningly.

“Have to hand it to ya, Lu, you always were a stubborn cunt.”

“I wouldn’t have come back if it weren’t important,” Remus said, slowly licking his lips. “I’m only looking for—”

“Tomny, I know,” spat Lee. “You think I didn’t hear you screaming yer head off in the hall? Fucking bastard… It’s always Tomny wiff you, innit. You’re like a bloody parrot the way you get on. S'always Tomny this, Tomny that—*Tomny, Tomny, Tomny, Tomny!”*

Lee moved sporadically, ambling forward several paces and slicing the knife through the air with short jerky motions as if he were punctuating every word. It didn't feel totally intentional, but Remus did have to jump backward to avoid letting the last one slicing through his chest. By then he’d been driven back far enough that his legs hit the coffee table, rattling a large crystal ashtray that looked as though it’d been lifted from one of those fancy cigar bars in Fitzrovia.

It was hard not to panic. Lee was blocking the door and the only other escape route was the balcony—and that was only if Lee didn’t catch him first. Even if he did manage to make it there; even if the door was unlocked, they were on the second floor! At best he’d scratch himself to ribbons on whatever dead bramble bushes grew beneath the balcony—at worst he’d break both ankles, possibly his neck. Though, Lee would’ve probably found that quite agreeable right about now.

“Are you even listening to me?” He wailed, swiping at the air with his knife, barely an arm’s length between them now. “God, you never fuckin’ listen!”

“Lee, put the knife *down*. You—You don't mean this."

"Shaddup! You ain't gonna tell me what it is I mean! You think just 'cause it's us two that I won't do it? Fucking toff—I warned you!"

"I know," Remus said, struggling to keep his breath even, "but I swear, Lee... If you let me go now, you'll never have to see me again. I'll never come back here, I'll disappear."

"As if I'd believe a liar! As if I'd believe someone who *only ever lied to me!"*

Desperate, Remus glanced around for another exit—another chance. All he found was a filthy living room and empty beer bottles. Lee had a cut on his cheek that had healed badly, no doubt the result of a fight. Seeing the cut and how its scabbed surface pulled at the skin, Remus was reminded of his own run-in with trouble, all those summers ago.

"Alright," he gulped, "so don't believe me now—I know you can't, that's fine. Don't believe the things I told you—believe the things you know!" Remus touched the side of his nose, where he knew his faded scar still split his face like a crack in the pavement. "You knew me when I got this. You *knew* me! I was fifteen and we were friends—you were my *friend*, Lee. I loved you, and I loved Tomny and he loved us both... And you—you and me? I would've followed you anywhere, mate!"

"You're not my mate!"

"No, but I'm still your Lu!"

For a split-second, Lee's knife dropped. Remus felt it in his bones.

"Please, Lee."

"I didn't ask you to beg."

"I'm doing it anyway."

The knife fell another several centimetres, and slowly Lee straightened up. He was glaring at something—his scar, Remus realised.

"You say you're my Lu? But who's that, huh? I dunno a Lu... All's I know s'a lying bastard named *Remus Lupin*."

"No—"

"You're a liar. There never was a Lu. Not really."

Remus shut his eyes. He felt like he'd been cleaved in two.

"I loved you, Lee."

"Liar."

"—I lied, but I still loved you. I swear, I did. I made you feel sorry for me so that you'd let me into the group, and I went on letting you believe it because… well, 'cause it was easier than admitting that I was any different."

"You're not 'different'," Lee hissed. "Different's growing up sleeping in front of the oven 'cause your piece of shit dad gambled away that month's electric money! Nah, yer a fucking prick—you only ever been mollycoddled! You don't know what it's like to be different!"

Remus grit his teeth. "You're right… but for what it's worth, I'm sorry anyway."

A hand shot forward, fisting the front of his jacket viciously.

"Don't you get it?!" Lee screamed. "I don't want your sorry! You can't just make up for your lies by being fucking sorry!"

Remus had nothing to say. Lee was right. He'd lied, and these were the consequences.

For a while Lee's expression was no more than fury. He was breathing hard enough that shoulders drooped by several inches each time he exhaled and spit covered his cracked lips from all the swearing. Remus wasn't fool enough to think he was safe, but when Lee finally released his shirt, he felt his chest give a lurch of relief.

"You say yer lookin' for Tom?" Lee asked, sucking his teeth. "Well, he ain't 'ere. Ran out on us jus' like you did, innit. Wanted a better life for him and that stupid girl of his."

"Skylar's pregnant. He only meant to—"

"Don't care. 'Cause you see, this—" and he raised his arms, indicating to the rest of the flat; "this s'as good as it gets fur' the rest 'a us. Every'fin rots in the End."

He wanted to deny it, but Lee had never been the kind to look outside of his own means. He felt safe in the familiar and had clearly made a name for himself the same way Tomny had. Reality was that he didn't want anything Remus could offer, he was just a sad boy mourning the things he'd lost. At least there, Remus could relate.

“I’m sorry, Lee,” Remus said stupidly, feeling a lump form in his throat. “I’m sorry everything’s gone.”

For a moment it almost appeared as though he’d gotten through to him. Lee stared back at him and for a moment his eyes were clear again; but quick as the change came, it was gone. Lee tipped his head forward, and this time when he raised the blade he pressed it to Remus’ throat.

“No.” Seething, he fisted the front of Remus’ jacket again. “No, you don’t get to decide when everything’s just *gone.”*

“Shit, Lee—”

“Nah, I think it’s time you got to actually begging, *Lu!*” He hollered. “Jus' ‘cause we got no audience doesn’t mean you can’t grovel! So go on, little ponce! You remember the words, right?”

It hit like a train—*I’m a ponce*—and like a vicious reminder, the knife stung his throat.

“Go on, Lu, say it!”

I’m a ponce.

“Would you rather me gut you? Is that it?”

"No."

"No? No what?!"

I’m not a—

"Come on, stupid ponce!"

I said, I'm not a—

"Say it!"

“No, Lee!"

Remus had felt the words leave his mouth. When they did, Lee's face turned to stone.

“No...?”

"... No.”

The knife bit deeper.

“No, you won’t say it, or no, you don’t want me to gut you?”

I'm—

"Answer, you ponce!"

I'm King of the Dock.

Remus wished there was another way. He wished he knew what he was going to tell Skylar, or Sirius. He wished he didn't have to let them down. He wished he'd had more time.

"I could do it, you know," Lee said, and suddenly he was a snivelling mess. "I've done it before... It'd be *easy*. I can do it. I will."

"No, Lee. You won't."

"You...? You think I... *won't?*" Lee's nostrils flared like an animal. "Fine, then maybe *I'll show you—!*"

“Moony!”

The cry came from outside, barely heard through the balcony’s glass door. Even half out of his mind, Lee still picked up on it, sharply wrenching his head toward the sound and then letting out a cackle loud enough to make Remus’ ears twinge.

“Them’s your mates, then? Wonder how they’ll react seeing you all torn up. I’m gonna give ya ‘nother scar to match th’ one over yer nose. See how tough you look then, Lu.”

Behind them the flat’s doorknob rattled.

“Lee? Boyo, let us in. Let us in, ya effing eejit.”

It was like Lee’s eyes had glazed over. Maybe it was relief.

“Ya hear that? Them’s my mates. They're 'ere, looking out. Whatchu think—I give you tah them? There won’t be enough left for yer boys to bury.”

“Moony!”

Remus felt something wet trickle down the side of his neck. The knife had cut him, leaving behind a burning sting, but he was still trapped

against the table and Lee's grip on his jacket was solid enough to prevent him from pulling away. Behind him, the door handle continued to rattle.

"Well, Remus?" Lee keened. "Got nuffin' to say now? There's a surprise."

Remus shut his eyes. He was so close. If he just reached down a bit further—

Thump! Thump! "Lee, who ya talkin' to? You even in there, ya daft cunt?"

"Moony!"

Just a little more—

"Luuuuuu!"

"Lee, let us in!"

So close—

"Moony!"

"Open your eyes, Lu! Open your eyes or I'll blind you, *ya fucking toff!"*

Remus grabbed hold of the crystal ashtray, bringing it upwards in a sharp arc. It caught Lee upside the head, slamming into his temple with a heavy thud. Lee dropped like a bag of rocks as Remus spiralled backward, clutching his throat and breathing very hard. The sound must've echoed, as the shouting in the hallway outside grew louder.

"Lee! 'Oo's in there?!"

The guys outside were pounding on the door now. In a few seconds they'd be throwing their entire weight against it and it'd be game over for Remus. Nearby Lee was on his knees, clutching his head in both hands. He was bleeding.

"Fuck…! Lu… *ngh…* Lu, *I'mma…* gon' feckin'—kill y—ou…"

"No," Remus wheezed, staring at the blood on his fingers, "you're not."

The ashtray dropped from his other hand, landing in time with the heavy thuds happening out in the hall. He couldn't hear Sirius anymore, but the front door strained against its hinges with every hit.

Watching Lee writhe there on the floor, a part of Remus wanted to hit him again—hit him until he couldn't ever be a threat again. But more than anything Remus wished they could've just gone back to the way they were.

"I loved you, Lee," he swore. "You were my brother."

"Nnngh—no, I had a bruh—a brother." Lee looked up at him, without pity or remorse. "You… You ain't my fucking brother."

Remus sucked a wet breath back. He imagined what he would say next. The words never came. Instead the door burst open, and two guys dressed in jean jackets and heavy boots hurdled their way inside. Remus knew what was about to happen. Like a shark scenting blood, they look one look at Lee—crouched over and bleeding—and instantly Remus was a dead man.

"Yer a dead man!" The first of them barked, predictably.

Remus moved like the room was on fire. He launched himself over the coffee table, knocking over a single free-standing lamp as he went for the balcony door. Mercifully it was unlocked, and he'd only just managed to shut it behind himself when his attackers slammed into the other side of the glass. With nowhere else to go, Remus picked up one of the old plastic chairs they used to sit on to smoke their cigarettes. One of them was missing its back rest, leaving behind two rusted metal prongs that stuck straight up into the air. Using the busted chair, Remus jammed the metal bar into one end of the sliding door, blocking the skinheads from opening it.

Standing up, he felt the glass shake as they slammed it with their fists.

"I'll kill you!" They spat, wrenching on the door handle while their breath fogged up the glass. *"Yer feckin' dead!"*

"Moony, what the hell are you doing?!"

It was Sirius again. He stood in the middle of the front garden, waving his hands erratically.

"It was Lee!" Remus shouted back. "Tomny isn't here."

"I figured when I saw those skinheads go inside." Sirius shielded his eyes with one hand. "You should jump!" He shouted. "Go on, I'll catch you!"

There was no time to argue. As the balcony door strained, Remus went to the railing and leaned over. He was fifteen—maybe twenty feet off the ground. If he managed to get himself over the railing and dangle from the bottom then he might've been able to half that—except Lee's mates didn't seem all that interested in waiting. So, Remus did what any reasonable eighteen year-old facing certain death would do.

He jumped.

Someone must've been watering the bramble bushes; they weren't nearly as thorny as he was expecting when he landed. In fact, they were more like shrubs than anything, but that didn't stop Remus from flattening them as his entire body came crashing down from above. Sirius was on him in a second, peeling his battered body out of the foliage with a single sharp tug.

Remus hissed in pain. "Shit! What happened to fucking catching me?"

"I panicked!"

"Bloody f—*uuuuuck!"*

"Quick, before those new friends of yours start thinking they can survive a jump like that too."

With Sirius' help, Remus began hobbling his way across the lawn. The old woman from earlier was gone, but the front gate was open. As they neared it, the van's side door slid open and Trish and Barty leapt out, urging them onwards with frantic arms.

"Hurry! Hurry! The damn lunatic's right behind you!"

It was like Remus' stomach had shot back into his throat. Behind them, Lee had flown out the flat's front door like an animal. Practically foaming at the mouth, his shirt was stained with blood and a vein bulged intensely in his forehead.

"LUUUUPIN!" He howled, brandishing his knife; ***"I'M GONNA KILL YOU!"***

"Fuck this!" Sirius yelped, practically dragging Remus toward the gate himself. "Reg, start the bloody car!"

There was no time to be astonished. Sirius' grip on his arm was like a vice, and Remus could feel Lee at their backs even as they ran. Ahead

of them, Trish and Barty scrambled back inside the van, reaching for anything they might be able to use as a weapon. When they'd reappeared, Barty had an empty beer can in either hand while Trish weilded the end of a broken mike stand.

“RUN!” They shouted, clearly terrified. "RUN, LUPIN—RUN!"

Even injured, Remus was quick. He and Sirius made it to the gate before Lee had time to reach them and—bursting through it, had only a few more steps of precious pavement left between them and safety.

Then Remus felt a hand on the back of his jacket.

"I've got you!"

“Lupin!” Barty shouted; *“DUCK!”*

Thankfully, Sirius’ instincts hadn’t been dulled by a twenty-foot drop. He pushed Remus forward, nearly driving him face-first into the floor of the van, and Barty let the beer can he was holding fly. His aim was true, and they watched as the can smacked Lee dead in the face and—miraculously not empty at all—exploded with all the glorious force of a stale lager.

The show was over for Remus before Lee could hit the ground a second time. As the other skinheads appeared on the flat's porch, Sirius shoved the rest of Remus into the van and hauled the door shut behind them. He gave Trish a nod and she turned to Regulus, who'd already leapt into the front seat;

“Drive!”

With a nasty screech off the transmission, Regulus shoved the gear stick all the way into fifth gear and the van shot forward into the street. He did nearly drive them into a line of parked cars, but eventually they'd levelled out, with Regulus’ elbows locked straighter than an arrow as he struggled to keep the steering wheel from wobbling in his hands.

Lying next to Sirius on the floor of the van, it was all Remus could do to breathe. So far none of them had said anything, and instead the radio prattled on, serenading them with a Village People's song. A second later, and Trish peeked over the edge of her seat.

"You okay there, Loonarny...?"

Remus shrugged, the tiny movement alone drawing a deep groan from deep down inside of him. Hiding her mouth behind one hand, Trish slowly began to titter;

“W-Wow…hah-ha… Heh–he–ha! Boy, Loonarny—when you said to watch out for the locals, ye really meant it.”

Unable to help himself, Remus began to laugh as well. It hurt, but he finished with a groan anyway after Sirius had turned over and smacked him in the centre of his chest.

“You bloody idiot—do you *ALWAYS* have to throw yourself into every near-death experience?!”

“*Ngh*… Huh-ha! Shit, Padfoot… How else do you get any character development around here?”

“Character—?!” Sirius finished with another slap, but the sounds of Remus’ pain were drowned out by Barty as he leapt up on his seat.

“Did you see that? Did you see when I threw that can of beer at his face?! HA—it fucking exploded!”

“ ‘Twas a good shot,” Trish agreed. “He’s gonnae be nursing that lump for a while. Here’s hoping he forgets ye exist, huh, Loonarny?”

Unsure whether he wanted to laugh or cry, Remus waved her off, lips pressed tightly together as he cradled an arm across his stomach. When he opened his eyes again, Sirius was still peering down over him.

“I’m guessing you didn’t find who you were looking for,” he said quietly.

The fact alone hurt more than his injuries. Sirius must’ve read the answer in his eyes; he reached out and carded his fingers through Remus’ fringe, his mouth forming a sympathetic smile.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s alright.”

I hope so, Remus thought.

Up ahead in the driver’s seat, Regulus was still white knuckling the steering wheel. “Great!" He shouted. "Now that we’ve established that everyone’s all well and alive, I feel this is a great time to remind you that—*I don’t know how to drive!”*

* * *

The captain of this lugger,
He was a dirty bugger;
He wasn't fit to shovel shit,
From one place to another;

Friggin' in the riggin'
Friggin' in the riggin'
Friggin' in the riggin'
There was fuck all else to do!

- "Friggin' in the Riggin'" The Sex Pistols, 1979

Later that night...

"Ah! … Augh… AGH, F—SHIT, EVANS!"

"Oh, stop whinging!" Lily hissed, busy capping the jar of ointment she'd been applying to each of Remus' many cuts. She hadn't been happy to come home from class to find Sirius and Trish bent over him on the sofa with a rag in either hand, but of course that hadn't stopped her from barging in and taking over. Remus' back hadn't been faring well ever since taking on the bramble bushes; he felt like he'd been used as a scratching post for several angry cats. After the ointment was applied Lily placed a large stick-on bandage over top, making him wince all over again.

"Honestly, Remus, if you didn't insist on getting yourself caught up in such asinine situations then I wouldn't be here right now torturing you."

"That's what I told him," Sirius sighed. Meanwhile he was across the room, tucked up on one of the sofas and already three drinks in. Remus noted with slight amusement that the beer he was drinking was the same brand Barty had cracked over Lee's nose earlier, but it didn't stop him from shooting Sirius the bird.

"You shouldn't have gone there at all," Lily scolded. "And don't you *dare* try and tell me you didn't talk him into it, Sirius Black."

"I didn't talk him into it! I just... didn't talk him out."

Lily's green eyes narrowed. "Honestly, I never thought I'd get stuck living with such fools!"

"You sure about that?" Regulus said out of the corner of his mouth. Inexplicably, it made Lily smile, and he quickly glanced away—a gesture that did not go unseen by Remus.

"Well," Lily huffed, “at least I have some good news.” Finished with his bandages, she tapped Remus on the shoulder while shutting the first-aid kid and Remus was able to spin round and face her at the kitchen table while lowering his t-shirt. “Sybill’s given the go-ahead on your guys’ show at UCL," she said happily. "That's right—come next Friday, you four are going to have your first ever *live*, head-lining concert.”

“No way!” Sirius shot upright on the couch, nearly upsetting Trish’s beer as she went in for a sip. “She really made it happen?”

“You mean real people are going to pay real money just to listen to you bang and whinge for a whole hour?” Barty demanded.

“Even better, Crouch” Sirius told him, “they’re gonna pay to listen to us bang and whinge for *two* whole hours!”

“Wow. Sucks for them."

Shoving his tongue between his teeth and bottom lip, Sirius tipped his beer toward Barty, who only crowded more closely into Regulus.

“Aw, what’s wrong Crouch? No ‘break a leg’?”

“I hope you break a leg, Black—in fact, I hope you break both of them!”

Not long after, the front door opened and Peter and James strolled in, their hands black with car oil and big smiles plastered across their faces.

“Good news,” James announced, “turns out Little Edge didn’t actually manage to ruin the van’s transmission, so it looks like we’re good to head out to Camden tonight!”

“Are you sure?” Lily asked, peering dubiously at Remus. “I think some of us have had enough excitement for one day...”

“I’m fine,” Remus replied stubbornly. He reached for his coat as he stood up, purposely resisting the twinge in his back.

“Just you wait, Edge,” Sirius said to Regulus as they all congregated by the front door to gather their coats and boots; “The Damned are sure to put on a good show. I know this guy from work, who swears their lead singer's like a fucking vampire or something. Said he even drank real blood on stage once."

"Don't be ridiculous. Vampires aren't real."

"Don't tell this guy that. It'd ruin the whole show."

Regulus rolled his eyes, and Sirius grabbed him by both shoulders, guiding him out the front door. "Ah, don't worry, Edgie. You haven’t seen anything ‘til you see your big brother up on stage anyway!”

With the brothers already out, James sidled up to Peter and playfully shoved a pair of his drumsticks into his hands. “Here, Pete,” he sniggered, “for when Rat Scabies dares one of the audience to take over for him on drums again.”

“As if,” scoffed Peter, tossing the sticks away. “He won't, and besides, I don’t fancy getting my head kicked in by a couple of punks when I don’t know all the notes.”

"I'd fancy it," Barty said snidely, before Trish had him by the ear.

They had to cram together in the back of the van just to get all eight of them to fit, and since Sirius insisted on sitting up front with James, Lily ended up riding the entire way to Camden in Remus’ lap.

“This's so exciting,” Trish exclaimed, her tiny shoulders crammed in between the two Salazar boys. Despite the fact that she’d travelled all the way from the Scottish Midlands to rip Regulus a new one, she’d packed rather poorly when it came to the general wardrobe department. Lily had offered to lend her a blouse for the concert, but in the end she’d gone with one of Sirius’—a cyanotype t-shirt they’d picked up along Portobello Market ages ago. It had Iggy Pop’s face on the front, layered with what appeared to be an x-ray of a very large ribcage. Overtop she was wearing Barty's jacket, of which she'd rolled up the sleeves just to make fit.

“Don’t tell me you’re nae completely buzzing,” she said to Regulus, who up until that moment had been staring out the window, watching as the bright lights of Camden High Street whipped on by.

“It should certainly be an experience.”

“Ugh, you’re like the grim reaper o’ fun.”

Regulus leaned his mouth into his hand, pretending not to notice, but Remus thought he’d managed to catch a hint of a smile in the light of a passing headlamp.

The Damned—or The Doomed, they were billing themselves now; it changed by the week—were playing at Camden’s Electric Ballroom. A bar and roller-disco most nights, the venue was occasionally transformed into a stage house meant to showcase the best and worst London’s rock scene had to offer. Remus had never been, but Dorcas called it a right of passage. You hadn’t lived until you’d seen the club’s bartender smash a bottle over a heckler’s head like it was a Greek wedding.

They parked the van a few streets over, making triple-sure to steer clear of any taxi ranks, before making their way over to Kentish Town Road where they found the club’s entrance already teeming with young fans. The concert being his idea initially, Sirius had generously offered to cover the door fee for each of them on the condition that should the lead singer turn into a vampire bat on stage, they’d all bow down and name him their new prophet. Remus didn’t know how likely that was, but when Dave Vanian took to the stage decked out in white face makeup and a billowing poet’s blouse, he began to think that Sirius’ odds of winning might not actually be that bad.

“He looks insane,” Barty said, before practically yelping as his shoulder came into contact with one of the “no wave” fans. This one was wearing a jacket with enough studded metal it could’ve been considered a lethal weapon. “Do they actually expect people to be able to dance to this noise?”

“Sure, you can dance, Crouch,” Sirius laughed, “just don’t expect to be given much room for pirouetting.”

The crowd was getting on great. Three fights had broken out before the end of the second song, but as none went so far as to draw any blood so most people remained unbothered. Instead they threw themselves skyward, bouncing up and down in place like highly-excitable and highly-inebriated children. An elbow caught Remus in the chin at some point, but when he looked to see who’d hit him, he couldn’t tell his neighbour’s arm from his own. They were packed in like sardines, spilling beer onto each other and practically tramping

across their own shoes.

'Go where you want to go,' the song said, *'don't stay locked at home!*
Don't be a fool—
Don't cry wolf!'

As far as Remus could tell, this was a people who'd come together purely to lose themselves in the noise. Unlike the Sex Pistols, there was no expectation to be the foulest couture-wearing dickhead in the room, and no one was foaming at the mouth for the chance of getting at some greasy blighter in a leather jacket that happened to share their own political epiphanies as they had while watching the Clash.

They were simply…

'So come and have some fun, yeah!
And help us smash it up—'

There to enjoy.

'Don't be a fool—
Don't cry wolf!'

"Not really your typical anarchists, are they?" Sirius called, shoving his way past a pair of head-banging girls in matching dog collars.

"They're not anarchists at all!" Remus shouted back. "They're just loud!" And better musicians than the Clash and Sex Pistols combined, certainly.

Smirking, Sirius then shrugged in indifference as he pushed a can of Skol lager into Remus' hand. On his other side, James and Peter were taking turns shielding Lily from the more rambunctious members of the audience. When lead singer Dave Vanian began waving his tongue suggestively at them, Lily laughed and slapped James on the arm, probably suggesting that he start doing the same.

Of all of them, Regulus and Barty were predictably having the worst time. Remus had suggested earlier that the two of them hunker down by the bar and get drunk enough to take the edge off, but they'd

declined then, and it only became obvious as to why when about halfway through the show, a beefy guy with hair stained vermillion and no shirt on indicated that he wanted to lift Trish up onto his shoulders. She almost accepted too, before Barty did the unthinkable and raised Trish onto his own shoulders himself. From there she had a prime view of the entire room, which she made the most of by shrieking every time the beret-clad guitar player came to the front of the stage to hammer out a solo.

'Problem child, problem child,
We think you live much too wild!
Problem child, problem child,
When you get home—
Your daddy's gonna tan your hide!'

It went on forever. At least, that's how it felt. Back at the Shoestring they had to break in the middle of their sets—let sense reassert itself so that more booze may flow—but at a real concert, nothing else mattered aside from the music. Remus could see the sweat on the band's face and chest and he knew—*he knew*—what it was to be there. To feel so out of breath you might pass out any moment, to be so in need of a drink of water you think *that's it, this is the end!*

And yet the rush makes it all worth it.

'Problem child, problem child,
We think you live much too wild!'

Things began to get real rowdy near the end of the show. An amplifier had been blown halfway through, creating a wonderful show of bang and sparks and the guitarist kept knocking over his microphone stand, usually battering some poor member of the front row in the process. If the crowd had been close to the stage before then they were practically breathing on the band now. Though she remained a good sport, James had eventually taken Lily to the back to get some air and Peter seemed to have made good friends with a punk couple who looked to be about in their mid-forties. Sirius was still going strong of course; he and Remus were on what had to be their third or fourth beer, though how Sirius found it so easy to slip in and out of the crowd at will, Remus still couldn't understand.

Trish had since traded Barty's shoulders for Regulus' and—urging him forward with her heels as though he were a saddle horse and not a boy—had managed to gain Vanian's favour, screaming loud enough that the lead singer eventually pulled what appeared to be a kerchief from one of his billowing sleeves and tossed it into the audience for her to catch. A pair of girls just in front had turned around to stare with envy, and Trish smirked as she kissed the silky scarf and tucked it in the collar of her t-shirt.

Somewhere between the raucous "Stretcher Case" and blustering "Neat Neat Neat" drummer Rat Scabies had lost his shirt, playing in only his trousers and a pair of sunglasses missing one lens. He seemed to favour the 'dead behind the eyes' sort of drumming face, but before Remus could finish the thought (or his beer), the song ended and half of the band threw down their instruments and stalked off stage. After that the bassist downed a beer and tossed the can in the audience only to meander off in sure search for more, and all they were left with was Scabies himself. He gave an impressive drum fill—characterised by enough bass drum to burst an *ear*-drum—and then Scabies stood up from his stool and pointed both sticks at the audience.

"Oi, which one of your sodding cunts has the bollocks to get up here and play? HUH?!"

The room cheered manically, but none were quick to volunteer. Scabies was known for the stunt, often luring an unsuspecting fan on stage only to let the crowd rip them to pieces the moment they were proven as anything less than astonishing.

As the drummer went on harassing them for tribute, Sirius slipped over to Peter and shoved him in delight.

"Go on, Wormtail! The bloke's name is 'Rat', you're practically cousins!"

"Piss off! That joke ain't even funny anymore!" Peter replied, looking a lot like he might throw up.

"Ain't any 'a ya got the balls?!"

"Come on, Wormy!"

"You do it then if you're so brave!" Peter yelled, shoving Sirius toward the stage.

"Me? I can't play the drums!"

“Lupin, then!”

“Sod off.”

Scabies roared into the microphone;

“No one!?”

It seemed like the angry drummer was not about to get his wish. A few guys near the left corner of the stage were playing at it, but every time one attempted to get on stage they’d wobble drunkenly and fall back down to be consumed by the mob. At one point Scabies began shoving them off stage himself, disappointed in their sorry state and obviously low-calibre. Some shouted for him to get back behind the drums and light them on fire—a favourite party trick of his Remus had always wanted to see up close. But Scabies would not have it. While his band mates were off, probably downing several shots and the odd cheeky bump or two, he stalked up and down the stage like a prison warden, shaking his sticks in the air and punting empty cans back into the crowd.

“Pete, you gotta,” James said, having appeared with Lily from the back of the venue. “It’ll be legendary!”

“Oh, go on, Peter! We know you’d be brilliant,” Lily encouraged, but Peter only shook his head again. Outwardly—and perhaps drunkenly—Remus was disappointed, but he couldn’t blame Peter for refusing. Getting up on stage with your own band was one thing—accepting the challenge of real label-signed punk rocker was another. If someone like Sid Vicious had even looked at him, he would’ve folded on the spot.

When several long, drawn-out minutes had passed and no one had risen to the bait, Scabies stormed back over to his kit and unceremoniously hurled his floor tom across the stage. The crowd ate it up, but it was clear not everyone was happy. Trish booed, still clinging to the tops of Regulus’ shoulders, and shockingly, Barty joined her. It wasn’t until the rest of the band reemerged on stage and Scabies took to one of the microphones that the mood finally shifted.

“Bloody pathetic! Since when did Camden Town become land of the fucking pillocks?!”

Initially Remus thought nothing of it. Scabies could only bleat for so long; eventually the band would pick up their instruments and finish out the show, and they’d all go home with their ears and brains rattled

to mush. But then something happened that no one could've seen coming.

Again, Scabies hollered—*"No one? Is there feckin' no one!?"* —and quietly, almost like a sigh, Remus heard a mumbled, *"fuck it"* coming from his left side.

A small yelp—and Trish had been dropped to the ground as Regulus started pushing past others like Barty, heading for the front of the stage. Like a sailor returning to land, Trish stumbled, and Remus scrambled to catch her as they were both jarred by the eager crowd. Together they watched as Regulus sifted through the sweaty bodies, his face tilted down but hand thrust high in the air so he could be spotted amongst the masses. *Me,* it seemed to say, *I volunteer.*

"No way," blurted James, having somehow witnessed the whole thing over Remus' shoulder; "He's not doing what I think he's doing, is he?"

Remus was without words. He could only gape as the crowd eventually began to catch on, parting obediently for Regulus the moment Rat Scabies noticed and pointed a single stick straight at him.

"A-ha! A sacrifice!"

The drummer crowed enthusiastically as he reached a hand down to help Regulus up onto stage. The minute Regulus' feet touched that cheap vinyl platform, the audience went wild. A second later, Remus felt a hand grab his shoulder. *Sirius.*

"Am I seeing things, or did my baby brother just get on that fucking stage?"

"I think he's doing more than just getting on stage," Remus bleated back. They watched as Scabies righted the floor tom and directed Regulus behind the drum kit to his very own stool. The seventeen year-old kid moved robotically, like he couldn't remember how he'd come to be on stage in the first place, and when Scabies handed him the drumsticks, Regulus stared at them like he'd just been given a live bomb to hold.

"What's he gonna do up there?" Demanded Peter. "He doesn't even know how to play!"

"What, ye think he just sits around in that bloody music room twiddling his bonny little thumbs?"

It was Trish. She and Barty had turned on the rest of them, a single smug look split between them.

“Uh—I don’t know about you, but I don’t think Scabies is gonna let him get away with playing Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight Sonata’ at a *rock concert*,” said Sirius.

“You mean he never told you?” Barty laughed. "Figures."

“Told him what?” Wailed James.

But Barty refused to say anymore. Sirius demanded it, even threatened to kick him out on the streets if he didn’t fess up, but Barty’s lips were sealed.

“Trish, is this for real?” Remus asked.

“You ain't dreaming, if that’s what you’re asking, Loonary.”

Remus looked at Sirius, who looked at James, who looked at Peter—and instantly they knew what was going on. It was unbelievable—the Marauders were had! Even Lily looked on in shock. Regulus—on the drums? Why? *How?!*

Sheila.

The thought must’ve occurred to Sirius the same moment it had Remus, for they looked at each other with equal parts shock and realisation. She'd never told them what instrument Regulus had picked up back in September, and now they were finally sorting it out for themselves—at a live concert, no less. Up on stage, Regulus was currently being zeroed in on by all four members of The Damned. The band’s guitar player, Captain Sensible, shoved a microphone beneath his nose so he could introduce himself, but when Regulus said nothing—merely staring out over the room as though his brain had short circuited—Remus had to swallow a laugh of disbelief.

“What’s yer name?” Scabies was shouting, to no avail. The sight of the large crowd had clearly dampened whatever reserve of mad courage it’d taken for Regulus to ignite the little stunt, but when Scabies simply answered with a swift, *“Aw, who gives a fuck what yer name is! Let’s just feckin’ play!”* and knocked the mike away, Regulus had no choice to comply. A perfectionist to his core, he straightened up behind the kit, readjusting the pair of sticks and began twirling them like a nervous gesture. Scabies leaned down to whisper something in his ear, but when Regulus shook his head, the drummer simply

shrugged and stepped away, accepting a beer as it was handed to him by one of the stage hands.

“Right, let’s hear it for the nameless wonder!” Scabies hollered, no mike needed. The crowd roared for him—for Regulus—and eventually the noise died down, replaced by craven need. The rest of the band had their instruments, but it was clear they, like the crowd, only intended to sit back and watch as Scabies tortured his next victim. Already the room was growing restless again. Remus could feel it like the heartbeat in his ears.

Play. Play. Play.

“Well?” Scabies asked him. “You gonna play or not, kid?”

There was no answer; Regulus was frozen, staring down at the drums like they might swallow him whole. Remus heard the heckling start from the back, growing more and more bold;

“Bloody play something!”

“Kick him off!”

“What is he—thick?!”

But it was a different voice that cut through all of it;

“Go on, Edge!” Sirius barked, cupping his hands around his mouth; “Go on—don’t listen to these tossers, show ‘em! You can do it!”

“Yeah, Edge, you can do it!” James added.

“You can do it, Regulus!”

“Play, Regulus!”

“Hurry up, Reginald!”

“Fucking, show ‘em, Reg!”

“Go on! Take the plunge!”

“You’re fearless, Edge! You’re a beast!”

“Play—play!”

“Hell yeah!”

They'd all started. From Barty to Lily, they went down the line shouting their encouragement like a war chant.

Play! Play! Play!

"We're here for you!" Sirius told him. "You're *my* brother—you can do it!"

"Anything you want, Regulus," Remus shouted, "you make the rules!"

"You're gonna kill it!" James insisted.

It was probably very embarrassing, but knowing Regulus, that was perhaps the only way to get him to do anything. He may have cringed behind the drum kit, but at least it snapped his mind out of its vegetative state. It took the band's eyes off him, and it gave the audience something to listen to—and that, in itself, was *enough*.

The first hit of the bass drum was like an electric shock to the entire room. It was amplified immediately by a rolling clash of cymbals and a cascade of dropped jaws, though no one could've been more shocked than Sirius.

"Holy shit," he muttered—and *holy shit* was right. Aside from the drums, the entire room had gone deadly quiet; like a jazz drummer, Regulus' playing had started out as a series of beats meant to rock the tempo back and forth like a boat. He played with his left just as equally as his right, commanding every note with immense precision and growing faster and faster with every hit on the snare. Even just watching, Remus' heart felt like it was in his throat. It felt like watching Sirius play the piano at his father's funeral—the tip of the waterfall, in which the subsequent plunge came faster and faster with every passing second.

Caught in a wave of awe no different than that of their audience, members of The Damned stood around like slack-jawed spectators; their instruments might as well have been lead in their hands. Rat Scabies himself had been finally outdone, it seemed. He gaped at Regulus openly, the beer in his hand all but forgotten, and when Regulus' drum fill came to a shuddering close, he threw his arms up in a clap.

Only Regulus was not finished.

With a booming smash, he launched himself into a blinding fit—smashing his bass and cymbals simultaneously. It took a few seconds,

but eventually Remus began to recognise the beat, and it was *not* jazz.

“Is that Black Sabbath?” Peter bleated.

“It’s ‘Paranoid’,” Remus answered in awe. Next to him, Sirius had his hands in his hair;

“HOLY SHIT!”

All Barty and Trish could do was cheer.

By now some of the other band members had started to catch on. It was only natural; Black Sabbath had set the bar for countless punk groups, and hearing them now, members like Captain Sensible were clearly invigorated.

Taking up his guitar, Sensible took a few seconds to tweak his tuning before joining Regulus in the opening riff. With the guitar it was everything. It broke the audience from their surprised daze and suddenly people were cheering again. They wanted more!

Dave Vanian picked up his microphone;

‘Finished with my woman—‘cause she couldn’t help me with my mind! People think I’m insane—because I am frowning all the time!’

“FUCK YEAH—GO, REGGIE!”

Sirius bellowed louder than the rest, using James’ shoulders to leap high enough so that Regulus might be able to see him if he only looked up. But Regulus wasn’t paying attention to them. The band’s bass player had moved over to the drums, matching his tempo to Regulus’ in a great show of improvisation. It wasn’t a perfect cover—not by miles—but Regulus’ playing had already wowed everyone. He’d peeled himself out of his jacket, and now perspiration was shimmering off his face and bare arms under the hot lights. Across the stage, Rat Scabies may as well have been creaming his pants. He leapt up and down, nearly driving his knees into his own throat while the band’s guitarist, Captain Sensible, threw himself down on his back, playing upside down and looking like the possessed girl from *the Exorcist.*

‘All day long I think of things—but nothing seems to satisfy!’

The crowd roared.

'Think I'll lose my mind—if I don't find something to pacify!'

There was a crash as someone smashed a bottle over one of the stage monitors.

'Can you help me?'

Rat Scabies picked up the broken bottle—

'Occupy my brain!'

And drank from its shattered rim.

'OHHH YEAH!'

It was like lighting a match and waiting for it to burn down the wick. Captain Sensible was a shit guitarist when compared to the likes of the real Black Sabbath, but no one cared. This wasn't about paying tribute—this was as close to any of them got to God. The amplifiers seemed to get louder, the bass harder, and no one knew what to do. The crowd thrashed as one, fists pumping through the air and shoving coming from all sides. Here was this regular kid, plucked from the masses—a fan, just like them! They wanted a piece, and thankfully Scabies gave it to them the moment he tossed the shattered bottle aside and threw himself over the crowd. They caught him, after perhaps a few concussions, and he crowd-surfed across the entire room while Regulus—*a skinny little punk*—played his own drums for him.

If Regulus noticed what was going on within the crowd, he did not give any indication of it. Instead he kept his head bent down low, dark hair falling into his eyes like a shield. Maybe, thought Remus, if he couldn't see them, it meant it didn't matter what happened. If Remus could've told him anything just then it would've been that his mother

would be very disappointed in how fucking cool he'd turned out to be.

When the song was over, Regulus finished them off with a fill that made you feel as though you were tumbling down a set of stairs. Where he'd learned how to do such a thing—and in only a year—Remus couldn't fathom, but he'd done it. And he'd fooled them all.

Dave Vanian, the perfect punk-rock gentleman he was, congratulated Regulus with a kind handshake. He'd only just pushed his hair out of his eyes, and seemed to be looking around for somewhere respectable to leave the sticks, only Rat Scabies ha made his way back onto stage. As Regulus came out from behind his drums looking like a kid caught with his hand in the biscuit tin, Scabies slammed him on the back for his good work and finished by wrenching Regulus' arm up into the air like he'd just won the Grand Prix. The following cheers were loud enough to shake the entire room, and they muffled Scabies' words when he leaned in to ask Regulus something. Whatever it was, Regulus still did not seem interested; he shook his head for the second time, still breathing hard, and Scabies shrugged before giving him the sticks to keep as reward for his hard work.

Afterwards, when Regulus was free to rejoin the crowd, he was met with even more fans eager to share their congratulations. He had to fight just to make it back to his friends, who were all standing in the middle of the pit with stupid looks on their faces. Regulus' nose was bleeding lightly, but Sirius merely took his jacket sleeve and began wiping it away for him before shaking him by either shoulder.

"You crazy bastard—you never told me you could do that!"

"You were so great!" Lily said.

"More than great! That was goddamn amazing!" James agreed. "Scabies looked likely to pass out when you started playing."

"Thought *I* was going to pass out," Regulus panted. Everyone laughed, even those nearby they did not know, and as Barty pointed and went on telling everyone that *that* was his best friend, Trish leaned in to give Regulus a kiss on the cheek.

"Aye, you were brilliant."

"Must've felt amazing," Remus said, giving him a light tap on the shoulder. "What was it you were thinking up there?"

Regulus glanced down again. His hands were trembling, but he just squeezed Scabies' worn out drumsticks and slowly the shaking ebbed.

"I just… wanted it to be loud," he said eventually. "When it's loud, it's like nothing else matters."

"You weren't worried you were going to sound awful?" Peter asked tentatively. At the question, Regulus finally raised his head. Then he looked straight at Remus.

"There are worse things than sounding awful."

Remus smiled, but it was Sirius who hugged his brother. "I have never been so proud and so fucking pissed off at the same time. You... You little shit—You better not be keeping any more secrets from me!"

Regulus shrugged, and afterwards James reached over and raised his hand into the air the same way Scabies had. "Come on, I think this deserves a drink!"

Everyone cheered in agreement, and as The Damned began gearing up for a final encore, Remus and his friends turned for the bar. The music was instantly blaring again, and James looked at Peter;

"Isn't it cool, Pete? Now you got another drummer to jam with!"

"Yeah… S'cool."

Behind them the band's speakers roared;

'Well, you used to hang around on the rails, yeah!
You know they was your patch,
But there's a brand new kid in town;
Never gonna let you live it down, he's gonna—

Stab yor back!
Stab yor back!
Stab yor back!
Stab yor back!'

"Oh, that reminds me!" Sirius called, after they'd reached the bar and ordered a double round of fresh beers; "What'd Scabies say to you up on stage just then?"

Regulus sipped from his can, grimacing; “He asked if I wanted to do ‘Speed,’ but I told him I didn’t know the song.”

Sirius glanced at Remus, and then began breaking down. By the time he'd caught his breath, his laughter had turned to real tears on his face.

“Oh, baby brother—you have so much to learn!”

* * *

A Few Days Later…

"Show me again?"

"No."

"C'mon, pleeeeease? Just one more time."

Regulus scoffed, but set his sticks back against the drums—*one-two, one-two*—showing off the basic intro to "Paranoid". James followed it with his eyes, enamoured, and when Regulus was finished he leapt up from his nearby stool.

"Oh, I get it. So it's like—" Instead of going for the sticks, he leaned over top of Regulus' shoulders and took both of his hands in his own. Regulus might've rebuffed him for it, had James not been doing the same thing all afternoon. Now he just looked mildly perturbed, hunched over Peter's drum kit with that dark fringe falling into his eyes. When they'd finished, James rattled the cymbal several times.

"Let's go again!"

"I already said no—"

"Just one more!"

"Ugh..."

One-two, one-two!

Finished with my woman—‘cause she couldn’t help me with my mind!
People think I’m insane—because I am frowning all the time!

"Amazing! You know, you could probably start a band of your own if you really wanted."

"Don't be stupid, Potter. Not everyone wants to be you, you know."

" 'Course not. Some people want to be Elvis. Do *you* want to be Elvis, Edge?"

"Idiot."

"I hear U2's looking for a new drummer."

"Shut up."

A small smile tugged at the corners of Remus' mouth while he watched them. *One-two, one-two*—"One more?"—*One-two, one-two*—"God, you're so annoying."—*One-two, one-two*—"Yeah, reckon you like it though."—*One-two, one-two*—"Shut up!"—*One-two, one-two*—

"Oi, Loonarny—is that really how you really roll a spliff or dae ye just proper hate me?"

Not realising that he'd been staring, Remus snapped from his daze and glanced down into his lap to find the joint he'd been rolling had come apart in his hands. He was sitting across from Trish and Barty in the basement of their flat's pseudo-practice room, helping them make use of the last of Trish's London weed stash. Barty's rolls were twice as bad as Remus', with loose leaf spilling out either end—not that Trish seemed to notice. She did slap his fingers when he began tearing the extra rolling papers into little bits though. Barty only sneered at her.

"Sorry," Remus said, licking the side of the ruined joint in an attempt to save it.

"You were zoning out," Trish replied, sounding amused. "Feel like sharing with the class?"

"I just keep wondering whether I should tell James about it."

"Tell Potter about what?"

"Oh, you know. Just Regulus' crush on—"

He didn't even get to finish; instantly both kids' eyes shot up. Barty had even stopped ripping Trish's rolling papers into tiny pieces, and fisted both hands in his lap.

"How do you know about that?" He demanded.

"You mean it's really true?" Remus was shocked. "I only guessed."

"You want my advice?" Trish said, fitting a finished spliff into the corner of her mouth and lighting it up. "Dinnae say anything. Reginald's like a spooked deer—bring it up and he'll ne'er come within fifty feet o' ye again."

"And I'll have to kill you," Barty added keenly.

Remus rolled his eyes. "I wasn't gonna say anything," he said, setting aside the mangled spliff and reaching for another. " 'Sides, there's no hope for it. Everyone knows that Lily's totally gone for James."

"Which is why I'll kill you if you say anything," Barty insisted. Behind them, James and Regulus were still thankfully banging away and unaware, but Trish must've been worried, as she grasped Barty by the chin and held her lit spliff up to his lips.

"Here, bawbag, use this 'n' relax."

Barty did, but only while shooting a deep glare at Remus. It was unsettling, even for Barty Crouch. James was a good guy; if it did somehow come out that Regulus had a thing for Lily, he wouldn't do anything more than tease. Though for Regulus, teasing was certainly enough to push him over the edge.

The mood changed again when the door to the basement opened and Peter sauntered down the stairs. He'd already changed out of his work clothes and appeared rather worn out, but recovered the moment he spotted Regulus sitting behind his set of drums.

"Sirius said you guys would be down here already."

"Yeah, just messing around," James said kindly. "Good day at work, Pete?"

Peter shrugged, then licked his lips dubiously as he gestured to the dum kit. "Thanks for saving my seat, mate."

Regulus was up in a second, awkwardly palming the pair of sticks Scabies had given him. "Thanks for letting me use it while you're gone," he mumbled back.

"Any time."

Remus stood up from the floor, taking a moment to stretch as he called out to Peter; "Did ya see Sirius then, Pete?"

"Yeah, he's upstairs. You know the bloody girl in him takes forever to get ready."

"It's just band practice."

"Hey, he's your boyfriend." Peter tested the pedal of his hi-hat, before snapping his fingers in recollection; "That's right. Phone call for ya, Moony."

Remus shot a look at Trish and the others. "Let me guess, Sheila again?"

"No, it's that Skylar girl."

Shit. "Was she crying?"

"Didn't sound like it. Lily picked up. Told her I'd fetch you."

James gave Remus a hopeful smile. "That's good news then, right, Moons?"

Remus wasn't so sure. Setting aside his bass guitar immediately, he passed Regulus, who'd gone to sit with Barty and Trish and had his head bowed as all three of them shared in whispered conversation. Their eyes met for a second, but Regulus' expression gave away nothing.

Upstairs, Lily was watering her plants, gently pruning the Marlene fern she'd moved into the living room window for more light. Her nose wrinkled when he walked in, and she stifled the overpowering smell with the collar of her shirt.

"Ugh, Remus, you *need* to stop smoking. I can smell you from here."

"It's all part of the process, Lils. Helps us get loose—*'broadens the mind'*."

"How you four get anything done, I'll never understand." She hummed. "Phones for you."

Nervously wringing out his hands, Remus fetched the phone. He braced himself for tears—*was James right? Was it good news, or was Skylar just putting on a brave face?*—and took the plunge.

After a while, he was underwater. He could hear her, but she was far away, like an echo.

Sky?

Hey, Sky…

It's Remus.

You're good? That's good.

Say, I just wanted to let you know that I went back to the flat the other day and—what?

You found him?!

No, yeah—shit, that's great news! Do—Do you think I could…?

He's sleeping.

No—No, I understand! As long as he's alright…

Will you at least tell him I called?

… Mhm.

No, I get it.

Thanks, Sky.

Yup. Totally.

And hey, about the baby—

Yeah!

No…

Alright, I'll call back later.

Take care of yourself, okay?

—Bye.

The phone felt heavy in his hand. He still hadn't hung up, and he could hear the dial tone the same way he could hear Lily, calling his name in concern.

“Remus? Remus?”

There was a short thundering as someone—Sirius—came down the stairs in heavy boots. The front door opened at the same time, and again Remus was underwater. He heard their voices drifting around him;

"Hey there, Mr. Ringo Starr! … Oh don't make that face, you know you love it..."

“Where have you been? Potter’s waiting for you.”

“Right, I’m coming… Hold on, Edge, have you been *smoking*?”

“Piss off.”

“Hmph.”

Sirius must’ve poked his head into the living room, imitating a Scouser’s accent;

“*Heeey-up,* Evans. You seen my jacket anywhere?”

“In the cupboard… Jesus Chr—Sirius Black, how many times do I need to tell you to stop wearing your boots inside!”

“Bloody fuck, you and Reg really teamed up today, didn’t you? ‘Shit on Sirius’ day… Yeah, I’m going—I’m going. Make sure you come down and listen some later, kay? … You coming, Moons?"

With their voices far away, Remus began to make a list.

1. Tomny was back.
2. Tomny was fine.
3. Tomny did not want to speak to him.

“Moonyyyyyyyyy—! Come on, Moony, we got a concert to prepare for! Shit, that's mental to say, isn't it? ... Eh, Moony?”

Tomny's fine.

A hand touched his arm.

"Moony?"

He's fine.

Slowly, Remus set the phone down.

Chapter End Notes

A 'flannel' is like a kitchen/dish cloth.
If someone has been 'slated' they've been publicly shamed/ criticized.
'No wave' was a cultural movement that came as a response to “new wave”.
'Wimpy's' was/is a fast-food chain.
'Skol' was/is a brand of canned beer.

Technicaaaaallly, 1979 is not the ideal timeline for a Damned show, but it was important to me that I featured the Damned as long as I was going to feature the Sex Pistols and the Clash. So to any super punk fans out there, please allow me this one deus ex machina.

I based the Damned show loosely on THIS performance. Also Here’s the Sex Pistols version of "Friggin' in the Riggin'". As far as I know you can't find it on streaming services. (I used the Anthrax version on the Spotify playlist .)

Songs in this chapter: “Have You Ever Fallen in Love” by the Buzzcocks (1978), "Heart of Gold" by Neil Young (1972), “Don’t Cry Wolf” and “Problem Child” and “Stab Yor Back”, all by The Damned (1977). Also “Paranoid” by Black Sabbath (1970).

A high five to anyone who can tell me where Regulus got his 'sounding awful' last line from 😎

See you next Monday for chapter 105!

Chapter 105: Figuring It Out

Chapter Summary

It's the Marauders' first concert outside of the Shoestring pub. An old tape turns up, along with a few more surprises.

Chapter Notes

Oooh, getting closer to the end guys.

CW: Suicide by gunshot mentioned in passing. Sexual content (semi-public sex - nothing wild for Cadence standards - some dirty talk??) so pay attention to the '> > >' and '< < <' to skip over.

The song I've written for this chapter, "Hard to Be a Teen", was written to the melody of "Basket Case" by Green Day. Feel free to listen while you read xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You learn to sing!
You learn to play!
Why don't the businessmen,
Ever learn to pay?!

That's show business—
Show business!
Show business—
That's the way it goes!

- "Show Business" AC/DC, 1975

Saturday 21st April 1979

Sheila was still burning a hole in their phone bill, still intent on sorting out just when her precious students would be returning to school, but no one could be bothered to stop the fun long enough to explain. Regulus and the others would be taking the train back to Scotland in a few days anyway, and in the meantime Sybill had made good on her promise to host their next gig. The turnout was good, better than expected even. For whatever outlandish peculiarity she'd

projected onto them during their first meeting, Sybill's handle on the UCL student body was impressive. She ran the event seamlessly, directing her volunteers on how to best wrangle the waiting crowd, and she knew where all the plugs would be when it came time to set up.

"You have your own monitoring system?" She'd asked, when they came rolling up to the hall's backdoors with their amps.

"No," replied Sirius, "but I'll wager that if we sounded like utter shit, one of you would've told us."

She hummed at him, then; "You can borrow ours, I suppose."

It was quite the set-up, much more professional than anything they've ever had a handle on anyway. When Remus had first heard about the shows being put on by Sybill's events committee he'd assumed they'd be small, empty ballroom-type things where a few students drifted in between astrobiology and liberal arts classes. As it turned out, these were major college events. Various clubs ran pub crawls for most of the day leading up to every show; even the most donnish student would skip out on an evening of studying to throw themselves around the basement of the university's shabby venue for a few drunken hours.

"Now who're those guys?" James asked, after they'd hauled their equipment inside only to find another group of boys standing at the top of the hall with instruments in hand.

"Student band," answered Sybill. "They're your opening act."

It was startling. Perhaps even more startling than the eager crowd of kids waiting beyond the doors.

"Opening act?" Echoed Peter.

"Mhm. Calling themselves 'The Disciples of Wonder'. They're okay. Bit more 'progressive' than you four, but I figured it would be a better suit than anything with a bongo in the lineup. They'll open, warm up the crowd a bit, and afterwards it'll be all you. I'd say be ready by quarter to nine."

Patiently, she stared at them—still bug-eyed behind her glasses—and the four Marauders shared a wary glance.

"What's the matter?"

“It’s just… We’ve never even opened for anyone before,” James explained. “Seems a bit mental that all of a sudden *we* have an opener ourselves.”

“Now you’re complaining about not being the opening act? And here I thought I’d seen it all.”

She meandered off, her harem skirt swishing as she walked, and the Marauders had no choice but to be grateful. Admittedly, it wasn't hard.

They were serving drinks in the corner (mostly lukewarm cans of lager), and Sybill had taken the liberty to have one of Peter’s poster designs printed and made into a banner they could hang above the windows behind their stage set up. Opposite to the banner, leaflets advertising for all kinds of clubs and classes papered the walls and among them were the various show bills and fliers of all the different bands that’d come before. Remus recognised a few as one-hit wonders that'd only just managed to get on the radio—Moby Grape, The Knack, and the like—but most were unknowns. Scrubs and punks just looking to make it like everybody else. Eventually James pointed to one. *Dick Very and the Headways.*

“Holy shit! Now there’s a blast from the past… What was that, tenth year?”

“Eleventh,” Remus corrected. “I wasn’t with you guys in tenth.”

“Right, right. I haven’t heard about those guys in ages. Wonder whatever happened to that Dick Very.”

“I 'eard he shot himself in the face while staying in some boarding 'ouse in Dublin,” called one of the opening act guys.

"You're shitting me."

"No, he's right," said another. "His girl left him for George Harrison’s tour manager or something.”

James looked at Remus, appalled. “Now that’s fucking depressing.”

“A moment of silence for Dick Very,” Sirius said, appearing between them with a round of beers, to which he raised boldly in the air and announced; “To Dick!”

“To Dick!” James agreed, swigging the beer.

Later when the opening act was set to start, Sybill rushed the four of them into one of the tiny classrooms just off of the hall. According to her, they were only ever used for private study around exam time and she apologised for the lack of a proper dressing room, but they weren't bothered. It was simply another luxury they'd never gotten the chance to miss. In fact, Remus would've needed five extra hands to count all the times he'd spent crowded around the Shoestring's bar, watching Sirius check his reflection in a jug of Heineken.

"What d'ya think, Moons?" Sirius called now, raising two coloured eye-liner pencils. "Red or blue?"

"Did you steal those from Mary again?"

"The word is *borrow,* thank you very much. … Bit harder now that we're out of school."

"But you still make it work," Remus smirked, before pointing at the left pencil; "Blue."

"Oh good. Then that must mean the red is for you."

It incited a small scuffle, in which Sirius had bent himself so far over Remus with the red eyeliner that Remus nearly toppled from his chair. James ignored them, nervously fretting on his unplugged guitar, while Peter had sat in his own corner, drumming his sticks against an empty desk and tuning the rest of them out. (He had also popped a Valium, courtesy of his mum's medicine cupboard, but they'd all taken one and were pretending that it didn't count.)

"C'mon, Moons! Just a bit under the eyes!"

"Piss off!"

The classroom door flew open, and Trish wobbled in, eyes alight and both hands cradling a beer. "Christ, it's an absolute rocket out there! Opening act's a bit mince but they're holding the crowd well enough. You lads should see it—think ye've got about a hundred people waiting to see you play."

"A hundred?!" James gasped, while Remus shoved Sirius off and sat up in his chair.

"Give or take."

James turned ashen and Sirius whirled on him.

“Don’t you dare throw up in here! It’s too small, it’ll reek! Go take the air if you need it.”

Trish, who was busy guzzling from her pair of pints, nodded as she brought the lip of the beer can down again. “Reginald and Bum-face are out back already if you wanna go see them. I’d avoid taking the front door though. Saw a few girls out there that looked pretty off their heads, if ya ken what I mean.”

Setting his guitar aside, James wobbled past her and Remus followed him to the door.

“Can ya believe the price of a beer ‘round here, Remington? Guy wanted thirty-pee just for a fucking can.”

“You know if you tell them you’re with us they’ll just give ‘em to you. We’re not making a wage for this so Sybill promised free beer.”

“I ken,” Trish laughed. “But Crouch paid. Just thought it would be funny.”

With her double-beers in hand, she slipped out after James and Remus turned to holler at Sirius, who was struggling with his eyeliner in one of Lily’s tiny compact mirrors.

“Gonna go have a fag before the show.”

“Hold on,” Sirius called, “can you help me with this first?”

“Ask Pete, he’s got a steadier hand than me.”

“Yes, but once Pete’s done touching up my makeup, I can’t very well give him the homoerotic kiss a moment of that calibre deserves.”

“Relationships between the drummer and lead singer rarely work out anyway,” Peter confirmed, snidely.

Remus groaned, letting the door fall shut as he meandered back toward Sirius. Grinning with victory, Sirius handed him the eye pencil and hopped up onto one of the desks, clapping his thighs as a means to beckon Remus in close.

“Be gentle, Moony. Eyes are the windows to the soul, you remember.”

“Shut up, ya bloody prat. And hold still.”

Sirius smiled, tipping his head back and looking toward the ceiling as

Remus drew a blue line across his lower lashes. He struggled to keep the pencil steady, a task not made any easier by Sirius' incessant chattering.

“Don’t forget to smudge it a little with your pinky! Mary says it looks sexier that way."

"Is that right..."

"Oh yeah—it's the 'post shag' look. The sort that leaves you walking funny.”

“I told you to shut up,” Remus grumbled, doing as he was bid. He didn’t say it, but seeing Sirius with those long lashes of his now tinged in messy blue, he was almost inclined to agree with Mary. “Did you check the phone messages before we left today?” He asked, mostly to keep his head on straight.

“Mm-hm,” Sirius mumbled, as Remus moved to do the second eye. "I think Sheila's getting impatient with us. Careful, don't call her back soon and she might disown you."

Remus pinched him.

"Ow!"

"I meant—*besides her."*

Finished with his make up, Sirius sighed and looked down again. “And nothing—but who cares? We don’t need Spectre. That dickhead wouldn’t know ‘phenomena’ if it clapped him ‘round the arse.”

Remus tried not to be disappointed. It was easier, after nearly two weeks of *nothing*. In the wake of Lottie’s wedding, a part of him had still been holding out hope that someone at Spectre Records would see their tape and chance it a listen. Then he’d considered that maybe they had. And that maybe they’d just decided that Marauders weren’t worth their time.

Not good enough.

“Don’t look so pathetic, Moons,” Sirius told him, leaning in to kiss the tip of his nose. “Tonight we play London College. Tomorrow—who knows? Maybe Madison Square Garden.”

“And just what happened to four years?”

“Eh. I’m rounding down.”

Remus rolled his eyes, but the smile had already worked its way onto his face anyway. As Sirius began to tease him once again with the threat of Red Rocket eyeliner, Remus leaned in for a kiss. Eventually Sirius had him by the collar, two pairs of eager hands roaming southward in search of a convenient zipper. They were cut short when Peter threw one of his sticks at them.

“Oi, no shaggin’ in the dressing room! … Don’t want it to *reek.”*

Not five minutes later, Remus had managed an escape for that desperate cigarette. Pushing past the horde of sweaty university students, he wandered through the hall, bobbing his head along to the opening act and nodding genially at whoever happened to look his way. He stopped to pick up one of the room temperature cans of lager, and off to the side, managed to spy Lily sitting around a circle of milk crate bar stools with Sybill and several other girls. No Marlene tonight —she had a night shift at the women’s shelter—but Mary had arrived with them and spotted him straight away, promptly striding over with a black garment bag slung over one shoulder.

“Reeeeeemus!” She simpered—practically yelling to be heard over the sound of the opening band. “Where’s that boy-toy of yours? I brought him that pair of trousers he’s been whinging about.”

“First room off the hallway there. And *don’t* call him my ‘boy-toy’.”

Mary blew him a kiss, before pinching his bum quite rudely and rushing off. No one seemed to notice, and so Remus took his beer and began trudging his way toward the exit. Bodies parted indifferently around him, paying little mind and mostly just interested in the music. It was a diverse enough crowd for the area; he found hippies with their media arts degrees, philosopher punks aiming to start the next revolution, suits with undergraduate business degrees scheming for their chance at the Wall Street shuffle, and foreign students just looking to take it all in. The Disciples of Wonder were holding their own well enough with an electronic rendition of “Paint it Black”, but even then Remus could tell that the crowd was hungry. Was it for Marauders? Would they even be to their taste? One could only hope.

The air outside was the warmest it’d been all April and for once it wasn’t raining. Tapping a cigarette from its carton, Remus stood back against the hall’s exterior wall and set himself to the task of people watching. Most other students were on break from classes for the

Easter holiday, but that didn't mean they weren't going to coalesce on the school quads to share a round of scrumpy and other illicits. Across the pavement he'd spotted a girl wearing a velvet blazer, its collar bedazzled with small crystal skulls. The flashy outfit was hard not to notice, and he paid for it when she caught him staring and returned the look in kind. But Remus was neither interested nor desperate enough for conversation. Adjacent to her, James was standing amongst a circle comprised of Regulus, Trish, and Barty. He was attempting one of Remus' very own lighter tricks, which he sorted eventually—though at the risk of his own eyebrows.

"Wait until you get a load 'a this one," James said after, before whipping out a fifty pence coin. "Learned it in scouts when I was eleven."

"Was that before or after they taught you how to bore people to death?" Barty asked, earning him a sharp pinch on the side from Trish. Regulus merely watched on, holding a beer in one hand and nibbling absentmindedly on his opposite thumb nail. Remus wondered if James would still be so friendly had he known about the obvious crush Regulus had on Lily.

"Alright, now keep your eyes on the coin, everyone!"

Who was he kidding, of course James would still be friendly.

With a quick flourish, the coin had vanished from James' hand only to reappear a few seconds later behind Trish's ear. She giggled, most likely due to the fact that she was at least five beers deep already, and James did the same to Barty, who flinched away and swatted at his own ear for good measure. Afterwards James turned to Regulus, but before he could reach out, Regulus had grabbed his arm by the wrist and revealed a second coin hidden inside the cuff of his sleeve.

James puckered, clearly put out to be caught in his own act.

"You're not supposed to touch the magician…"

"Magician, or court jester?" Regulus snarked, flicking the coin back at James' head. It made Remus chuckle. He might've gone to join them—stopped eavesdropping long enough to test out his own rusty sleight of hand—had the dark-haired girl from earlier not sidled up to him against the wall.

"Bum a fag?" She asked, with a voice as sweet as sugar cane. He passed her one, as was the generosity of addicts, and she leaned into

his lighter while drawing her long, oil slick hair behind one ear. “I’m Christine.”

“Er—Remus.”

“Never seen you around here before. First show?”

“Not exactly.”

“You a fan 'a the band then?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say I know 'em pretty well.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of ‘em, to be honest with you.” Smiling, she gestured back to the group she’d broken off of. “My girl there, Nell? She saw them playing in some pub in South London. Said they were brilliant. Practically forced me along tonight.”

“Not your usual scene then?”

“Oh no, I love it actually. Nights like these make for fine enough company.” She took a drag, and Remus didn’t miss the sideways glance. “Nell’s mental though. Straight bloody fell in love with the lead singer, didn’t she?”

She said it like they’d known each other all their lives. Understanding dear Nell’s plight, Remus smirked to himself.

“Yeah, well… He is pretty good.”

"She came hoping she could get his number, but no one's seen him around really."

"He's probably just warming up." Remus raised his fag. "You should know though—pretty sure he's... compromised."

"What, like he's got a girlfriend?"

"That's it."

"Do rock stars even have girlfriends?"

Remus bit his tongue, and Christine eyed him over the end of her cigarette.

“Oh well. Too bad for Nell." She dropped her arm, exhaling. "Say, what’d you say you studied again?”

“I didn’t, actually,” he replied, rather sarcastically. “Or that is, I don’t. Recently unemployed as well.”

She fell silent for a moment, as though she were weighing any positive qualities he might have had against the more glaring drawbacks. Before she could decide, a whistle cut through the air from James. He and the others were standing by the door now, looking at him expectantly.

“Moons, opener’s finished! It’s our turn, now are you coming or is Crouch, here, gonna have to take your place on stage?”

Barty didn’t appear so eager, and while he went on to nail James in the ankle with the toe of his boot, Remus turned back around to Christine, who was gaping at him in realisation.

“Sorry, got to go. Hope you enjoy the show though.”

His smirk was obvious by the time he’d ground out his cigarette and sauntered over to the doorway. James and Trish had already hobbled on, and that only left Barty and Regulus behind to wait on him.

“What’s got you looking so smug?” Barty asked. “What, arrange to meet that barmy girl out back after the show?"

"None of your business, Crouch."

"Gee, for someone who dresses like a frigid librarian, you’re quite the slag, Lupin. Am I gonna have to tell Black?”

Remus raised an eyebrow. “Go for it, Barty. Only means more fun for me.”

He flexed his tongue at him, and Barty scowled while Regulus turned his face to hide a smile.

Inside the ballroom, the mood had shifted. It could’ve been that the Disciples of Wonder had run out of steam and the crowd had grown bored, or maybe they were just looking forward to seeing what would come next. Weaving his way through the lulling mob, Remus made a beeline for the front of the room. There he found Sirius waiting by one of the refrigerator-sized speakers with a pair of shot glasses in hand. There was no real lift to the stage, but a grimy carpet had been rolled out in preparation for the show, now weighed down by a scattered mixture of equipment.

“Have you seen these?” Sirius demanded, using one of the shot glasses to gesture toward the heavy black blocks that made up Sybill’s monitoring system. “Bloody going to be able to hear my own heart thumping in my chest.”

“Almost makes us look like professionals,” Remus replied, taking one of the shots and knocking it back. Sirius smirked at him and then did the same, giving Remus a chance to take in his state of dress. He was wearing a white vest with an anarchy logo he’d painted on himself, only to slice down the middle. Shirt cut deep around his chest, he had Mary’s trousers on again as well. They were leopard print, and flared out at the bottom to show off the black boots he wore on his feet. They had to have been the tightest pair of trousers Remus had ever seen him squeeze into.

“Dunno how anyone could move in those things without losing all feeling in their bits.”

Sirius set his shot glass down on top of the stage speaker and winked. “Easy. You just don’t wear any pants underneath.”

He turned toward the microphone with a cheeky *‘Don’t tell Mary’* and that was what started the concert as far as Remus was concerned. By the time he was slinging his guitar strap over his shoulder, all he could think about was Sirius peeling himself out of those skin-tight leopard trousers at the end of the night. It was their first real show outside of the Shoestring, and suddenly all Remus wanted was for it to be over. Too bad they owed Sybill two sets.

It was great fun, being up there. Even ten years later when the Marauders had reached their peak, Remus would never get used to all the feelings that came with fame—but being on stage with Peter wailing upon his drums and James singing backup for Sirius while simultaneously blowing kisses to Lily in the wings—*yeah*... That was something that was always going to make sense.

“We’d like to dedicate this next song to all of you other disappointing good-for-nothings out there in the audience,” Sirius called. “And to my mum and dad—*fuck you!”*

There were several intense cries of agreement, and they quickly followed it up with the opening to “It’s Hard to Be a Teen”. As Sirius began to sing, Remus spotted two girls, Christine and who must've been her friend Nell, fighting their way to the front of the crowd. They waved at him excitedly, already mid-shriek, and just like that the

previously sceptical audience had gathered its courage. Hands were cupped to mouths—lungs began to holler—whistles cut the air—and James' rough down-tuned power chords did exactly as they were meant to. It was the whole show really…

Just one big wake up call.

"Do you ever feel like you're hanging by a wire—
Don't move too fast, or else your luck just might snap!
Isn't there anyone left for you to admire?
Someone to put your hopes in—to give a crap?!"

It was a good song to rally the troops with; no monotonous synth-noise, no wailing punk or flavourless folk rubbish. Just pure, solid rock.

"My teachers say I've got no clue!
My parents don't approve of you!
I'm a rebel with a cause,
I think I'm fucked because—
It's hard to be a law-abiding teen!"

A beer can soared across the room, clattering near the foot of the stage; but it wasn't a foul, it was a congratulations. A compliment for rousing them—these law-abiding students—from their mindless, mechanical law-abiding routine.

"Yeah, it's hard to be a teen, hooked on cheap nicotine,
Your body's growing up while your brain's bringing you down!
Your shoes are too tight and your hair is never right,
You'd rather stay in bed, got no urge to get ahead!"

Near the back of the room, Barty had raised Trish onto his shoulders—or rather, Trish had forced him to catch her after launching herself off of one of the stacks of empty beer crates. Remus couldn't see Regulus at first, that was until Lily had taken his hands and forced them up into the air with her own.

"My teachers say I've got no clue!

My parents don't approve of you!
I'm a rebel with a cause,
I think I'm fucked because—
It's hard to be a law-abiding teen!"

It was amazing to hear Sirius relayed back toward them through the monitoring system. He sounded good—*more than good!* He sounded like he was having the time of his life… Though all Remus would've needed was a single decent eye to see that. Sirius bounded around the stage as usual, playing to every person who dared look at him as though they were the only two people in the room.

"I ain't got no clue…
Good thing I've got you!"

The crowd ate it up. Every time someone got too close to the band, Sybill or one of her fellow committee members would usher them back into their place. The only one who dared cross them was Mary, who stepped up to Sirius on the edge of their red carpet and wrapped a purple silk scarf around his neck mid-song. He kissed her cheek for it, and Remus saw Nell swoon in the front row. Understandable. Remus felt a bit like swooning too.

"My teachers say I've got no clue,
My parents don't approve of you,
I'm a rebel with a cause,
And I think I'm fucked be-CAUSE—
IT'S HARD TO BE A LAW-ABIDING TEEN!"

The song finished with a final flourish—as well as several deep thrashes on the guitar from James—and just like that Remus was breathless and sweating. It took him several seconds to realise that the roaring in his ears wasn't just the feedback from the monitoring system, or Peter tapping his hi-hat; it was the crowd. They were chanting.

Chanting their *name*.

"MA—RAH—DERS! MA—RAH—DERS!"

It was insanity. Never, in his entire life, could Remus have imagined such a feeling. So many people losing their minds—becoming *this* excited over something they'd created. Something *they'd* done!

Remus turned to his left to find Sirius already staring at him, chest rising and falling laboriously. He was grinning—his entire face had come alight.

They love you, Remus mouthed.

No, Sirius replied; *They love us!*

And it must've been true, because when Sirius grasped his microphone again and asked if they'd like another, the entire room began to shake with cheers.

They did several more before they were finished, including a sped-up cover of "Jailhouse Rock" in which Sirius unravelled his entire thirty feet of microphone cord by leaping into the middle of the crowd and dancing swing-style with any girl bold enough to approach him. Seeing their hands all over his chest and shoulders, Remus suddenly felt a lot more greedy.

When the song ended and Sybill brought up the lights again everyone, he grabbed Sirius by the arm and led him straight back toward the dressing room. At the mouth of the hallway, one of the girls meant to keep anyone from sneaking off to do less than savoury things in the empty classrooms gave them an odd look.

"Sorry," Remus said; "Wardrobe malfunction."

She let them go, whilst simultaneously discouraging any new and curious fans from following. Remus had never been so lucky. The door had no lock, and so he threw a chair against it to ensure they wouldn't be walked in on. As he did, Sirius meandered back toward one of the desks and leaned against it. His legs looked so long in the tacky leopard-skin trousers, and the cheeky way he'd crossed them at the ankles surely wasn't helping.

"Well," he hummed, smugly; "you've successfully spirited me away. Now just where is this wardrobe malfunction of yours?"

"Here." And then Remus whirled around, grabbed the front of Sirius' vest, and ripped it straight down the middle.

For a moment both of them were stunned—Sirius by his sudden nakedness, and Remus by his own sexually-starved brashness. He didn't think it would be so easy if he were being honest, but the flimsy white fabric had practically disintegrated under his brazen fingers.

"You fuck!" Sirius gasped, amused and equally full of disbelief. "This was my only shirt!"

"We'll find you another one," Remus groaned, and just like that he had Sirius up against the desk, those long leopard-clad legs wrapped around his waist. Normally Remus could control himself after shows—Sirius' flirtatious stage presence was mostly fanfare away—but there was only so much a sane man could take. Someone had started the stereo up outside, and the music shook the whole building with fervour.

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"You're so fucking sweaty," Sirius groaned. "Take off your shirt already."

Remus obeyed, and clutching beneath Sirius' thighs, pressed himself even deeper against him, as though he could have fused the two of them together by their chest cavities. Sirius' hands were in his hair as he kissed him, nails scratching against the base of his skull while his tongue traced scorch marks across his lips and teeth. There came a little hitch in both their breathing as Remus began gliding his hands up the smooth planes of his boyfriend's back. His fingers were rough and swollen from the unyielding strings of his bass, and he imagined it might tickle if not for the fervent grip driving every touch. At one point Sirius had slipped the silk scarf Mary had given him from his neck and rather than throw it away, wrapped it around Remus' neck instead, knotting either end around his palms and pulling them taut.

"I do believe you're propositioning me for sex in this very here dressing room," he cooed, when they'd broken apart long enough to breathe. Ignoring him, Remus leaned in for another desperate kiss, but was evaded when Sirius turned his mouth away and pulled on the scarf like a warning.

"More of a classroom, really," Remus replied stubbornly, voice husky with tightness and need.

"Isn't that a bit scandalous for an ex-prefect?"

"Take off those trousers and I'll show you something really

scandalous.”

“Naughty.” Sirius’ tongue darted out to wet his lips, but before Remus could chase it Sirius had lifted one hand and pressed his thumb past his lips and teeth. He traced every inch of the inside Remus’ mouth with it, thumb nail dragging across his palate and sending sharp little shivers down the back of his throat. Growing impatient, Remus had just about slipped his fingers beneath the waistband of Sirius’ impossibly-tight trousers himself before Sirius had either wrist in hand.

“If I take off these trousers now, Lupin, I’ll never get them back on again.”

“Good. It’s about time I got a private show.”

Sirius’ eyes flashed; *“Very naughty,”* but he released Remus’ hands and cupped him round the throat again, bringing their mouths back together. The whole thing made Remus feel bold, so bold that when the doorknob rattled behind them, he almost didn’t stop.

"Occupied!" Sirius hollered. It made Remus' heart seize up, and they pulled apart long enough to stare at the classroom door. Whoever outside must've heard Sirius' shouting, as the rattling quickly ceased. With no way of knowing whether they'd truly gone or were just hanging around outside hoping to snag a peek, Remus reluctantly freed himself from Sirius' long legs and crept over to the door. There was a curtain drawn down over the glass window which he used to peer out of.

"There's no one there... Must've fucked off."

"Or they could just be waiting to catch us," Sirius pointed out.

Remus shrugged, letting the curtain fall shut. "I guess if they are, we can always escape out the window—"

When he turned around he found Sirius completely shirtless, with his zipper open, leopard trousers peeled away at the crotch and showing off two sharp hip bones as well as a trail of dark hair and—

"What was that about the window, Moons?"

Remus had already forgotten. After kicking the chair to make sure it was in place, he strutted back up to Sirius and spun him around until he was trapped between him and the edge of the desk. From there

Remus was able to run his hands down the flat of Sirius' stomach, past those dagger-like hip bones and into the cinched fabric hiding the rest of him. It made Sirius' breath come out in a little hiss like music to his ears.

"You sure are eager today..."

Remus pressed his face into the back of Sirius' neck, feeling the perspiration there. With his fingers he forced the trousers down still, until he could take Sirius in his hand.

"They were touching you."

"*Ngh*—Who?"

"The girls."

Sirius chuckled. "Pretty, right? And *so* soft."

Remus bit down over the soft flesh of Sirius' shoulder—not hard enough to do any damage, just enough to elicit a tiny whine from deep within Sirius' throat. He could feel his hands all over him—Sirius reaching up and behind as his nails scrabbled for purchase along Remus' hair and neck. Eventually he thrust them forward, and with his thighs trapped against the edge of the desk, Sirius had no choice but to fall further upon it—his bare arms the only thing left to keep him upright while Remus continued attempts to get him off.

Inside, his guts were a tangled mess of arousal. He thought back to the concert; of watching Sirius imitate the moves of those rock stars they'd admired their whole lives while simultaneously doing a better job of it. He didn't know if that was because Sirius was this new-age Mick Jagger come to life, or if Remus was merely eternally biased, but he got the feeling that the two were not so mutually exclusive.

"Moons," Sirius was saying, "Moons—wanna touch you... Feel *you*."

"You sure?" Remus breathed, nibbling along the shell of his ear; "You were feeling those girls just fine earlier."

Sirius made a noise of irritation.

"Prick."

It was enough for Remus, who flipped them around until they were facing one another. From there Sirius began grappling with Remus'

belt and zipper, which both admittedly required less effort considering all Remus was wearing was the same simple pair of jeans he wore every other day. At least now they could kiss each other again though, a fact Sirius took full advantage of as he stuffed one hand down the front of Remus' pants. With the other, he reached for that devilish purple scarf and began slowly wrapping it around the centre of his palm.

"Imagine it," he cooed, squeezing both hands temporarily and drawing a shudder from Remus' mouth, "you, me... backstage at a real concert —a hundred thousand people waiting on us."

He tried. All that came out was—*Sirius. Sirius.*

"You're insane."

"Maybe. But I ain't letting you go." Sirius pulled on the scarf, forcing Remus face downwards until their mouths were hovering a mere hair's breadth from each other. "No, Moony... I'm gonna *fuck* you."

If Sirius hadn't kissed him just then, Remus was half-sure he'd have bitten clean through the middle of his own tongue. They weren't novices at this by now—they knew how to get each other really going, and better yet, they knew what it took to finish in a way both of them liked. It'd been wonkier in the beginning, mostly a lot of nervous chittering and unsteady hands—*Does this feel alright? Are you okay? Tell me if it hurts. Tell me what feels good*—but eventually they'd gotten it. Now Remus knew Sirius' body like the loops and lines of a map. He laid down a jacket for him and made sure, even in their impatient haze, that neither of them were ever racing ahead of the other. Instead it was like a dance—only that sounded too cheesy so he never said it aloud. Instead he just followed Sirius' lead, waiting for his turn to cup his body like a precious thing and carve out a place for himself within him.

Forever, he thought, with Sirius' arms around him. He wanted to do this *forever*.

"I'm never gonna get used to it," he panted, "their hands, all over you —*wanting* you."

"Yeah, but *you* have me."

He did. He *really* did. Sirius was everywhere. And as deep a place Remus had made inside of him, the hole Sirius had opened up within his own body was just as full. Now he couldn't live empty anymore.

"Love you," Sirius moaned near the end. He always said it like that—*heh, love you*—like he was waiting on some snappy retort, which he often got because Remus was almost *always* feeling cheeky when he said it. Today was no exception. He slid his hand up the side of Sirius' neck, thumb pressing against his bottom lip, *close*.

"Eyes on the prize, Padfoot."

"Prick." Sirius sucked on the digit. "Hold me tighter."

Remus did.

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They emerged later twice as sweaty but more satisfied than they'd been when the audience was cheering their name. Luckily for them, they hadn't been forced to make use of the window; Peter had arrived to fetch them around the time Sirius was forcing himself back into the skimpish trousers. ("*Don't* tell Mary.")

“If you’re gonna sneak off and shag, could you at least do it with a few less eyes watching?" Peter let out a heavy sigh. "You’ve got about a dozen girls lined up outside wondering where you went.”

"You could always tell them the truth, Wormtail," Sirius said blithely, "give Sybill something to *really* print in that zine of hers."

Peter threw a beer can, which rattled across the floor at their feet. “Just hurry up! Second set starts in ten.”

The door shut, and Remus turned on Sirius again—shirt off and silken scarf still wrapped securely around his throat. Sirius thumbed it a moment, looking half-fucked and completely devastating.

"Still got ten minutes," he murmured, "we've managed with less."

"You're talking about a second round?" Sirius tutted. “I *just* got these trousers back on. And unless you'd fancy another Wormy visit...”

Remus groaned, wrapping his arms around Sirius' bare torso in protest. “We should’ve never formed this band. It's a complete waste of time.”

“You’re right. Perhaps we should quit—get a job at one of those sex shops in Soho. Much more conducive to shagging.” He pulled on the scarf cheekily, and Remus shook his head, feeling a very real blush

flood into his cheeks.

“Mm, yes, how tempting." Stepping back, Remus watched as Sirius fit his boots on again. His shirt was still torn, and as Remus began looking around for a replacement, Sirius nudged him and said not to bother.

“I think it suits me, don’t you?”

A fresh wave of jealousy had washed over Remus by the time he was watching Sirius stroll past those girls waiting in the hallway outside their dressing room. He'd returned the white anarchy vest to his body, only now it was torn down to his navel, somehow showing off even more skin. After squeezing through the crowd, they met their friends by the hastily assembled bar where James was already waiting with a beer and a knowing look.

“You two just couldn’t help yourselves, could you?” He mused, thumbing Sirius’ torn shirt. "Jesus, Moony. You're an animal."

"Damn straight," Sirius grinned.

“Mind your own,” Remus told James, taking a seat on one of the rickety stools ahead of the counter. A sort of circle had formed around them, made up of other students keen on ogling, but not brazen enough to assume that they could actually be a part of the group. Remus, who was only used to being revered for the pranks and tomfoolery they’d pulled at school, glanced around anxiously. It felt as though he were waiting for the ball to drop; like soon the only sane person in the room was going to materialise just to tell them off for being awful during their last set.

Down the bar, Lily made herself comfortable on James’ lap, while Peter and Mary seemed to be heavily engrossed in a conversation of their own.

“No Moira?” Mary was asking. Her question made Peter squirm a bit.

“Seeing her tomorrow. You know rock shows aren’t really her thing…”

“Where’s that brother of mine?” Sirius pondered aloud. “The drum kit’s empty—I was gonna dare him to play something. Think he could manage all of ‘Moby Dick’.”

Sirius’ cheeky remarks aside, no one had an answer; Regulus and the

others were missing, presumably off on their own somewhere. Perhaps they were back to bumming smokes outside, or else locked in the toilet while one of them puked their guts out. Remus was hoping for the former, but Sirius didn't seem too worried.

"Ah, well. S'not like they can get into any more trouble than we did," he smirked, elbowing Remus suggestively.

"And just how much trouble would that be?"

The question came from further down the bar, where a stranger Remus might've mistaken for one of the more domineering business students was sitting on his own and sipping from a bottle of lager. Juxtaposing the cheap beer, he was wearing a cream-coloured suit jacket and what appeared to be a very nice watch. His hair was a dark auburn and he had the tell-tales signs of a four o'clock shadow sprinkled across a handsome jaw. Certainly no student. A tutor, maybe?

"You boys put on a good show," he said, before gesturing to the empty bar stool on Remus' far side. "May I?"

Remus shrugged; "Do as you like," and the stranger moved down towards him, leaving his lager behind. After sitting, he tapped two fingers on the bar top and it was instantly replaced by the bartender, who said nothing as he moved along to serve other waiting customers.

"Gideon," the stranger said, offering Remus his hand. "I've been watching you guys."

"In a good way or a weird way?" Scoffed Sirius.

"Not much difference in this industry, is there?" Gideon jutted his chin toward Peter. "I liked your drum solo on that last song. You could give Mitch Mitchell a run for his money. And you—" He pointed to James; "Play any harder and you'll break all five strings."

James baulked; "Well, I—"

"I once watched Johnny Ramone break three strings in less than five minutes, and he couldn't do half of what you just did."

James and Peter shared a glance, clearly floored by the generous compliments, but Remus was getting a bad feeling. He'd heard this sort of name-dropping before, and it'd almost cost them everything. Thankfully he wasn't the only one getting suspicious.

“Can we help you with something?” Sirius asked.

“To be determined.” Gideon smiled, then he turned to the bartender and handed him a fresh note. “Four beers, and two of those sparkling mezcals for the ladies.”

“I’ll take a beer actually,” Lily said, eyeing Gideon suspiciously.

“Fuck that, I’ll take the cocktail.” Mary cracked the tab of the admittedly prettier drink, sipping it prudently. “So Gid—can I call you Gid?”

“Only my friends call me Gid,” Gideon said openly. Mary gave him her best ‘hook, line, and sinker’ smile.

“Brilliant. Well—*Gid*—I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t exactly look like the average university student. Are you just visiting?”

“Ah, good, I like savvy women. And it appears you’ve caught me, Miss…?”

“Mary.”

“—*Miss Mary*. You see, I don’t get out to these school shows that often, but a little birdie told me that tonight might just be worth my while. And well—” He raised his lager; “looks like my little birdie was right.”

“Where are you from?” Remus asked.

“Plymouth, originally.”

“No, I mean, why are you *here*?”

Gideon sipped from his drink, though his lips were a smile around the bottle rim. “Suppose I should finish introducing myself.” Still looking smug, he set the bottle down and began reaching for something inside his suit jacket. “My full name is Gideon Prewett, and I represent what could very well be the best business decision you boys will ever make.”

“Right,” James scoffed. “And I suppose you work for EMI?”

“Oh, ha. Not quite.”

With two fingers, Gideon held out a single business card stamped with

gold leaf. Remus took it, turning the card over as Sirius leaned his nose in to see.

Gideon A. Prewett, it read; *A&R Manager, Spectre Records Ldt.*

“Spectre Records?” Mary echoed, when the card finally made it to her; “What’s that?”

No one answered. Instead Sirius snatched the card from her, then the beer Gideon had bought for them—free beer was still free beer, even from a possible scammer.

“How do we know this is real?” He asked, holding up the card. “You could just be lying.”

“Been given a lot of fake business cards, have you?”

Again, no one answered—too embarrassed to admit the truth—and Gideon tilted his head scrutinizingly before ultimately shaking it.

“Whatever. If you must know, your first guess wasn’t all that far off. I used to work for EMI—me and my brother got on as office assistants back in seventy-one. We both wanted to break into management but EMI’s stingy like that. Too much red tape, too many suits to get through to get anything done. It’s why they missed the boat on punk. But you see, Spectre took a chance on us, and we haven’t let him down yet. So I’m hoping… that maybe you’ll help me keep up that winning streak.”

They were confused until Gideon reached into his opposite pocket and pulled out a very familiar looking tape.

MARAUDERS, APRIL 1979

Gideon smirked.

“I hear you boys are fans.”

The penny dropped, and suddenly all of them understood; this was for real. This guy wasn’t just interested in playing them compliments, he wasn't just offering promises.

He was offering them a *deal.*

“Holy fuck,” James babbled. “Does this mean Gaz Spectre actually

listened to our demo?"

" 'Listened' might be being a bit generous," chuckled Gideon. "Let's just say he heard some of it, and what he heard was enough to send someone out to scout you. Namely—me. Which is a pretty big deal, I might add. Usually we just send an intern or something. But plenty of bands can sound half-decent on tape, and it's the top one percent that can do it for real that I'm interested in. So I volunteered to come myself."

"And you think we can do it for—for real?" Peter stuttered, practically slack-jawed.

"Who gives a shit what I think?" Gideon replied automatically. "It's the audience that's gotta care, and judging from what you just did, I'd say you're off to a pretty good start."

It was not the answer they'd been expecting.

"You mean you're not even gonna ask us anything?" James prattled. "Like, who writes the songs or what 'image' we want to portray?"

"What, are you crossdressers or something?"

They shook their heads. Mary stuck a finger out.

"Well, Sirius could almost pass for—"

Sirius clapped his hand over his friend's mouth, silencing her. "How much money do you want up front?"

Gideon scoffed. "None."

None?!

"You think if Queen had had to pay the record company that we would have ever gotten something as great as 'Bo-Rap'?"

Gideon's answer felt different from anything Fletcher had tried to sell them on, and not just because he wasn't asking for money. Their own naivety had done half of Fletcher's work for him, but it was the way he spoke that had really done them in. Fletcher had never let them get a word in edgewise, and Remus knew now it was so there was no time to sort out how not a single thing he said made any sense. He'd sold them a dream with a hidden price tag and then ripped it away the moment he was done with them. Now that they knew the game a bit

better, it was obvious that Gideon wasn't going to make it so easy.

"So what," Sirius said, "you wanna sign us on for nothing…? Just like that?"

"No, that's not how this works." Gideon scooted his stool closer, hands moving rhythmically as he spoke; "Look at it this way, say we sign you before you have time to prove your worth and turns out I'm tone-deaf and don't know a grammy winner from a budget wedding band you put together with your mates as a side gig. Well, then the company's stuck with a four album contract that'll never sell and I'm out of a job. Rest assured, Spectre'll take on the initial burden, right—put you up for a few shows, maybe a short stint 'round the bigger cities. No big stadiums or promotional budgets, but if you can prove to us there that you can hold a crowd's attention for a few hours every other night, then *maybe* you'll have a chance of getting that contract."

"You're talking about a tour," James nodded. "You want us to tour the country—for real?"

Gideon smiled again. "How'd you guys like to play the Roundhouse?"

It was like asking if they'd *like* to win the lottery.

"Ooh, I know that one!" Mary chimed in first. "I used to do ballet at this little studio right up the road."

Gideon winked at her, then nudged Remus fondly, as if to say *'see?'* But something about the manager's offer irked him; it only took a few seconds to work it out.

"Hold on, the Roundhouse has been empty for months now—Subway Sect just cancelled a show. They say the roof's caving in. Care to explain that one?"

Gideon nodded pragmatically. "You're right. No one's used the venue since last summer when Siouxsie and her Banshees nearly brought the roof down. *Literally.* The whole thing's needing a good refurbishment, but luckily for us, I know the bloke that used to manage it. His name's Jeff Gilbey—he's a good guy. Bought the place when it shut down and worked on the roof himself all summer, only now the floor's rotting and it's basically a write-off. Reckons he's gonna sell it for the land to make up for his losses, but I got a couple other groups interested in playing there first. If you're willing to share the stage for a night then there's a small chance I could get you in, but only if you're interested."

“Is that safe?” Lily asked.

The manager smiled. “Who ever said rock and roll was safe?”

Before anyone could reply, Sirius leapt up off his stool;

“Band meeting!”

Despite several bystander’s sudden interest in the going-ons of the group, the four boys were able to segregate themselves off in a corner where they bent their heads together to parley.

“I dunno,” James started. “It sounds a bit too good to be true, don’t it?”

“It’s always gonna sound too good to be true,” Sirius rebuffed, “it’s the chance of a lifetime.”

“But he’s so charming and good looking. Aren’t you even a little bit suspicious?”

“Paying close attention to his face, were you, Prongs?” Peter drawled. James rolled his eyes, but the rest of them were already sniggering.

“I see he’s already charmed your girlfriend well enough,” Remus added keenly. Back across the room, they could see Lily and Mary giggling at something Gideon was saying. They each had a can of seltzer now and were sipping them as the fancy A&R manager leaned one elbow on the bar.

“Can’t very well blame her,” James grumbled.

The look Sirius gave his best friend read as bewildered, but before he could question it, Peter had already jumped back in;

“I think we should do it.”

“You do?” Remus asked.

“Yeah, he can’t be lying.”

“And how do you figure that?”

“I mean, it’s obvious, isn’t it? Gingers can’t lie.”

“ ‘Gingers can’t lie?’ Where the fuck did you hear that from?” Sirius demanded.

“Sim. He told me once—it’s like a rule or something.”

“A rule that *only* applies to gingers? What are you—four?”

"Shut up!"

James snorted into his palm. “Pete, mate,” he laughed, “I think your brother might’ve lied to you.”

Peter grumbled unkindly, cheeks turning red, and Sirius slapped him on the back. “Forget the gingers,” he said. “Moony, what d'you think?”

Remus pulled on his neck with both hands. “It’s an opportunity for sure… I think we’d be kicking ourselves later if we let it go just because the guy’s a bit ‘too suave’.”

“Oh, so you think he’s hot too, huh?”

"That's not what I meant and you know—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Sirius sucked his teeth. "Right. I know my track record isn’t perfect, but I also think it’s a good idea. Like, that was our demo back there, and if those stinkin’ sods at Spectre Records liked it, then maybe this is it! Maybe this is exactly what we’ve been waiting for.”

“Sure, but not many bands make it at nineteen,” Remus mumbled pessimistically.

Sirius took his arm. “We’re not just *any* band.”

That was true, he supposed. It had to be.

"So?" James echoed. "What's the verdict?"

Soundlessly, the four Marauders looked at each other, and one-by-one, each nodded in full agreement.

“We accept your offer,” Sirius announced when they’d returned to the bar; “Just tell us what day we’re meeting Spectre.”

Gideon set down his can of seltzer, already primed with a laugh;

“Oh no, you’re not meeting Spectre. Gaz doesn't have time for every college band who manages to get a demo into his postbox. Nah, you guys are gonna play a show at the Roundhouse—a *more* than generous

offer—and later, if I decide you're worth it, then I'll pass you onto Spectre. Deal?"

They couldn't very well say no. If nothing else, Gideon was right; a show at the Roundhouse was an unbelievable opportunity.

Standing up from his stool, Gideon shook each of their hands while Lily and Mary clapped happily.

"This is so exciting," Mary said. "Our very own band of losers—about to become an even *bigger* band of losers!"

"C'mere then," Sirius cooed, "give this loser a fat snog."

She squealed, batting him away at first only to later take his face in both hands and leave a cherry-red kiss mark on the centre of his cheek. Just then Sybill reappeared, promptly congratulating them on the good news and henceforth scolding them for being late to start their second set.

"Look at you four, already in demand," Gideon gloated. After giving his hand another excited shake, James and Peter promptly scooted back toward their set-up at the front of the hall. Sirius followed a moment later, muttering something about needing to take a leak, but did linger long enough to watch Gideon finish his beer.

"You're not gonna regret this," he told the manager; "Marauders is gonna be the biggest band in the world, you know."

"Yeah? And who said that?"

"Me. Just now."

"Well then. Let's not jinx it." And Gideon knocked his beer against Sirius' in agreement.

Afterwards, with Sirius gone to piss, the only one left to see the big-shot A&R manager off was Remus. He walked him to the door, where Gideon clapped his shoulder genially.

"Sorry I can't stick around for your second set. The Allman Brothers are flying into Heathrow tonight and I'm to meet them at the airport. It's their first UK tour since the hiatus and Gaz wants 'em treated well."

"Right, but about the Roundhouse—"

“Relax, kid! It'll take a short while to sort everything out, but it'll happen. Just gotta be patient... In the meantime you lads got my card. Got yours too." Already backing towards the hall’s doors, Gideon pulled their demo tape from his pocket and waved it through the air. “Good luck, lads. Here’s hoping guys like the Allman Brothers are opening for you one day.”

Remus wasn’t so much an Allman Brothers fan, but he couldn’t deny the small thrill he felt as he watched Gideon leave the hall.

“You helped make this all happen, you know,” he told Lily when he returned to face her at the bar.

“Did I?”

“Yes. You got us the gig with Sybill. You’re the reason Gideon came at all.”

"You don't think he would've found you at the Shoestring?"

Remus shrugged. "Jesus, Lils, I'm only trying to say thank—"

“You're welcome, Remus," she cut-in fondly. "Anything for the object of my dearest affections. But I will be expecting a dedication at the end of your first autobiography.”

He hugged her, absorbed in her warmth, and when they pulled apart again Lily tapped his nose with her finger and continued sipping on her cheap cocktail. Somewhere between Sirius’ bold claim and Gideon’s subsequent departure a swift drum beat had kicked off from the front of the room. Figuring it for Peter, Remus didn’t pay the noise any mind until Mary reappeared on Lily’s far side, a look of astonishment plastered across her face.

“You guys *so* aren’t going to believe this.”

And maybe they wouldn’t have, had neither of them witnessed Rat Scabies’ temper tantrum back at the Electric Ballroom. Admittedly, Remus was still surprised. Based on the way Regulus had snapped at Sirius and James for yammering over the feat the entire drive home, he would’ve expected Regulus to never play a single note in front of them again; yet there he was, set up behind Peter’s drum kit and smashing away. Trish and Barty stood behind him looking thrilled, if not completely inebriated. Regulus himself would not look up at all; he kept his head bowed as if his long hair were blinders meant to block everything out.

“Bitches! Why didn’t anybody tell me Regulus could play the drums?” Demanded Mary.

“It’s a new thing!” Lily practically shouted so she could be heard over Regulus’ barrage of sound; “He didn’t tell anyone—not even Sirius!”

“Well, he’s good! More than good, if they’re anything to go by…”

She gestured toward the small crowd of students who had amassed next to the stage. Most were just bobbing their heads along to every thundering sixteenth note, but as the solo went on, more and more gathered, some even cheering and raising their drinks.

“Blimey,” Mary said, as Regulus began slamming on his hi-hat and crash cymbals; “Maybe you guys should put him in the band.”

There was no time to stew on Mary’s little joke. Already Remus spotted Peter as he stormed over to them with an apprehensive-looking James close on his heels.

“Moony, go on over there and tell Sirius’ baby brother it’s time he got himself back into line. If Gideon overhears this mess, it could ruin everything!”

“Gideon’s already long gone,” Remus blabbed. “Why haven’t you asked him to just stop?”

“I’ve tried! The cheeky cunt blew me off!”

“I dunno, I think Regulus is just playing around,” James reasoned. “Look at him—he’s clearly drunk or something.”

“Drunk enough to play that?” Peter wailed, gesturing to the cacophony of noise. “He’s acting like Keith Moon if he were half-bladdered on Adderall.”

Coming from another drummer it might’ve been a compliment, but Remus knew it wasn’t. Above all, what Peter admired in his own drumming was strict precision. He looked up to guys like Neil Peart and Buddy Rich—those known for their flawless technique. He didn’t care for showy solos or insane speed rounds, and for the most part the other Marauders had never complained. A drummer’s job was to keep time, a hard thing to do when based purely off of instinct. Peter had spent hundreds of gruelling hours nailing down every one of their compositions, often having to bend at Sirius or Remus’ every whim. He was a good team player when he wanted to be and probably

deserved more compassion, but as it was, Remus was still riding the high of Gideon's offer. He didn't quite want to be brought back down to earth yet, and so instead he said;

"It's just a drum kit, Pete."

"Wrong!" Peter spat. "God, you don't get anything, do you?"

He stalked off, and Remus and the others were left to flounder in his wake.

"Where's he going?" James whined. "Sybill will murder us if he just leaves—we still got a whole 'nother set to do!"

"We'll go get, Peter," Lily offered, taking Mary's arm. "In the meantime you two idiots might want to think about getting Regulus *off* of Peter's drum kit."

It felt like getting a scolding in primary school. While James shifted his weight uncomfortably, Remus scanned the crowd for any hint of Sirius, of which there were none.

Regulus was still going by the time they'd made their way behind the drum kit toward Trish and Barty. A few girls had crept closer to the kit the longer Regulus played and appeared to be trying to speak to him. As far as Remus could tell, Regulus hadn't said a word in reply—hadn't even looked up. Luckily for him and James, Barty was all too willing to gab.

"Saw Puny-grew throwing a fit," he simpered. "Poor bloke. Must be hard feeling so second-rate in your *own* band."

"Shut your mouth, Crouch," snarled James. "I know you were the one who put Regulus up to this, and it's Peter's drum kit."

Barty raised his arms in mocking surrender before gesturing to Regulus in a 'go ahead' motion. Glancing warily at Remus, James moved forward.

"Regulus?" He shouted, leaning in only to swing his face out of the way when Regulus went for his crash cymbal. "Regulus! Edge—it's me! James! Can you… I mean, could you stop for a moment?"

The crowd was booing before Regulus had even stopped, but he did—slowly, like he was caught in a trance.

“You good?” James asked.

“War Pigs…”

“Huh?”

“I said the song’s called ‘War Pigs’! Fuck, le'me alone!”

He was talking to James like he was one of the pestering girls, Remus realised. It was hard to tell if James had come to the same conclusion though; rather he looked almost hurt.

“Regulus, mate?” Remus called, coming in close. “Are you feeling alright?”

Regulus ignored him, slashing at the snare while tapping his foot against the pedal of Peter’s bass drum; *thump-thump-thump-thump!*

Remus turned to his friends; “How much has he had to drink?"

“Only about twelve beers,” yawned Trish. “And a little pinch 'a weed.”

“Isn’t that a bit excessive?” Griped James.

She shrugged. “Lollyhead almost never smokes it. He asked for some after your first set. Couldn’t think of a reason to tell him no.”

“Yeah? I can think of about twelve different reasons,” Remus scoffed. By now James had Regulus by the shoulders, and was slowly easing him out from behind the drum kit.

“There you go, champ,” he smiled, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “Let’s get you some water.”

For the most part, Regulus appeared agreeable to this, but then some girl who’d been watching him play came up to his other side and took him by the arm. She’d only said about three words before Regulus was wrenching himself free, his expression similar to a kid who’d just stuck his fingers in a light socket and gotten burned.

“Sorry,” James apologised, “he’s a bit out of sorts right now.”

The girl stepped back disappointingly, but by then Regulus had recognised just who it was who was leading him.

“Potter…”

“That’s my name.”

“Get… gerroff.”

“Don’t be difficult, Edgie. Just gonna get you some water and then we’ll all be right as—”

“I said—*get off!”*

The cry was viscous, and James released Regulus before he could take a drumstick upside the head.

“I don’t need your help,” Regulus warbled. “Don’t… Don’t *touch* me.”

“Right,” James huffed, “you wanna tell me today’s date then? Or even your name? ‘Cause you look higher than a kite, mate.”

“Fuck off. Why don’t you just go find your perfect little girlfriend and leave me alone for once, you stupid prick!”

A few nearby watchers sniggered, and Remus got the distinct sense of deja vu.

“What are we, back at school?” He grumbled, walking forward. He took the drumsticks from Regulus, who didn’t fight, and then pushed him by the shoulder. “Walk on, ya bastard, or I’ll carry you.”

The look Regulus gave him could’ve curdled milk, but Remus didn’t care. He pushed him again, lightly, and looked back at James. “Sorry, Prongs. How ‘bout you just go find Peter and the girls? I’ll be right back with this one.”

James nodded, glancing once more at Regulus, who did not return the look.

“And *you two*—” Remus pointed at Barty and Trish; “Any more trouble and you’re sleeping in the rain.”

Trish blew him a kiss—as did Barty, though his was of the more crude variety.

Back at the make-shift bar, Remus sat Regulus down at one of the empty stools and pushed a cup of water toward him.

“James was just trying to help you out. You didn’t need to bite his head off.”

“Yeah? Well, Potter can get fucked.”

Remus rolled his eyes, tapping the drumsticks against the bar top in irritation. “You know, just because you have a small thing for Lily doesn’t mean you get to be a dick to James whenever you want.”

Regulus flung his cup over, nearly soaking the front of Remus’ trousers.

“What the hell—”

“You say anything like that again and I’ll take your eyes, Lupin!”

“Jesus… Where’d you even hear that—an Al Pacino movie?” Remus found a stack of old newspapers in the bin to his left, which he used to begin sopping up the water. “You’re going back to school in a few days,” he muttered, “are you sure you wanna leave on such a sour note?”

“Piss off.”

“You should really work on regulating that temper of yours. You’re starting to sound like a broken record.”

“Don’t psychoanalyse me. I pay people for that.”

Remus shook his head. Tossing the wet newspapers aside, he gestured for another glass of water. “Are you at least glad you came?”

“No, your first set sucked.”

“Cheeky prat… I meant London. It’s only been four—*five* bloody weeks since you got here.”

Regulus fell quiet, contemplating his water. “Sirius is worried,” he said after a while. “I can see it every time he looks at me.”

“ ‘Course he’s worried. You’re his brother.”

“No, he’s worried I’ll go back to school and end up doing everything our mother wants of me. He’s worried I’ll turn out just like the rest of our family—*horrid*.”

Remus turned his head away, disguising his obvious wince with a gentle scratch to the back of his head. He hadn’t anticipated any confessions.

“Well… will you?”

He felt stupid for putting it so plainly, but couldn’t come up with any other way to phrase it without beating around the bush.

“I don’t want to,” Regulus said. “And I… I don’t want to go to university either.”

It was a surprise to say the least, especially for someone as smart and talented as Regulus. But then again, Sirius had been the same way.

“Got any plans then?”

“No."

"None at all?"

Regulus mumbled something.

"What's that?"

"*I said*—that I… may like... being in London…”

“Oh?!” Remus tried not to sound smug. “Really?”

“Yes, but that’s not a plan.”

“Who says? You think we moved out here with jobs all lined up and the perfect flat just waiting for us? Nah. We figured it out as we went along, just like everyone else. We had help of course—Sirius’ inheritance, James and Peter’s parents—*heh*—Lily. But we did it. And you can do it too, if you’d like.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “I hate your pep talks.”

“Yeah, I know.”

By then the bartender had come round again to offer Remus another beer. He abstained—for once—and instead asked for a water. When the guy brought it to him, he raised it to Regulus.

“To figuring it out.”

“You’re not really going to make me cheers with you, are you?”

“Go on, do it. Otherwise I’ll tell James you fancy his girlfriend.”

Regulus glowered, but reluctantly raised his cup and knocked it into Remus'. Feeling well pleased, Remus sipped from his cup—tipping it back just in time to glimpse Sirius bounding toward them from the back doors.

"There you are!" He cried, wrapping his arms around Regulus from behind. "Edge! Have you heard the good news? Your big brother's gonna be headlining the Roundhouse."

"Congratulations," Regulus hissed, already pushing him off.

"It's shit you're gonna miss it."

"He'll catch other shows," Remus said. "Won't you, Edge?"

Regulus rolled his eyes, picking up his water.

"Shut up, Lupin..."

* * *

"My teachers say I've got no clue! My parents don't approve of you!" *I first heard the lyrics in a little pub over in South Bank. When I started hearing it again in my head weeks later, I knew I had to go back. A week more and I was scribbling their name on every scrap receipt I could find. I paid a kid four and a half quid to write the lyrics on the walls of an Underground station, then I snapped a photo. It's still in my wallet now, soon it'll be printed on the front cover of this magazine.*

MARAUDERS. *It must be love.*

It's 1979 and punk is dead. "God Save the Queen" – the Queen is saved. There ain't no more British pop and Bowie's jumped ship to drop acid with Iggy in New York. All that's left is new wave speed and inconsistent E flat shock chords. Not that anyone's told ***MARAUDERS*** *that. With melodic songs and near impeccable manners, this four-man band cannot claim to be the new Kings of Punk, nor do they care to. They are something else entirely. Something old, something new, something borrowed—full debut.*

Can you hear them?

Remus lowered the copy of Sybill's *Slasher Chick* fanzine. He'd lost

count of how many times he'd read it since she'd dropped it off yesterday morning, but it wasn't nearly enough. According to Sybill they'd already pawned off almost a hundred copies since their show just four days ago. They weren't the only subject—she'd also managed to snag an interview with one of the Ramones' ex-roadies and there was a controversial opinion piece on page nine titled "My Vagina's No less 'Holey' than Yours" critiquing the Catholic church's view on abortion—but there was no denying that the Marauders took front page. There wasn't much way of devising who said what thanks to the way Sybill had penned the interview, save for the fact that Remus had actually *been* there. Reading it back now, he could picture every word perfectly;

Sybill: How old are you?

Sirius: Twenty-one!

Peter: He's lying, we're nineteen.

James: Eighteen, in Pete's case. He's not nineteen until September.

Peter: Wanker.

Sybill: What have you been doing in London lately?

Sirius: Shagging as many hot women as possible, naturally.

James: No, don't print that.

Remus: Potter's worried his mum might read this.

Sybill: You can say what you want. We're not aiming at the general public anyway.

Sirius: Yeah, that was a joke, but we say what we like…

Sybill: Now that the Pistols are through and the Ramones have gone back to New York, there's a lot of curiosity about the London scene and what'll come next… Do *you* expect to be next?

Peter: I wouldn't say we represent the entire scene…

Sybill: Who do you represent?

Sirius: The sexy people.

Remus: You're going to sound like a twat.

Sirius: *mimicking R* You're going to sound like a twat.

Sybill: How do you feel about New Wave?

Sirius: No comment.

Sybill: Are you old school then?

Peter: Nah, we're new school.

Sybill: Do you have any dreams to be distributed in America one day?

James: Oh, sure!

Remus: But we'd like to be distributed in the U.K. first.

Sybill: Any other groups in London you feel are any good?

Sirius: The Damned are the only one with a clue. It's why they got left behind.

Sybill: How about the American bands?

Peter: Didn't we just talk about the Ramones?

Remus: Iggy's good, but his band sucks. And he should stop partying with Bowie – selling self-destruction as art doesn't suit Bowie, and Iggy's better on his own anyway.

Sybill: You've heard about Patti Smith?

Sirius: Yeah, and she talks too much.

Sybill: Takes herself seriously.

Sirius: Oh, course! She's an artist.

Sybill: Do you think of yourselves as following the tradition of rock 'n' roll or going against it?

James: What's the tradition of rock 'n' roll again?

Remus: Dying at twenty-seven.

James: Oh…

Peter: Against. Definitely against.

Sybill: What will your music be like in a few years?

Sirius: Interview us in a few years.

Sybill: Are you guys comedians or something?

(No answer.)

Sybill: Mods or punk rockers?

Peter: Mockers.

Sirius: You stole that from Ringo.

Peter: Sod off.

Sybill: Is this the worst interview you've ever done?

Peter: It's the *first* interview we've ever done.

Sybill: You're playing at the Roundhouse in a few weeks. How does that make you feel?

James: Don't ask unless you've got a bucket.

Sybill: You each come from substantial backgrounds. Do you see this as a hindrance or an advantage?

Sirius: You said there's no chance of our mums reading this?

Sybill: It's not likely.

Sirius: Bollocks.

Remus: Right, we know what we look like. Four shit-eating toffs who've never done a hard-day's work in their lives. And maybe we haven't – we've been granted a lot. But we're not looking to tell anyone how it is, or what it is they should believe in.

Peter: Lots of people have talent, just not the means of funding it.

James: That's right. Not everyone could afford to do what we did. Sometimes it's all you have just to wake up and put food on the table.

Sirius: We're not claiming to be the most self-aware. We were given a head start, we see it. Mostly we're just here for the art.

Sybill: And what would you say to those that might say you haven't suffered enough for the art?

Sirius: You haven't met my mother.

Peter: And art isn't just suffering.

Sybill: What is it then?

Peter: It's everything. It's part of everyday life.

Sybill: So you're not just posers?

Remus: Everyone's a poser. You think Jesus wasn't posing on that cross? We don't just write what we know, we write what we feel. If they're gonna hate us then that's life, innit. Everyone hates you.

Sirius: Now who sounds like a twat?

(R shoves S.)

Sybill: Lupin, you write the lyrics, don't you?

James: Is it that obvious? Our little Shakespeare.

(R shoves J.)

Sybill: Last question – If you could say one thing to London's youth to wake them up, what would it be?

Sirius: That getting your prick sucked feels better when you're awake.

They'd made fun of each other for hours afterwards—*" 'everyone hates you, that's life, innn-it, Lupin?"*—and in the end James asked Sybill for an extra copy to send to his parents.

Now it was late April, and Regulus and his friends were due back at school so that they could pass their exams and get on with their lives. Remus wasn't sure what would come after, but Regulus had an open invitation to their couch, and—should he so choose—an offer from his big brother to support him at whatever university he should choose. With their first big-time show at the Roundhouse just on the horizon, it was all getting very real, very fast.

For now though, it was time to say goodbye.

“You’re sure that’s all of it?” Remus asked, while setting the last of the bags down by the front door.

“Should be,” Regulus replied, checking his trunk’s clasps. When he’d arrived the trunk had been relatively light. Now it was heavy, packed full with clothes, music magazines, and records Sirius had insisted on sending his brother back to school with. *Culture*, he’d called it.

“Excited to be going back?”

Regulus shrugged. “Where’s Sirius?”

“Still upstairs, I expect. I’m sure he’ll be down soon.”

This time it was a nod, and then Regulus let his gaze drift out the front door. Trish and Barty were already standing on the pavement with their bags, waiting on the taxi Lily had been kind enough to call for them. They were arguing about something—Trish making a face, Barty rolling his eyes. She’d just grumbled something very Scottish at him when Barty reached a hand toward her face, only to have his fingers slapped away viciously.

“Crazy bird! You had dirt on your collar—I was only trying to brush it off!”

“Brush your own dirt, Bawbag!”

“Bleeding Christ, you’re infuriating.”

“Wow, that’s a big word for you. Can you even spell it?”

Remus touched his thumb to his lip. “Are those two really…?”

“God, I hope not,” Regulus grimaced. “There’ll be no living with them.”

He smiled, then fit his fingers into his mouth for a whistle. "Oi, MacDuff! Got something for ya!"

Down on the pavement, Trish turned around and Remus tossed her the small object. Instantly Barty had crowded in to see what it was, but she answered with a cry;

"My hag stone!"

"*Gloine nan druidh,*" Remus corrected, almost certainly butchering the pronunciation. "You were right. Turns out it is lucky, after all."

"Not 'lucky'," she scoffed, before setting a hand over her eyes. "Don't you want it?"

"Do me a favour and hold onto it 'til the next time I see you."

It drew a smile from her, and she clutched onto it. When Barty curiously reached out to touch, she swatted his hand. It would've been endearing, were it not Barty Crouch.

"God," Remus scoffed, turning back to Regulus. "What did you even manage to do with Crouch? Can't believe I'm saying this, but he might actually be less of a little dickhead now."

“If you think I’m about to take all the credit, you’re daft.”

Chuckling, Remus reached out and pat Regulus on the shoulder. He rethought the gesture the moment Regulus began veering away from him, and rubbed his hands together afterwards to hide the awkwardness.

“So… We’ll be seeing you in the summer then?”

“Only if Sirius doesn’t come to his senses first.”

“He means it when he says he wants you here,” Remus promised. “And you’ll like London. It’s not exactly the city of dreams or anything... but it’s got some decent opportunities if you know where to look. You’ll say hi to Sheila for me in the meantime, yeah?”

“I didn’t know she was your godmother,” Regulus said. “It explains why she talks about you so much.”

Remus pressed his lips together, staunching a smile. “I’m gonna go get Sirius,” he told him, patting his arm once more—quickly this time, so that Regulus couldn’t avoid it. “Don’t go anywhere, Edge.”

Before he could even wink, Regulus had flipped him off, and Remus began backing towards the stairs. On the above landing, he ran into James, who was coming out of his and Lily’s room with a small tin under one arm.

“The others still here?”

Remus gestured back down the stairs in confirmation. “Those from your mum?”

“Yeah. I told her that Regulus really liked the kheer she’d made, so

she wanted to send him back with some baking—you know, like how she used to do for us. Is Sirius down there?"

"Nah, looks like he's hiding out. I'm gonna go get him right now."

"Ha, bloody coward."

"Don't be too hard on him," Remus smiled. "I think he's just sad his brother's leaving."

James began backing down the staircase. "I swear, Moons, had you said that to me a year ago I wouldn't have believed you."

"I wouldn't have believed me either, Prongs."

Leaving James to it, Remus ascended the narrow set of stairs leading up to his and Sirius' bedroom. He was half-expecting to find Sirius pacing the room nervously, and was fully ready to commit to his usual pep talk, only, when Remus walked into the room, it looked as though a bomb had gone off in one of the wardrobes. Clothes were strewn everywhere, carpeting the bed and floor with an unnerving amount of leather and spandex.

"Sirius, what are you doing?"

"What's it look like?" Sirius grunted. He was on his hands and knees before their wardrobe, digging through the bottom of it as though it were a skip bin and he'd accidentally thrown out a box of takeaway that was still good.

"Dammit. I put it in here so I wouldn't lose it, and now I can't bloody find it!"

Stepping over a stray boot, Remus sat down on the corner of their bed, feeling the mattress sag beneath him. "Wanna tell me what it is you're looking for?"

"My leather jacket—the old one. I had Wormtail update it for me. Wanted to give it to Reg as a going away present."

"Stunning. 'Cept it's sitting right here."

Sirius sat up so fast he smacked his head against the wardrobe's door handle. After cradling his scalp for several minutes, he ceased his moaning and finally crawled back over to the bed, where Remus had unearthed the old jacket from beneath a pair of horrendous tartan

trousers Sirius had procured over at the Spitalfields Market.

“You’re brilliant, you are,” Sirius said, giving Remus a quick peck as he stood up and raised the jacket. “Think he’ll like it?”

Remus didn’t get the chance to reply; instead Sirius turned the jacket around to reveal the name “EDGE” slashed across its back in white paint. A tiny “made in London” took up the rest of the space toward the bottom, painted in all the colours of the Union Jack.

“Do you like it?” He grinned. “Glows in the dark too.”

“Do you want my honest opinion?”

“Okay, so it was mostly a joke,” Sirius admitted, folding the jacket over one arm. “Just wanted to give him a reminder that he was here.”

“I don’t think he’s likely to forget.”

A beat passed, and Sirius had leaned back in for another kiss. This one was slow, thoughtful and nostalgic. When they broke apart again Sirius had shut his eyes and leaned their foreheads together.

“You know… When I found out Alphard had left me that money, I figured it would be for the both of us. He probably thought leaving it to me was the easiest way to keep Mum and Dad from getting their hands on it, but later, when Reg and I fell out… Well, just started thinking he didn’t care for my help anyway.”

Remus reached up, tangling his fingers in Sirius’ hair. It’d gotten even longer in the past year and was now hanging below his collarbones. He could still remember the time they’d been out Christmas shopping for Lily, and Sirius had been mistaken for a girl on his way out of some fancy boutique. Sirius had been embarrassed at the time, but puffed right back up again when Remus told him they only stared because he was so pretty.

“You worry too much,” Remus told him, kissing those pretty lips again. “Five quid says he wears it the entire train ride home.”

Sirius’ face became a grin. “I’ll take that bet.”

With a cheeky shove, he had Remus on his back on the bed, the jacket trapped between them as Sirius shimmied his way up Remus’ torso to straddle his legs. There was a rhinestone belt digging in between his shoulder blades, but it took a back seat to all the feelings of Sirius’

mouth on his. Tongue-n-tongue, they stayed that way until a distant honk had Sirius sitting up in alarm.

“Shit. Already?”

“That’ll be the taxi,” Remus nodded, wiping his mouth. “You should go on down, say your goodbyes. Maybe you can make him swear he’ll come stay for the summer.”

“Yeah… Yeah, alright! You go stall him."

"Why?"

"I left a pair of drumsticks sitting around and now I think I’ve lost them in all this mess.”

“How typical.” Kissing Sirius once more on the cheek, Remus picked his way back through the clutter and started down the stairs. Arriving on the first floor landing, he could hear voices coming from the front door.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you last night,” Regulus was saying.

“Don’t worry about it,” James replied. “You were drunk.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean it. What I said.”

“It’s cool. I told Lily, and she forgives you too.”

“Oh. Great…”

Inching down the stairs, Remus paused. The two were standing across from each other in the entryway; Regulus had Effie’s tin of baking in one hand, and was staring down at it dubiously. Was this it then, he wondered? Had James caught on to Regulus’ little crush on Lily at last?

“Sirius really enjoyed having you here,” James said eventually. “Sorry we’ll be missing your birthday.”

“It’s fine.”

“Well… You totally blew us all away at The Damned show! Last night too, before you stopped, that is. I’d never seen anything like it.”

Regulus glanced up, and Remus didn’t miss the hopeful look in his eye.

“Yeah?”

“Totally! I still think you could form your own band, that is, if you really wanted to. Sirius might have a heart attack—it’s always been his dream, right—but I’m sure he’d come around eventually.”

Regulus shook his head staunchly; “It’s just a hobby. I’ve got no interest in dreams.”

“That’s too bad,” said James. “You’ve sure got a lot of nerve. You could probably do whatever you wanted. All it takes is a few seconds of bravery. Sirius told me that once.”

“Bravery? *Really…?* ”

“Why not? It’s like—back at the concert, that was one of the bravest things I’d ever seen, yeah? You got up there when no one else would—it was mad! So, say all it takes is a little bit of madness, and boom—everything you want can come true.”

“So now it’s madness,” Regulus chuffed.

“They’re related,” James grinned. “But I find that when you want something, you can’t just wait for it to come along on its own. You just gotta do something a bit mad first to make it happen.”

And this was perhaps the moment Remus would be kicking himself over for many, *many* years to come. So far off the mark he’d been, that when Regulus pressed up onto his toes to kiss James on the mouth, he’d had the gall to be surprised.

A credit to James’ character, he did not leap away in shock. Instead his eyes bulged, and he reached up to grasp Regulus by the shoulders. This seemed to spur Regulus back to his senses, and he pulled back, his cheeks a violent red.

“I’m sorry, I… I just needed to do that. Just—Just once.”

And then Regulus was gone, scooping up his trunk and darting out the front door, Effie’s baking tin clutched tightly to his chest. It was clear James was dazed; when Remus finally descended down the rest of the stairs on rubbery legs, he turned to face him with an open mouth.

“Moony, did you see…?”

Remus nodded.

“But I–I didn’t—”

“I know, Prongs.”

James deflated, arms hanging limp at his sides. Down on the pavement, Barty was helping Regulus shove his trunk into the taxi boot. He harped at him, mostly complaining about Trish—not that Regulus seemed to be paying any attention. After muscling the trunk inside, Regulus slammed the boot shut and glanced back up at the flat. He must’ve seen them staring, as he quickly turned away and hurried into the back seat of the cab.

“I should probably tell Lily,” James said in a hollow voice. “That’s what you do, right? You’re supposed to—to tell ‘em.”

“It could be worse,” Remus gulped. “I mean, he kissed you.”

“Yeah. That’s right, he did.” A beat, then; “But maybe… don’t tell Sirius.”

Remus glanced at him, surprised, but before James could begin explaining himself, Sirius came thundering down the stairs.

“Useless cunts! What're you doing letting them leave?!”

He pushed past them and ran down to the street just as Barty and Trish were getting into the cab. Regulus rolled the window down for him, and Sirius shoved the jacket and drumsticks inside before taking a moment to lean both arms on the edge of the cab’s window edge. Remus couldn’t see Regulus’ face with him in the way, but he’d have bet a lot more than five quid that he wasn’t looking Sirius in the eye.

“You think he’d blow his top if he knew?” Asked James.

“Uh…”

“It was only the one time,” he went on babbling; “And it ain’t gonna happen again, so… Shit, Moons, will you please not say anything?”

Remus was at a loss. It felt wrong to be keeping such a secret, especially when everything was just starting to make sense. *Of course Regulus had a thing for James*— of course! Honestly, he was a proper spanner for not picking it out sooner.

“We don’t need anymore drama for the band,” James reasoned, mostly with himself. “And Regulus is going home now. So I suppose, what

Sirius doesn't know won't hurt him. Right...?"

Great, Remus thought; now he'd gone and jinxed it.

"Sure, Prongs..."

James looked at him. "Shit. Please, Moons?"

Remus pinched his forehead, trying not to look at Sirius' back as he leaned over the cab. Maybe James was right—it was only a kiss after all.

"Alright, James. Whatever you say."

Visibly softening with relief, James grabbed him by the shoulder. "Thanks, mate. You're a good friend. I'll see you downstairs for a bit of practice, yeah?"

"I'll holler when Peter gets back."

Nodding, as if to psyche himself up, James let out a breath and then slipped out the front door, heading towards the exterior stairway that led down to the flat's basement. He didn't dare look at the taxi when he passed, but made sure to wish the others a safe trip back to Scotland and gave a genial wave. Even while watching, Remus couldn't tell if Regulus had waved back.

After several minutes, during which they'd surely racked up a decent idling fare on the taxi meter, Sirius rubbed his brother's hair and stepped back from the window to see them off. He remained there until the car had turned a corner at the end of the street, hands pressed into his back pockets.

"You okay, Moons?" Sirius asked when he strode back through the front doorway of their flat. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Say, you haven't seen Sybill's little magazine lying around anywhere, have you? Think I'd like to have it framed…"

Chapter End Notes

New character alert!! (I love Gideon Prewett) Also hello Regulus???? Boy moves in crazy ways. So proud of him actually.

'Mince' means like rubbish.
'Scrumpy' a strong cider drink.
A 'vest' is the same thing as a man's undershirt.

Mitch Mitchell was the drummer who worked with Hendrix in the Jimi Hendrix Experience.
An 'A&R manager' is someone who negotiates and signs new artists for record labels and music publishers.

Parts of their Sybill interview were borrowed from a The Damned interview in Issue 1 of “Slash” Magazine, May 1977.

Chapter 106: The Roundhouse

Chapter Summary

The Marauders play to their very first concert audience.

Chapter Notes

No CW's for this chapter apart from brief mentions of addiction.

I use (as in Sirius sings) two songs in this one. The first is one I wrote to the melody of "Dazed and Confused" by Led Zeppelin (though I ignored 02:06 - 03:29 where Plant is just moaning while I wrote it) and "Five to One" by The Doors. Feel free to play both while reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Buddy you're a boy, make a big noise,
Playin' in the street, gonna be a big man some day!
You got mud on yo' face, you big disgrace,
Kickin your can all over the place, singin'—
We will, we will rock you!
We will, we will rock you!

- "We Will Rock You" Queen, 1977

Sunday 6th May 1979

The first time Remus had ever laid eyes on the Camden Roundhouse it'd reminded him of a wary and dilapidated version of Albert Hall, or perhaps a more industrialised rendering of some ancient Greek pantheon. Since then its exterior had changed very little, what with the chipped pavement and worn-out car park all chockablock with rain puddles and potholes. Piles of old roofing tiles had been mixed in with abandoned stage pieces at the far end of the property, all discarded from the venue's previous life as a performing arts powerhouse. It was a huge building, originally built to house turntables for steam engines—but like the telephone box in Marlene's beloved *Doctor Who*, its vast cement walls gave very little indication of the sort of volume it contained within. Now standing in the middle of the annular hall, Remus stared up at the surmounting set of glass

windows at the roof's peak and imagined a fall from that height would kill anyone. *And they were supposed to play there,* he thought? He wasn't confident his ruddy little amp could fill a room half this size, let alone be heard over an entire crowd. But there they were; no going back now.

"You'll be happy to hear that I've made the executive decision to have Marauders round out the show," said Gideon. "Get it? Round as in *Round*-house? God, I just kill myself."

He sniggered as he strolled over to them, continuously tapping a clipboard against one hand. He'd yet to write anything on it, and Remus got the feeling he just held it to look professional. Not hard. His suit was pure-white with a navy shirt underneath and he looked a bit like a ginger-fied Marlon Brando, minus the cigarette and Sicilian accent.

"Also, just as a little tidbit," Gideon threw in, "you should know that it's a sold out show. Turns out Gaz was feeling generous. He put out a little advert in last week's edition of 'Sounds'."

He said all this very keenly. The Marauders, meanwhile, had yet to pick their jaws up off the floor. Even the girls, who'd come early to witness their soundcheck, hadn't a single quip to split amongst themselves.

In a shocking turn of events, Moira had turned up to show her support for Peter, making up for the loss of Lottie, who was still off on her glowing honeymoon with Roger. She had managed to find the time to send a postcard though; *Congrats! Guess you idiots managed to prove Dad wrong after all. Love from San Sebastian!*

"The Do Nuffin's will warm-up the crowd, get everyone nice and loose," Gideon said, pausing long enough to direct a set of stagehands rolling in a soundboard the size of their bathtub back home. "You'll be following Modern English at nine-thirty. Show ends ten-to-eleven. Any later and the city'll fine us for violating noise limits. Considering you lads don't have much in the way of a cab fund, I wouldn't risk it."

"Cool—Cool…" James stammered, acting decidedly *not* cool. "Any other advice then?"

"Yeah. Don't fuck it up."

That was what they got: a wink and a warning not to ruin their first ever chance before it even started. Remus knew that by putting them

up at the Roundhouse, Gideon had effectively given Marauders his personal stamp of approval, which meant that any chance of failure also ran the risk of marring his own industry name. And yet Remus couldn't help but feel that they still stood the most to lose.

Despite Gideon's warning, the soundcheck was a disaster. News of a sold out audience had turned any budding anticipation into full-out dread for the four concert-newbies. Thanks to the Roundhouse's tiny modular stage, there wasn't enough room for each of the band to have their own set up, which meant that sharing was the only way forward. They'd agreed to use Peter's drum kit, but the amps and pedals were being provided by Modern English, a new-wave band from Colchester that sounded more akin to Genesis than they did Aerosmith or Led Zeppelin. Hearing their soundcheck, Remus thought the songs went too bad—no different from the verse-chorus-verse one might hear on the radio those days—but something about the band's stage presence or general lack thereof felt unnerving. Mostly they just swayed ahead of their synthesisers, a style Sirius later mimicked during their own practice. He paired it with a droll rendition of the band's only single, "I'm Drowning", shambling ahead of his microphone like a zombie;

" ' *I'm drowning… dun-DUN-dun-DUN! Going underrrr… I'm drowning…* '"

He only stopped after Peter threatened to strangle him with his own microphone cord, lest the other band overhear him. They were already usurpers; it'd been clear from their first meeting that neither band wanted much to do with their new pals. The Do Nuffin's had already been playing together for years and were therefore much more established on the local scene than Marauders could ever hope to be. Adversely, Modern English's recorded single painted them as serious musicians with a real shot of making something of themselves. Though neither group was popular enough to be making any real demands, no one made a secret out of the fact that Remus and his friends were complete novices, and thus had swooped in on what could've been a big and very *real* opportunity for the rest of them.

"Tough," Sirius said later, busy admiring his arse in one of the dressing room mirrors. "Suppose the hotter bird gets the worm."

Dorcas tutted. "You say that now. Just wait until some hot young dish sweeps in to steal your limelight."

"Impossible. No one's *that* good-looking."

They ragged him for a little while, but Sirius' confidence had always been a bit contagious, and glancing around the tiny dressing room, Remus was quite sure they'd take what they could get just then.

With a bit of help from Mary, Sirius had turned out a show-stopping new look, complete with eyeliner, black velvet pants and red lamé matador's jacket—of which he wore nothing underneath. He'd spent the better part of The Do Nuffin's set complaining that the outfit would've looked better if he'd just had a few tattoos underneath—comparing ideas with Marlene and Peter—but Remus disagreed. Sirius looked already like a rock star. He *looked* like Jagger.

"Hope you're ready, lads!" Gideon called, sticking his head in the dressing room's door. " 'Cause you're on in five minutes."

He was gone a second later, just in time to miss James standing up from his seat, his face having turned a horrible ashen grey.

"I think… I need a bucket!"

"I'm starting to wonder if this isn't a medical condition we should be worried about," Lily winced, patting her boyfriend on the back.

As James made a mad-dash for the bin, Peter put down his empty beer bottle and gave a loud belch.

"I can feel it," he rasped, still expelling air; "Tonight's gonna be a perfect show. A ten out of ten! Right...? What d'you think, Moony?"

"I say ten too," Remus replied, barely glancing up from his bass guitar. Peter cheered.

"And you, Sirius?"

"*Ngh*—Eleven!" Sirius bellowed. He was across the room, doing a poor attempt of a hand-stand against a wall covered in faded Jimi Hendrix posters.

"Can you stop that?" Remus scoffed. "You're going to break your neck."

"I'm trying to evoke a natural rush," Sirius said, his face already flushed. "Wouldn't have to if someone—*ngh!*—hadn't refused the sound guy's offer."

"This is literally the most important show we've ever played," James

moaned, cradling the plastic bin to his chest. “You’re not allowed to be high for it.”

Sirius grunted, folding forward off the wall. “Aren’t you excited, Prongs?” He simpered, creeping closer to James and his bin. “Just think of it… All those people out there, anticipating the show. Waiting for you—cheering our names! Just—*Potter, Potter!”*

James thrust a finger out. “I will vomit all over you, Black!”

The sound of a thumping fist came from outside the dressing room door, making them all jump and signalling that it was time to take their places. The girls shuffled out first to join the audience near the front door and afterwards, Sirius reached an arm down and hauled his best friend to his feet.

“Well!” He grinned, smacking James on the back; “Go on—get it all out now, mate, ‘cause for the next two hours, you’re not even going to have time to breathe.”

It was chaos outside the dressing room. Remus had never seen so many people running around in one place, save for maybe that time they’d snuck backstage for The Clash. Two weeks ago he’d been astonished by Sybill’s ability to gather a mere hundred people or so, and now—between those working the show and those attending it—there had to be at least a thousand bodies packed between them and the front doors. Apparently anyone who’d brought their copy of *Sounds* with the show’s advert in it had gotten in for free, and the draw of getting to see three bands for the price of none was well worth it. Even if they were complete shit, Remus doubted many in the audience would care.

But it wasn't just about playing their songs correctly, he reminded himself. This was about proving to blokes like Gideon that they were worth the shot in the dark. That Marauders could be the best band in the world. That they were *not* complete failures...

“For a bunch of sops, those Essex bastards sure can move a room,” Sirius said, peeking out to admire all the people hanging out on the upper balcony. One of the venue’s swivelling stage lights caught him dead in the eyes as he did and he flinched, only to turn back around with his hair glowing blue under the light and a beaming smile on his face.

“Holy shit.”

Remus nodded. “Holy shit.”

“Get it together man,” Peter was busy telling James. Like a little christening, they’d each been given a shot of whisky and a firm handshake when they approached the ramshackle staircase that led up to the stage. There they found Modern English finishing up their encore to the sound of roaring applause. It appeared as though their minimal stage presence was of little consequence to the exuberant crowd—not that James seemed to notice. He was too busy pulling at the collar of his ringer t-shirt and trying not to hyperventilate.

“Does anyone see Lily and the girls?” He wheezed, covering his mouth to force air in through his nose. The answer was no; it was nearly impossible to pick out anyone amongst the sifting crowd. If they wanted to see their friends, then they were going to have to get out on stage.

“Gear’s almost ready,” Gideon said, appearing out from behind a set of stage monitors. “You lads looking forward to your first big show?”

“Do you always do this?” Sirius asked instead. “You know, play babysitter for the bands?”

“Playing babysitter for spoiled little rock star cunts is my job. It’s not always glamorous, but it has its perks. A house in Costa Rica, for example.”

Before Gideon could brag any further, a man in all black with a headset on came up and nudged him from behind. He gave him the okay, and Remus felt his stomach hit the floor.

“The stage is all yours, gentlemen,” Gideon grinned. “You do remember what to do with it, right? Which end of the guitar is up?”

In answer, Sirius reached for the microphone a waiting stagehand had been cradling for him. “Best get that contract ready, Prewett,” he called, already walking up the stairs. “Wouldn't want another agency to beat you to the punch.”

Looking back on it, Remus would consider that instant as the moment Sirius Black sealed the deal on the rest of their lives. They didn't know it, but Gideon Prewett had already decided that very first night he’d seen them play that they had what it took to be a good band. Still, it was Sirius’ confidence—his no-fail attitude—*that* was what made Marauders truly great.

The lights were down when they walked out on stage for the very first time. As the audience swayed gently in anticipation, Remus focussed hard on trying to remember the set up; Peter's kit toward the back, a microphone stand at centre stage, and a keyboard on the far right for Sirius' piano bits. His cheap Teisco bass would be waiting for him next to the stack of amps on stage left. There he felt for it until his fingers hit the strings in the dark. There was a faint rippling sound from the attached amplifiers as the low notes slithered through their stage monitors. Somewhere nearby Remus could hear the faint ticking of an amplified metronome, ready to count them in.

Tick–tick–tick!

He swung the bass's strap over his head. This was it.

Tick–tick–tick!

Adjusted his E string. This was fucking it!

Across the stage, in pitch darkness, James Potter fit a guitar pick between his teeth and strummed down. Amp feedback echoed.

The crowd got loud.

Behind them, Peter Pettigrew drew a stick along the edge of his crash cymbal.

Tick…!

Remus Lupin struck a chord. Felt the sound tremor in his feet.

Tick…!

And Sirius Black wrapped the microphone cord around his wrist.

… Tick!

"Do any of you remember what magic feels like?"

The lights stayed low, anticipating the eager roar of the crowd as Sirius spoke into the mike. Remus felt every word like a caress over the skin of his arms and neck, but there was no time to be caught up in all of Sirius' sensualities. With a gentle flick he began the descending bass line he'd built the song around. It was a love song in a way, and also a curse. He'd come up with the melody ages ago—admittedly during some stupid spat between him and Sirius he couldn't even remember the reason for. But the drama was there, the

lust was there. And when Sirius sang…

“ ‘I know that they’re here and we’re supposed to play,
A song that I wrote for you in happier days;
Sweet little mama, I’m caught under your spell,
Black magic woman, I fear I ain’t well!”

The lights went up with a great whoosh, and suddenly Remus felt like he was being blinded by a supernova. James’ guitar shrieked and whined—turning their ominous love song into the curse Remus had meant for in his anger. He felt stung and abused, scorned and what for? *Sirius Sirius Sirius*—but *there* was Sirius, with a single hand on the microphone and blowing out his entire chest;

“ ‘You knoooow it can’t be no more—
I think this man outta leave,
Ain’t got no more answers, baby, but you taste so sweet;
Run me around in a dark room—
Don’t know where I am,
Yeah, draw me in, baby, my heart’s growing weak!”

It was like dropping into the punch instead of dodging it. Peter kept them in line with the gentle tap-tapping on his snare and clash, while every shuttering twang of James’ guitar rocked them right back again. The audience ahead of them were hypnotised—they didn’t know whether they should be moaning or crying. James had called it the Zeppelin effect; seeing how their mouths dropped open and their eyes glazed over like they’d just been shown the white gates of Heaven. Sirius had that effect on people regardless, but his voice changed when he whined. It turned raspy. It turned them on.

“ ‘If being lost is a crime, then a sinner I’ll be,
I still love you, baby, you’ve got magic up your sleeve;
Praying for a woman shouldn’t be too much to need,
Can’t it be now, baby—
Please don’t leave me to grieve!”

Sirius tossed his hair back;

“ ‘Please don’t leave me to grieve!”

Peter brought down his sticks.

“ ‘Don’t leave me to grieve!”

James slashed his strings.

“ ‘Don’t leave me!”

Remus took a breath.

“ ‘DON’T LEAVE ME!”

Before Sirius had even finished his final scream, James had moved to the centre of the stage, rocking his hips forward as his fingers chased themselves up and down the strings. With Peter at his heels his song soared across the hall like a siren, and the wave of people down below surged up to meet him, crashing over the lip of the stage with desperate and longing fingers. All sound fell away except for them—and they didn’t know what they were doing, they’d made it up! The words were made up, the melody was fake—none of it mattered apart from *listening* to each other! Their first song at their first real show and it might as well have been one they’d never even heard before. It could’ve been—didn’t matter. The Marauders knew each other well enough to make any strange thing feel familiar again.

“ ‘I know that they’re here and we’re supposed to play,
I’ll make love to ya, baby—thinking of happier days;
And sweet little mama, I’m still caught under your spell—
Black magic woman, I’m gonna send you to hell!”

It was as though he could feel Sirius’ hands on him now. The microphone cord was wrapped around his throat, squeezing and squeezing until all that was left was that airy feeling that kissed your brain before you passed out. Maybe they shouldn’t have started with “Black Magic Woman”; they’d ascended and now there was nowhere

else to go but back down.

Oh well…

Might as well make it a party then.

By the next song the crowd had been broken from its trance and with every slam of Peter's drumsticks, and eventually their mindless thrashing had returned. Come the third song, Remus could no longer feel his fingers. It was an odd sensation—not the fingers, the captivation—but the audience had not acted this way for The Do Nuffin's or for Modern English. They had played their music and struck a few cords but this was different. This was a carnal need for something more. Remus would've given it to them all night if he could, only the Marauders didn't have enough of their own material to cover an entire hour and a half-long set. But they did have two things:

Sirius Black.

And Jim Morrison.

" 'Five to one, baby—
One in five;
No one here gets out alive, now—
You get yours, and baby,
I'll get mine;
Gonna make it, baby—
If we try!"

Sirius hadn't wanted to sing any covers, but there was something to be said for a song an audience could sing back to them. The people may have liked the originals, but they hadn't had the time to get to know them yet. Jim Morrison had been dead for almost a decade, and dead Americans sometimes made for pretty decent art. Memorable art, anyway.

" 'The old get old—
And the young get stronger…"

The rasp was back like a growl, and Sirius kept both hands on the mike as he slid toward the floor at the front of the stage;

“ ‘May take a week—
And it may take longer…”

Eventually his velvet knees had hit the stage;

“ ‘They got the guns,
But we got the numbers…”

His head tipped back;

“ ‘Gonna win, yeah,
We’re takin’ over—
COME ON!”

Sirius draped himself across the black vinyl floor, arms spread open like he could absorb every inch of the madness tipping their metaphorical scale. Remus looked at him and he *wanted him* but there was something else too. He’d noticed it before that last bridge—and now James was playing again and he’d forgotten.

Remember!

Remember, dammit!

Remember where?

There…?

No—*there!*

Across the room, near the back bar and lit up by the black lights. He’d picked out Gideon by his white suit and hair, but it was the man standing next to him that Remus was really interested in. He’d only seen him the one time outside that corner shop along Denmark Street and now there were lights in his eyes, blinding him—but he was sure!

“It’s Gaz!” Remus shouted over the music, moving toward Sirius as he swung himself up from the floor of the stage. “By the bar—it’s Gaz Spectre, he’s here!”

Sirius’ eyes flashed greedily—hazily—but he saw him. Remus could

tell by the way Sirius fit his microphone back into its stand that he'd hit whatever reset button existed within him. To change one's tune mid-song was always a gamble, but Gideon had lied to them and brought Spectre anyway. If there was ever a time to finish with a bang, it was now.

" ' *Your ballroom days are over, baby,"* Sirius growled;
" *'Night is drawing near…"*

" *'Shadows of the evening,"* Whined;
" *'Crawl across the years…"*

" *'Ya walk across the floor with a flower in your hand,"* Moaned;
" *'Trying to tell me no one understands…"*

" *'Trade in your hours for a handful of dimes—"* Keened;
" *'Gonna make it, baby—in our prime!"*

The sound disappeared, and slowly, the crowd began to whisper;

Come together… one more time.

Peter's bass drum thumped; *ku-tss!*

Get together… one *more time.*

James eased his slide down the strings;

Get together… one more *time.*

Remus held his breath.

Get together… one more time!

With a single deafening crack, Sirius kicked the mike stand over and slammed into the floor.

“GET TOGETHER—ONE MORE TIME!”

And that was all there was for it. They were *together*—the entire room was with them. Remus looked and looked and he couldn’t see Lily, but he knew instinctively that she was there. Her and Mary and Marlene and Dorcas. Could they feel it too? Remus thought so.

By the time they were thundering off stage, Remus felt like a million pounds that’d just been run over with a train. His ears were ringing—whose idea was it to not invest in ear plugs?—and he *definitely* couldn’t feel his legs.

“Good news!” Shouted James, despite the fact that he was standing right next to them. “I don’t have to throw up anymore!”

It was around this time that Remus realised James had lost his glasses. Maybe it'd helped—not being able to see the audience—but there wasn’t any time to look for them.

“Spectre!” Remus gasped, slamming Sirius in the centre of the chest and nearly winding him all over again. “He was by the bar—let’s go!”

But they were not allowed. Either because they were worried about their newest stars causing a riot out front or because they meant to hussle the four of them into the back to very violently coerce them into signing their lives (and future pay cheques) away for their brief five minutes of fame, the stage hands and small team of security Gideon had hired to work the event began ushering the Marauders back toward their dressing room.

“Alright, we’re bloody going!” Sirius snapped, before his mood shifted again and he was bounding forward to wrap his arms around James’ shoulder. “Holy FUCK—that was amazing. Did you hear us? I mean, did you *fucking hear us?!”*

“I don’t think I’ll ever hear anything again!” Peter shouted, apparently suffering from the same ringing in his ears as Remus.

They made it to the dressing rooms and Sirius burst through the door like a jack rabbit on speed. He only paused when they came face to face with Gideon, smiling around the lip of a cigarette as he leaned back against one of the dressing room tables. He said something that was probably very sly, but Remus could hardly hear anything over the

ringing in his ears and James' shouting;

“WHAZZAT?!”

Gesturing, Gideon snapped his fingers and the door was yanked shut behind them.

"Let's talk, lads."

A few minutes later they’d all peeled out of their sweaty stage gear and were given several rounds of whisky and a cool towelette to drape over their necks and eyes. It felt like overkill, but when Remus began to notice the spots in his vision from the stage lights he acquiesced to the pathetic little towel and leaned back in his chair with his face covered.

“You boys did great out there,” he overheard Gideon profess. “Blew the roof off the joint. Almost literally.”

“I thought I saw a few ceiling tiles falling into the audience,” James snickered.

“And Spectre?” Sirius asked boldly. “We saw you two by the bar.”

“That’s a keen eye you got there. But I’m ‘fraid Spectre’s *loooong* gone. Sorry, boys. I tried to keep it quiet to avoid any possible disappointment.”

Remus didn’t have to lift the towel to notice that the disappointment was already in the room.

“I assume that means he hated us,” grumbled Peter.

“On the contrary, Pettigrew… Gaz says he wants to sign you.”

It was astonishing enough news to stump all of them for several seconds. Before Remus had even swung upright in his chair—towelette flying off his space at warp speed—Sirius was already on his feet.

“Are you serious?” He shouted. “He actually wants to sign us!?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re not just having us on, are you, Gid?” James babbled; “ ‘Cause if you are, one of us ain't gonna be leaving this dressing room in one piece.”

Gideon tipped his head forward in a chuckle. “No, Potter. In fact, I am happy to report that Marauders is officially the latest and greatest signing of Spectre Records Limited. Save a few pesky contracts, of course. You blew more than just the audience away tonight—you impressed Gaz. He thinks you could be exactly what you say you are, and he’s willing to give you a chance, so…” And then Gideon stood up from his chair, arms wide. “Welcome to the family, lads.”

It was an instant celebration. Peter threw his sticks in the air while James swooped in from behind and lifted each of them straight off the ground in a great bear hug. They embraced Gideon too, but Remus barely noticed. He’d already grabbed Sirius.

“We did it, Moons!” Sirius gasped, holding Remus’ face in his hands. “We got a record contract—we did it!”

Sirius was right—*they did do it!*—and like with every other major milestone they’d shared so far, Remus cupped Sirius around the back of his neck in a reflex and kissed him full on the mouth.

It took them a few seconds to realise what they’d done, and by then it was too late. Sirius sprung away from Remus as though he’d given him an electric shock, and they both found Gideon staring at them with a bewildered look on his face. For a while no one spoke, until finally James stepped up to Sirius.

"Yeah, whoo! We did it!" He cheered, before attempting to grab Sirius by the face and lay one on him. He never got so far; Sirius was pushing James away by the cheek before their lips got within feet of each other.

"Quit taking the piss, Potter!"

"I ain't! I'm *cel—e—bra—ting.*"

The bold attempt to cover up for Remus' mistake still didn't stop Sirius from pushing away like a kid worried about catching cooties. Peter, meanwhile, had his head in one hand, staring at the floor as though he were questioning every decision that'd lead him up to that point.

"Valiant effort, Potter," Gideon said, before pointing between Remus and Sirius. “So this a thing then?”

“No,” Sirius answered, at the same time Remus replied with, “Yeah.”

Shocked, Sirius whirled around and Remus felt a small stab of guilt for

being the one to go against him. He tried to make Sirius understand with his eyes—they were only safe as long as they decided who knew—but Gideon had his answer.

"This is gonna require some serious PR coverage," he mumbled, scratching his chin. He thought a moment longer before letting out a casual sigh. “Well, good thing PR’s my entire job.”

Sirius scoffed, like he didn't believe it. "You mean you don't care that you just agreed to sign a band of poofters?"

"I have a girlfriend," Peter said, raising his hand. It made Gideon smirk at least.

“What? You think you’re the first benders I’ve ever worked with? That’s a laugh. Nah, we’ll sort it. Get ‘chu girlfriends or something—you know, for show. Everyone does it.”

“Everyone…?” Peter gaped. “Even like—Led Zeppelin?”

Before anyone thought to answer him, a knock came at the door. One of the hired security stuck his head in.

“Oi, Gid, got some girls here to see the band. They all got passes…”

“Speaking of girlfriends!” James cheered. He rushed forward just as Lily and the other girls piled into the room, hair stuck to their necks with sweat and already yammering their praises.

“You were fantastic!” Lily cried, throwing her hands around James. “*Ohmygod*—it was spectacular!”

"Wonderful!"

"Truly amazing!"

"Next time you should all be shirtless."

Remus was still dazed. Eventually Gideon had wandered over to him and passed him another shot of whisky.

"Don't sweat it, Lupin. We've all got our vices. One and done—you got it out of your system. Now just make sure you play it smart and I'll make sure that none of this ever blows up in our faces."

His words gave Remus the distinct feeling of deja vu, but still—he clinked his whisky shot against Gideon's anyway, and told himself that

he'd never make such a blatant mistake again.

As Lily embraced James and Moira raced to congratulate Peter, Remus set the shot glass aside to smile at Dorcas, who was striding forward with Marlene.

“I think you’ve actually managed to get better, Lupin,” she smirked, before delivering a cheeky punch to his bicep. “Guess getting fired from the shop was a blessing in disguise after all.”

“Funny how that happens,” Remus grinned.

“Just you wait,” said Marlene, “soon they’ll be whisking you off to posh places in fancy limousines and cars with blacked-out windows.”

“Yeah, you’ll be checking into the Savoy under pseudonyms just so your crazy fans don’t come breaking down the door," Mary cheered, her arms locked around Sirius' neck and lipstick marks now decorating both of his cheeks. Before she could give him another, Gideon was swooping in.

“That day might be closer than you think, ladies.” Then he broke the news to the girls for them, and was even kind enough to call for a bottle of champagne in celebration.

“You should come down to the office this Friday. You’ll have a meeting with Gaz, and he’ll decide where it is we go next. Don’t quote me, but I think he’s gonna get you on a tour.”

The boys all shared the same look of disbelief. James had both hands clasped over his head like he was going to puke again, and Sirius was about one glass of champagne away from doing another hand-stand. It was amazing! A whole tour? Suddenly their heads were being filled with ideas of where it was that they'd go. North—South—the whole country? But then Gideon made snide mention of 'America' and it was as though the Marauders could no longer think straight at all.

America...

Holy fuck.

In all their excitement, they'd somehow come to the conclusion that this was news far-deserving of a second round. It took some prodding, but eventually Gideon agreed to take them over to the Roundhouse's club and bar. Most of the crowd had dissipated by now, but there were surely a few left who'd recognise them.

"And remember, don't go around bragging about the record deal," Gideon warned them. "It's bad luck to count your platinum records before they've gone gold."

"Yeah, and we ain't even officially signed yet anyway," said James. Sirius smacked his arm for it.

"Don't jinx it, Potter!"

As they all turned for the door, Remus felt a tug on his sleeve.

“Remus, hold on. There's something you should know.”

It was Lily. She kept hold of him by the sleeve, nibbling anxiously on her bottom lip.

“What is it, Lils?”

“We weren't sure whether to say anything or not, but I know you'd want to know. It's... Well, Tomny. He was here—he... I guess he came to the show.”

Suddenly all the noise in the room evaporated.

“Tomny…?”

“Mhm,” Lily nodded, as Sirius and the others turned on them. “He was watching your guys' set.”

Suddenly Remus felt jaded. “Yeah, and the Queen was on the balcony,” he scoffed, unwilling to have his good mood ruined by whatever game Lily was playing at. Before he could pull his arm away, Lily was shaking him.

“No, really, Remus! I swear—I *know* it was him! He was standing right near us. We only noticed toward the end.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Marlene insisted. “We couldn’t get any closer, it was too packed."

"Where'd he bloody go then?" Sirius asked.

"I dunno. We lost sight of him after the lights went down."

It was a boot to the stomach. Remus’ heartbeat had begun to race again, different but not unlike the way it had up on stage. Desperate, he turned to Sirius.

“What are you waiting for then,” Sirius told him. “Don’t you want to see him?”

Now Remus didn’t care who was around. Heart swelling with pride, he leaned in and captured Sirius’ lips in a kiss a second time.

“He was by the east doors,” Mary called, as Remus threw the dressing room door open afterwards and nearly slammed into the back of the pair of security posted up outside.

“Wait, hold on!” Gideon barked. “You can’t go out on your own. Lads, bring him back.”

Ignoring his new manager’s wishes, Remus shoved past the bodyguards and threw himself down the hallway before he could be stopped. It was stupid to hope, especially considering he had no idea where he was going or if Tomny would still be there. Maybe Lily had made a mistake. Maybe it wasn’t even him after all. There were plenty of other blonde, scruffy-looking guys in London.

Weaving his way through the confusing hallways of the Roundhouse’s backstage area and out into the lobby, Remus began to imagine a stranger in Tomny’s place, stuck wondering just who this “Remus” idiot was and why four barmy girls were bothering him. *Get a load ‘a them,* he’d say, *they think I know—*

"Tomny!"

Bursting out the front doors, Remus found himself standing on a large piece of pavement. Cars and taxi cabs zoomed past on the dark street and crowded groups of people mulled around as they often did after concerts got out, smoking and sipping out of the occasional beer can.

Remus felt embarrassed for shouting. It’d garnered him several looks, a few of which were beginning to transform in front of his eyes. He began to hear the whispers;

No way.

Is that really…?

—I think it is!

“Hey, man, will you sign my shirt!?”

Remus jerked away, only to end up backing into another girl and

accidentally trodding across her foot. She yelped in offence at first, but after looking up to see who it was, promptly forgot all about her scuffed boot.

“Hey, aren't you with the band?” She asked.

Frazzled and completely disoriented, Remus backed the other way and felt someone grab his arm.

“You’re with the band!”

“You’re in the band!”

“Hey—guys, look! He’s in the band!”

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

People began to press in from every direction. They didn’t even know his name, not that it mattered. They were undeterred by his height or general unfriendliness—desperate for whatever golden luck he had to rub off on them for even a moment. Looking into their many faces, Remus began to wonder whether crowds like this could smell fear.

“Sorry—I’m sorry,” he winced, trying to push his way through; “Please, just—just let me through! I’m looking for someone, alright—”

The words died on his tongue when Remus finally spotted him. He was standing off to the side, staring. Same sandy hair, same white t-shirt split at the collar, blue jeans—

“Tom!”

“It was so cool how you shredded the guitar at that part—”

“Do you really know Modern English?”

“Tomny!”

“What’s your name?”

“Are you going backstage?”

“TOM!”

The fans were packing in even tighter—with those on the outside unsure of who it was they were even fighting to see. Nearby a waiting police car whooped its lights, temporarily spooking them and causing

Remus to lose sight of his friend. With no patience left, he began forcing his way through the wall of bodies before him. They followed, naturally, and what had started as an accidental run-in became a small chase. Was this how the members of Led Zeppelin felt?

It took a while before he was alone again, and in that time he'd circled all the way back to the venue's far side and had found himself severely out of breath. He couldn't see Tomny, nor had he spotted him again while eluding his—*fans? Admirers? Insane groupies?*

"Shit."

Remus covered his face with his hands. He might've started crying out of sheer frustration, had a hand not come out of nowhere and slammed itself up against the back of his head. After practically face-planting into the dirty pavement, Remus spun around expecting a fight. But then—

"Yer lucky… That was my left."

For a moment Remus thought he was going out of his mind. A chill came over him.

"Tom?" He echoed, breathlessly. "You… What're you doing here?"

Tomny did not smile at him. Instead he crossed his arms over his chest, looking more irritated to be dealing with Remus' shit again than anything else. The skin beneath his left eye was yellow like the leftover remnants of a black eye, and there was a split in his top lip that had scabbed over. His old scar had opened up again.

"Came to see the show, ain't it obvious?"

"Yeah, but... why? How'd you know?"

It was that boyfriend 'a yers," Tomny said. "Sent me a ticket."

"Sirius…? You're saying Sirius sent you a ticket?"

"Innit." Tomny glanced up at the stone wall that led almost fifty feet up to the Roundhouses' roof; "His note said you were getting up to sumffin big. Gotta be honest though, didn't expect it to be this big... Shit, you're like a real rock star now."

Remus felt his ears begin to burn. "We're not making any money from it," he mumbled, "it was just something we did to see if we could get a

record deal."

"Well? Did you?"

"Er… Yeah. Yeah, I think so."

"Good. Reckon any bastard who tells you no would've have to be fucking deaf."

It was nice; nicer than he deserved. Remus felt his resolve begin to crumble again. Tomny must've seen it in his face, as he immediately waved a hand through the air.

"Nah, none 'a that weepy shit. I didn't come to watch you blubber."

Remus wiped his face, embarrassed. "Then why—" He cleared the whine from his voice. "Why did you come?"

Tomny pressed his hands into his back pockets, sucking on the inside of his cheek.

"I guess… because I missed my best friend."

There was no stopping the tears then.

"Augh!" Tomny moaned, tipping his head back as Remus furiously scrubbed at his eyes and cheeks. "Stop it! 'Ere, enough—cut it out."

He thumped him again, upside the head and again on the chest.

"Don't!" Remus moaned, embarrassed. "Piss off."

"Make me, ya little shit."

Another smack, this time across the face. Remus shoved his hands away.

"Stop it!"

"And jus' what you gon' do 'bout it, princess?"

Tomny hit him again, and this time Remus came back with a swing of his own. He cleared the air before his nose, but Tomny was too busy gloating at the near-miss to notice the second set of knuckles heading straight for his jaw. It landed with a crack of teeth and Remus felt a small twinge of satisfaction, which only lasted about as long as it took for Tomny to recover and drive his fist into his stomach. From there it

became a test of endurance, with both of them grappling for each other's middle. They nearly had each other on the ground by the time the cop car pulled up and flashed its lights.

Tomny hauled him up; "Shit—go!" And together they took off down the street.

They ran until they'd made it around the corner of nearby Regent's Park Road, where cars zipped through the intersection and people continued to pass them with no interest or inclination of who they were.

"Yeah... Yeah, I needed that," Tomny panted, half-collapsing into the graffiti-coated brick. Remus followed, leaning his back up against the mucky wall and breathing hard. He pressed a hand against his rib cage and the gesture alone forced out a groan that left Tomny chuckling in amusement.

"Did I hurt you, hot stuff? You used to be able to hold your own when we were kids."

"I've been going through it a bit lately, if you must know," Remus grunted. "Hurt myself falling off the edge of *your* old balcony, right."

"Is that supposed to be you bragging?"

"Fuck off, Tom."

There was little bite in it, and Tomny just ended up chuckling again as a cab motored past, flashing them with its headlamps.

"Stupid sod… What'd you go back there for?"

Remus found a crack in the pavement to glare at. "You. What else?"

Tomny pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek.

"And uhm—Lee, did he…"

"He threatened to kill me." *And not for the first time.*

"Shit." With a haggard sigh, Tomny ran one hand through his hair. "Look, if I had'a known you'd go back there then I would've—"

"What, picked up the phone?"

"You act like you were burning a hole in the phone-box."

“Well, I was doing more than you, wasn’t I?”

This one did have bite, for which Remus was instantly sorry for. They both hung their heads—guilty—and eventually Tomny pulled a box of cigarettes from his pocket. He offered them to Remus first, who accepted only to place the cigarette behind one ear. Tomny didn't say anything.

“Skylar came by our place last month."

“Oh, aye?”

“She couldn’t find you.”

“That was sort of the idea.”

Setting a cigarette between his lips, Tomny began fumbling with his lighter. It only sparked, and finally Remus reached over and took the lighter. The flame caught a second later, and Remus capped the lighter with a crisp *clink*.

Tomny inhaled. “I ain’t proud.” Exhale. “Ran out on my girl when she was days away from having a baby, didn't I.”

Remus fiddled with the lighter, sheepish. “Where'd you go?”

“Oh, you know… Hung around.”

“And is that how you got all this?” Remus gestured to the black eye and the fat lip.

“Huh? Oh, nah. Got that when I went to visit Mum.”

“Your mum?”

“Mhm. She’s got herself a boyfriend, I guess… Fat ugly prick.”

Remus was astonished. “I don’t get it. You never talk about your mum. I didn't even know you found her.”

“Wasn't hard. She was still out in Plaistow, jus’ like I thought.” Tomny chuckled humourlessly. “Guess I’d somehow gotten it into my head that she should know about the baby, right? Shit, had this whole plan… She didn’t want to see me though. Jus’ took a sec to figure that bit out.”

"Jesus, Tomny... Why didn’t you just go home?”

Tomny pulled the cigarette from his lips. All they had in the way of light was a single buzzing street lamp, but even then Remus didn't miss the way his bottom lip quivered.

"I dunno, Lu. I just don't know..."

Remus was grateful for the dark street when he pulled Tomny in by the head, hiding whatever frustrated tears he may be shedding into his shoulder. He wasn't expecting Tomny to cry, much less hug him back, but his arms were fierce as he lashed them around his back.

"I fucked up, Lu."

"S'okay, Tom."

"I should never have left, innit... Now m'a piece of shit, jus' like my ol' man."

"That's not true. You went back. Skylar called me."

There was a pathetic snivel. "Had to, didn't I? S'my kid…"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is."

Tomny squeezed even tighter, and with an ache in his ribs, Remus' eyes turned downwards. Eventually he spotted the still burning cigarette now lying abandoned on the cement.

"Tom… You know I'm proud of you, right?"

Seconds ticked by, and slowly Tomny released him, keeping just one hand on his shoulder. Remus matched it, fisting him by the shirt.

"I'm sorry for what I said before," he told him. "I'm sorry to you, and to Skylar. I'm sorry that I'll never understand what it's like. And I'm sorry for ever looking down on you. Even—Christ… even when I didn't mean to. No—*especially* then. I was supposed to have your back, and I let you down."

"Shaddup."

"No," Remus insisted. "I fucked up, right? I was a proper cunt to you and Sky. But I swear, Tom... I've never been anything less than proud to call you my friend."

It was the honest truth. When he was a kid, Remus had bragged to anyone that'd listen how cool and amazing his friend was. He didn't

know when that had changed, and he was sorry for pissing off when Tomny had clearly needed him the most.

"You're a sop," Tomny told him. "And you ain't my friend."

Remus dropped his eyes.

"You're my brother."

The weight coming off of his shoulders was indescribable. Remus made a noise like he'd been punched again, and Tomny compensated by tapping him fondly on the cheek.

"I have sumffin for ya," he said, reaching into his front pocket. The 'something' in question was small, silver in colour and about the size of a poker chip. Remus nearly dropped it when Tomny flicked it toward the centre of his chest. He held it up to the light.

" 'To thine own self be true'," he mumbled aloud. "Twenty-four hours."

"S'been a bit longer than that." Tomny smiled bashfully. "Few more days and it'll be a month. Not a single hit in all that time—I promised Sky. It was the only way she'd agree to let me back in the house."

"She must've really changed you then. You never did well with ultimatums."

"You should talk."

Remus chuckled, passing the sobriety token back; "I'm proud of you," he said again, meaning it. It earned him a smile as Tomny returned the chip to his pocket. Nearby a series of honks drew Remus' attention. He wondered what time it was and if his friends were still waiting for him. And Sirius… He'd sent Tomny the ticket. So much good in his life, and he had Sirius to thank for it.

"There's one more thing, Lu," Tomny said, drawing Remus' attention back. He had something in his hand again. It was a photograph.

"Jus' thought you'd like to see your goddaughter."

At less than a day old, the baby in the photo had a face like a potato, with a gummy mouth and the faint wisps of fair hair coming out of the top of her ill-shapen head. Remus could have counted every baby he'd come into close contact with in his full nineteen years on one

hand. Seeing her—photo alone—he was absolutely bricking it.

“She… Holy shit. She’s… beautiful, Tom.”

“Eh, looks a bit like a smushed pumpkin to me,” Tomny said. “Don’t lie! I can see you thinking it too. Skylar damn near kicked me out of the delivery room for saying the same, but it’s the truth.”

“No, no,” Remus laughed, creasing up all over. “She’s beautiful, really. Reckon she’s got Skylar’s eyes.”

“You think? I sorta thought she had mine.” Tomny sighed mockingly. "Doesn't look all smushed now though. She was born back in April. April twenty-second, at nine-oh-nine in the morning... Most mental day of my life—just about hit the floor seeing her come out."

"Shit. Don't blame you."

"We named her Emma too. Emma Louise.”

“That’s a nice name.”

“Yeah, Sky wanted something simple, innit." Tomny pressed his hands into his pocket, looking almost nervous. "She was pretty set on Emma early on, but I… *mayyyy* … have told her a lil' sumfin about my favourite ‘Great Aunt Louisa’...? 'Bout how she made *such* a difference in my life, and how I *always swore* I’d name my first kid after her... Mm? Yeah, it was good though, she was totally sold after that.”

He should've caught on; Tomny was all but giving him the elbow and sly wink. As it was, Remus just turned the photo over. “I didn’t know you had a great aunt.”

Tomny smacked him over the head.

“Ow—!?”

“Honestly, for someone as smart as you, you sure are thick!”

“Right, so why d'ya hit me?”

“I don’t *have* a Great Aunt Lou-i–*zah*, you toff. Are you really gonna make me spell it out for you?”

It probably took longer than it should’ve, but slowly Remus began putting two and two together; Louisa... Louise... Louis... *Lou*—

“You’re shitting me.”

Tomny ran his tongue along grinning teeth. Standing across from him in disbelief, Remus smacked him in the chest.

“You actually lied to your pregnant girlfriend about some fake great aunt just so you could name your kid after… *After*—”

“If you said anything I’d deny it.” Tomny gave him a long look, and Remus felt himself soften.

“Look, Lu, I don’t got a dad to name no kids after. And I ain’t naming ‘em fucking ‘Thonas’, that’s for sure. You’re all I got… You're all I want. And now I reckon yer in it for life, sucker.”

"For life?"

"Innit."

Remus could have cried.

“Will you come back with me?” He asked. “I think the others would like to hear the good news.”

Tomny shrugged, hands in his pockets. “Eh, why not. Skylar’s already gonna take my balls just for being out so late—Emma’s a shite sleeper. What’s a few more hours?”

Endlessly pleased, Remus turned and together they began making their way back up the dark street. The pavement had since cleared out for the most part, but he doubted anyone would have recognised him as a Marauder now. The smile on his face was much too sappy.

“You can keep that one by the way,” Tomny said, gesturing to the small four-by-four photograph Remus was still clutching in his hand. “And you should come and visit. Sky’s invited you over and Emma—she deserves to meet her godfather.”

Suddenly Remus was bricking it again.

“Fuck. You know, it actually sounds mental when you say it like that.”

“You think that’s bad? Try *Dad.*”

* * *

Remus knew they were in for it the moment James had appeared downstairs with his hair combed. They'd all woken up on time that morning on time, and had even spent breakfast going over a game plan of what to do should Spectre decide he wasn't interested in signing them after all. (This mostly involved telling the award-winning producer where he could stick his gold records and slamming the door on their way out.) But however well-prepared they felt, it was hard to predict one's van breaking down in the middle of one of the biggest thoroughfares in London.

"Switch gears, Pete! Switch gears!"

"I'm bloody trying, Potter!"

"Come on, Minnie. Hang in there, old girl!"

The van gave a lurch, shooting forward like a hoover that'd sucked up its own cord. Remus knew they'd been in trouble ever since Paddington when the engine had started acting up every time Peter pushed it over thirty miles per hour. Spectre's office was in Barnsbury and now only a few short minutes away by car, but they'd gotten cocky with how much extra time they'd had—dawdling by the front door like they were The Rolling Stones and it was written into their contract to be fashionably late for everything.

"I told you we shouldn't have stopped for those bloody sausage rolls!" James wailed, as the van's engine gave yet another jarring shriek.

"They were having a two-for-one!" Sirius shouted back, offended.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Peter lowered the van into first and let it putter along like a dying animal as other frustrated drivers on their way to work honked and swerved to get around them. Finally there was no use for it anymore, and they were forced to admit defeat after the van sputtered and died just two streets over from King's Cross.

"This is just great!" Sirius hollered, after James had opened the van's rear-engine cover and was hit in the face with a cloud of grey smoke. "The *one time* we let Pettigrew drive, and the van keels over in the middle of the road!"

"Me?" Peter snarled. "Why's it always my fault—Moony's the one who

bought the damn thing!"

Standing further up the pavement, Remus fit a cigarette in his mouth; "I suppose this isn't a good time to play the 'Lily made me do it' card."

James shut the engine cover with a sigh, standing up and dusting his hands off on his trousers. "Well, lads, guess we're walking."

"How long's that supposed to take?" Asked Peter.

In answer, Sirius reached out to a passing man, who'd stopped to let his terrier piss on a nearby tree.

"North Barnsbury, huh?" He echoed, scratching beneath his flat cap; "Well, you're not far, lads. It's only about a mile's walk from 'ere."

"A *mile?*"

"Give or take. Should only take you about twenty minutes."

They all glanced at James, who'd pulled back his jacket sleeve to check his watch.

"We have fourteen minutes."

Shit.

"How is it we're always fucking late?!" Peter moaned, as they each broke off into a sprint.

It was not an easy sprint. James, naturally, had no problem, and Sirius' one-track mind helped him forget about the fact that he'd done little else besides smoke and drink for the last eleven months, but along with Peter, Remus eventually began to lag behind. His lungs were on fire before they'd even made it over Regent's Canal, and he was only now discovering that the right heel of his trainer was not fully attached to the bottom of its sole. They made it with scarecely a minute to spare, and James stopped long enough to thump a palm on both Remus and Peter's backs as they approached the front doors of the building.

"Hang in there, lads," he said. Sirius, meanwhile, wasted no time. He was giving their name to the lobby's secretary when one of the elevator doors dinged from across the lobby, and out stepped Gideon Prewett in another one of his fancy Italian suits.

"Ah, smashing—you're here! Was starting to wonder if you were

gonna stand us up."

"Sorry. Van broke down," James said.

Gideon caught on as he glanced between their sweaty faces. "So, you —what, ran here?"

His answer was another ragged wheeze from Remus, and suddenly Gideon was grinning as he herded them into the lift.

"Gaz was really impressed with what he saw at the Roundhouse show," he said, leading them down the long hallway on the top floor. A young secretary leapt into an open doorway just to avoid them, arms full of folder stacks. She puckered sheepishly when Gideon smiled at her, before glancing back to the rest of them.

"I was my brother Fabian who passed your tape along first, you know," he went on. "I thought you sounded like a bunch of Zeppelin wannabes, but he was the one to convince Gaz and I to keep listening."

"So why aren't we here, thanking him?" Sirius drawled.

"Oh, you will be. He's in the meeting. I handle the talent while Fab handles the finances. We're a package deal, see, so do me a favour and try not to piss him off. He's the one who makes sure you all get paid."

The Marauders shared a giddy look. Paid for their music? That'd be the day.

Following closely on the music manager's heels, Remus was surprised when the office with the rock stars' portraits hanging on the wall turned up empty. "Gaz likes to get everyone out of the office when he's meeting with new talent," Gideon explained, gesturing to the empty typewriter desks. "Thinks all the extra noise can be off-putting."

"You should tell him to check in with his staff sometime too," Remus grumbled, still able to recall the rude guy they'd handed their demo tape off too.

Stopping before the door labelled gold with the words 'Gaz Spectre', Gideon knocked once and let them inside. It was a nice office, with deep leather furniture and glass covered bookcases bearing photographs and various awards and accolades. It wasn't as flashy as Remus had been expecting, though admittedly his experience with

real music producers was rather null. Fletcher had been putting on an act, and they, in their own naivety, had fallen for it. Gaz Spectre didn't need an act, what he needed was fresh talent, and if Marauders didn't live up to every bit of that expectation then they'd quickly be finding themselves put out on their rears all over again.

"Well," Spectre mused sarcastically, as the four of them trotted in after Gideon, "if it ain't my favourite group of phenomenons."

He was sitting behind a tall desk, rocked back in his leather armchair with a fat cigar balanced between two fingers. His suit was crisp and there were smatterings of grey at his temples, though his moustache and goatee were decidedly black. He could've dyed it to look younger, Remus thought snidely. Behind Spectre, a man who looked almost identical to Gideon save for the closely-shorn way he wore his hair, was leaning up against a bar cart with an empty glass in his hand.

"Gaz," Gideon started, as he began gesturing to the rest of them; "This is Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, James Potter, and Sirius Black. Lads, this is Gaz Spectre, founder of Spectre Records. That there is my brother, Fab."

Spectre nodded at them, while Fabian stood up from the bar cart and poured a generous amount of liquor into the empty tumbler, setting it next to Spectre's ashtray.

"Bourbon?" He offered, raising the decanter. They each nodded timidly, and Fabian went around pouring them a drink. Spectre still hadn't acknowledged his own, and so the Marauders glanced dubiously at one another, wondering if now was the right time to drink.

"Well?" Spectre raised his cigar. "You gonna sit or not?"

They rushed to obey, squeezing themselves into the leather sofa across from the desk. Sirius sat beside them in the remaining armchair, tapping the rim of his bourbon glass with one finger. Remus knew it was an anxious gesture, but Sirius was doing a pretty good job of masking his unease.

"You certainly don't look like today's average rock stars, I'll give you that," said Gaz. "You look about ten years too late."

"Or more," said Fabian.

"You mean you think we're... too old?" James asked.

"Not old—over. I'm calling you over. Finished. Ca-put. You look like you're waiting for the next great Woodstock, and I'm fresh out 'a hippies."

The comments made each of the Marauders look down at themselves. Hardly a cause for alarm, Sirius appeared much the same as he always did in his leather jacket and motorcycle boots, while James looked like an Indian John Lennon with his gelled-up hair and round glasses. Peter had opted for a coat Moira had gotten him as well as a bootlace tie; distinctly un-rock unless you were riding a moped and listening to skiffle. Not used to paying any attention to what he was wearing, Remus had dressed himself little more than a jean jacket and dark trousers, and—as he was now realising—had come out looking like the guy that sold newspapers on the corner.

“Don’t worry, we'd look better on an album cover,” Sirius said, earning himself a short chuckle from Gideon. As Spectre turned to look at him, Gideon leaned over James’ shoulder from behind the sofa and pointed down the line at each of them.

“I promised you rock, Gaz. And you saw it for yourself—these boys can deliver.”

“They can put on a half-decent show, sure,” Spectre nodded, “but that don’t mean they can sell out a stadium.”

“Who do you know who’s selling out stadiums in the beginning?” Peter asked. “The Beatles—”

“Sold over three-hundred million units before you were done wiping your nose, shortstack.”

“The Beatles had no competition,” said James. “The radios were too racist to play anything more than Liverpudlian pop—of course they came out on top.”

“Got something against scousers, kid?”

“No. My girlfriend’s from Liverpool.”

Remarkably, Spectre smiled. Then he pointed at Remus with his cigar and Remus felt his stomach drop.

“You know, when this one flagged me down in the street I thought to myself, ‘here we go, another fucking idiot who thinks his dreams are worth more than the piss on the pavement’. So colour me surprised

when Fab, here, played me his tape. Got me thinking to myself, ‘holy shit, maybe he is worth more than the piss’.”

“Generous of you,” Remus mumbled, making Sirius snigger into his palm.

“So they’re clever—so they’re wily—big whoop. Rock’s a liability nowadays, lads. Everyone wants pop, and people ain’t just buying records ‘cause they like the way the music sounds anymore. Now you gotta appear to their ‘wider senses’. You need a show in everything—in the way you dress, drink, and act. If you ain’t covering yourself in shiny little sequins like you're Gary Glitter then they don't want 'cha."

"I don't think that's true," Sirius said boldly. "The Who spent all their time smashing up instruments and Ozzy just covered himself in blood. People still wanted them."

"Aren't you listening, spanner? Those guys are old. They've already secured their success. What do *you* have?"

"Heart," Peter said.

Remus could see it on Spectre's face; *'Heart'? You've got to be joking me.*

"What more do you need than heart?" Sirius said in Peter's defence. "Real bands—real people have heart. You can't put heart into a button you press on a synthesiser. The people know it, they've just forgotten. They don’t know what it is they should be wanting anymore, and it’s *our* job to show ‘em. So you're right, Ozzy is old. Guys like him don't know what it’s like to be just another face in the crowd anymore.”

“And you do?”

“Sure, we do. Joe Strummer once offered to let Lupin use his toilet after we snuck backstage.”

James reached over and smacked Remus on the arm—“*WHAT?”*—and Remus waved him off.

“If rock’s so over," he said, "then why’d you invite us here?”

No one said anything at first. Spectre had begun sucking on the end of his cigar. Finally he nodded at Gideon, who leaned over the back of the leather sofa with a delighted sort of grin on his face.

“How’d you four like to go on tour… in America?”

The Marauders' jaws dropped. Looking at each other, they might as well have popped another bottle of champagne.

"For real?" Echoed James. "You're not just making this up?"

"Have you never heard of America, mate?"

James gripped the chair arm next to him, while Peter leaned over and began smacking Remus enthusiastically on the thigh. Sirius had gone very quiet.

"I'll admit it is a bit backwards," Spectre said, dabbing his cigar in the ashtray. "Normally we'd put you up for more shows while we work on getting a single out onto the radio. Then we'd see about a local tour, get you out at the universities, maybe a few shows up north to drum up interest in wider places, but it's like I said—rock's a risk. New rock, anyway. Ain't enough to just throw money at an album—that's a waste. And I ain't in the business of waste."

"So…?" Remus urged.

"So instead we flip the script. I've got a band over in Nevada that needs an opener for their latest tour and I think you're the best ones to do it. Meanwhile, we'll get your demo pressed as an EP—those we'll distribute strictly to the radio stations. See if we can't drum up enough interest for an album... You should know that Warner Brothers just did the same thing for Van Halen last year, so if you sorry sods can do enough to leave those fans foaming at the mouth and racing back to the charts, then I'll put you on a three album contract."

James was practically leaping out of his seat. "Three albums?!" He exclaimed, clasping Gideon by the hand. "You're lying."

"Good news, right?" Gideon grinned.

"Try blinding!"

But then, like an impudent devil on their shoulder, Sirius stopped tapping his bourbon glass.

"And then?"

Everyone whirled on him. Spectre merely scoffed.

"Whatchu mean 'and then'?"

"I mean, what happens when we blow Van Halen and your ruddy little

Las Vegas band out of the water? 'Cause we'll want more. Reckon *you'll* want more, Gaz."

The corners of Spectre's moustache quirked. "Are you trying to sell yourself into slavery, kid?"

"Not at all." Sirius leaned forward on his knees. "Just trying to show you what a real phenomenon looks like." Sirius glanced sideways at his friends and winked. Then he lened forward and placed both hands on his knees.

"We want the Garden."

The words seemed to hang in the air.

" 'The Garden'?" Fabian echoed. "You mean you want to play *Madison* Square Garden?"

"That's right. In three years."

"*Th*—! Three years...?"

Sirius shrugged. "Or less. Depends on how well you market us, I suppose."

Gaz tapped the tip of his cigar into the ashtray. "That's bold. In this business 'bold' means risky."

"What's a phenomenon without a little risk?"

Fabian pinched his forehead. "Do you know how few bands make it to a mid-level stadium? What you're talking about is a *coliseum*—built for twenty *thousand* people."

"Is that all? Best to put us down for three nights then."

The Marauders all stifled their laughter. They may have been used to Sirius' blithe conviction, but it was clear the music producers were not. Luckily they had Gideon on their side.

"Alright, cheeky," he said, "Prove to us you can work a crowd in Denver, and maybe then we'll talk about booking you into the most famous music venue in the world."

Sirius and Gideon knocked knuckles, and afterwards they all turned to look at Fabian, who was measuring their frontman up for all he was worth. Then he gestured to James.

"*You*—Potter. Ever tried contact lenses?"

"Uh… no."

"We'll get you some for the tour. Rock stars don't wear glasses."

James scratched the back of his neck. "Seems a bit ableist but alright…"

"Lily loves those glasses on you," Peter remarked kindly, just as Gideon strolled forward and clapped his hands.

"There's this little saying we have in the industry, lads. 'We want the *girls* in the audience to want to be with the *boys* in the band, and we want the *guys* in the audience to want to *be* in the band'. Can't do that if you're up there looking like Elton John."

"Ha!" Sirius crowed. "Elton John wishes he looked this good."

Eventually they'd all settled back down into their chairs, and Spectre finally raised his long-forgotten drink. "The British Invasion's over, lads," he declared, "you've missed the final charge. All we've got left 'round here is born-again punks and crappy heart-less synthesisers. I'm afraid America's all that's left for you now."

In answer, Sirius raised his glass. "Well then, let's bring on the yanks."

They stumbled back out onto the city pavement with the shock of Spectre's offer still buzzing in their ears. *You leave in a month,* he'd told them, *wrap up any other business before then, and Jesus-fuck, find yourselves something else to wear. American girls are different from English women, they care what your clothes look like before they start ripping 'em off.*

"Did that really just happen?" Peter demanded, as a London tour bus drove past and several tourists leaned out its windows to snap photos of them. As the bus drove off, Sirius wrapped a hand around Peter's neck to pull him upright, and slapped him passionately round the middle.

"Yes, my dear Wormy—you just got signed to one of the biggest record labels in the entire country! Time to pack your bags and kiss your mummy goodbye, mate!"

They continued to celebrate, whooping at every bewildered pedestrian who happened to toddle past. James, meanwhile, had moved further

up the pavement and was staring very intently into a sewer grate.

“Potter?” Remus shuffled forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Potter, are you alright?”

James looked up at him. “Peachy. Just wanted to get a good wiff.”

“Wiff of what?”

“Our shit. ‘Cause it don’t stink no more.”

“I really hope that was meant to be an attempt at a lame joke.”

James’ face split into a grin, and he took hold of Remus’ shoulder in return, just as Sirius and Peter came skipping over. “We did it, didn't we? We actually fucking did it.”

“We did!”

“Holy shit... We did it!”

“Better call Evans.”

James rocked back on his heels in disbelief. Then he threw himself skyward in a single great leap.

“PACK IT IN, BOYS!" He hollered at the sun, "*‘CAUSE WE’RE GOING TO AMERICA!”*

Chapter End Notes

'Chockablock' means crammed full with something.
'Sounds' was a music magazine that would've been read by fans of the era.
A 'cab fund' is just an account of extra money to be used by the band (usually on drugs, lol).
'Bricking it' means you're so scared you're crapping your pants.
An 'EP' is short for 'extended play'; shorter than a full album, with more songs than a single.
Also Modern English is indeed a real band.

Sorry to have to go back on my word but the final chapter won't be out until Feb 20th! A few days after that I plan to release the tiny epilogue (chapter 108) so please be on the look out for that ＜3 I also have plans to take a complete break from fic and social

media once Cadence is completed, but I'll be answering questions about Part 2 and other projects on tumblr for a short while afterwards. Hit me up there if you have questions. (Preferably not - 'omg who ends up with who' tho 😂)

Thank you for coming this far with me. We're in the home stretch!

Chapter 107: Son

Chapter Summary

Well folks, we're ending like we began.

With a series of goodbyes.

Chapter Notes

C/W for this chapter: Discussions of past childhood trauma. It's a hard convo, but it's for the better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Down at the Astoria the scene was changing,
Bingo and rock were pushing out x-rating;
We were the first band to vomit in the bar,
And find the distance to the stage too far;

Meanwhile it's getting late at ten o'clock,
Rock is dead they say—
Long live rock!

- "Long Live Rock" The Who, 1974

Friday June 22nd 1979

"Moony! Oi, Moony…? Hell, you even up there?"

Remus grunted back;

"Be down in a sec."

There was no need. Sirius came swinging around the bedroom doorway a second later, looking rather outrageous in a velvet-collared frock coat. Seeing him, Remus chuffed lightly.

"You know, most people wait until they've gotten a couple albums out before they start dressing like a gender-queer pirate."

"Is that so? Well, then I feel the need to inform you that most people also wait until their late sixties to start wearing those jumpers with

the patches 'round the elbows."

Remus looked down at himself. "Lily said it looked smart. For the party."

"You can take advice from Evans on many things," Sirius sighed, "but *fashion* is not one of them."

Because he couldn't be bothered, Remus returned his gaze to what he'd been looking at, while Sirius flounced further into the room. “Are you coming then?” He asked, busy fiddling with the cuffs. “Effie’s gonna have our necks if we’re late to our own going away party.”

“Yeah, m'coming…”

Sirius turned his nose up, curious. “Go on then. What’s it you’re looking at?”

There was no need to feel shy. It was only Sirius.

Remus held out the photograph. It was the same one Sandra had given him at the start of last summer; the black and white picture of himself and Hope sitting together on the estate’s parlour floor. The memory had been standing idle on the top of their wardrobe for months now, and Remus had never paid it much attention. Like the old white trunk he'd hauled to school every year, it was enough to just have her nearby. Now that they were going away, his mind had begun to wander.

"I get nervous when you act sentimental," Sirius said. "Usually it means you've done something wrong."

"That is a gross exaggeration."

The corners of Sirius' mouth quirked up and he came to sit next to Remus on their bed. Without asking, he draped both legs over Remus’ lap, sitting upright so that he could meticulously pick a finger through the curls in Remus’ fringe.

“It’s a good photo,” he hummed, peering down at it kindly. “Your mum was proper lush, yeah?”

“Shut up.”

"What?"

"That's my *mum*."

"Yeah? Well, I'd have still chatted her up. Bet Potter would too… If she were ginger, that is."

Remus turned to him, nose scrunched. "That's enough out of you."

"Shut me up for real then."

Remus didn't need to. Before he could say anything else, Sirius was leaning in to kiss him. It lasted a good while, with Sirius' hands clasped tightly around the sides of his neck, fingers tangled in that silver chain. It was ironic; in every other sense Sirius was electric. He could light up a room with less than a smile—shock you like the unexpected flash of lightning—and yet most of the time, it felt like he was the only thing keeping Remus grounded on earth. He was that rod that kept the rest of him from just... burning up. If it weren't for Sirius, Remus Lupin would've gone up in smoke ages ago. There'd be nothing left save for maybe a few scorch marks on a chair.

"Oh, Moony," Sirius whispered as he stroked his face and hair, "Moony, Moony, my mooning Moony... What's got you feeling so melancholy then, hey? Is it the tour... Mhm... We leave in a few days. Thought you'd be excited."

Leaning away, Remus paused to pick a hair from his mouth—Sirius'.

"It's not that," he mumbled, flicking it away. "Was just thinking."

"Aw. Don't leave us in suspense."

He shook his head. "It's stupid. I was only wondering if… Well, if she'd ever left the country before. Or, hell—been on a plane."

"You mean you don't know?"

The question came out deadpan, and Sirius winced in apology;

"Sorry, dumb question." He cleared his throat. "Couldn't you just—I dunno, ask Giles or something?"

Remus set the photograph back on their set of drawers. He was embarrassed and so he began picking at a hangnail. "Nah, not really. He's sorta weird about it... Reckon he thinks talking about her will upset me. He's probably just afraid I'll turn out like her or something."

"Lush?"

Remus gave him a stern look. "*Crazy*."

“Oh. Well, I can deal with crazy,” Sirius said, matter-of-factly. “Just don’t start pulling out all your teeth or anything. A guy's got his limits.”

Scoffing, Remus shoved Sirius’ legs off so he could turn himself over, and just like that—had him pressed against the bed. Sirius laughed when his head hit the pillows, and Remus bore down on him with a hand on either side of his head.

“You're saying you wouldn’t love me without teeth, Padfoot?”

“Don’t get all offended, Moons. I wouldn’t love *me* without teeth.” Sirius smiled and traced his tongue across his front teeth for emphasis.

"And just what happens when we’re old then? When everything starts falling out on its own?”

“I’ll expect you to glue them back in.”

"Right. 'Course."

The bed creaked as Sirius raised both legs and wrapped them around Remus' middle. Remus took hold of a large chunk of Sirius' hair, pinning it to the pillow as if to say, *what do you think you're doing?* Clearly unbothered, Sirius squeezed with either thigh while simultaneously tracing a hand up the side of Remus' neck. He finally stopped with one thumb pressed against his bottom lip, and Remus felt a breath lodge itself in his throat.

Sirius licked his lips. “God, you’re lush too, aren’t you?”

“Enough. Say ‘lush’ one more time and I’ll—”

“Hush,” he cooed, already pressing the thumb past Remus' lips, laying it against the flat of his tongue. “Keep it a surprise. You know I just *love* surprises.”

Remus bit down on Sirius’ knuckle, before pulling back and kissing along the inside of his wrist.

“*You*… You drive me mad, Sirius Black.”

Sirius' lips parted. "Well, in that case..." There was a sudden series of grunts—mostly from Remus—as Sirius pushed up by the shoulders and flipped them over so that he was on top. “—Let's drive to Fiji! Screw the tour, we'll just tell he others to fuck off."

There was no time to formulate a plan of escape. The two had only just begun kissing again when a knock echoed from the corner of the room. The bedroom door was still ajar but rather than walking straight in unannounced, a hand waved itself through the open doorway like a white flag of surrender.

James Potter, it seemed, was finally learning.

“Not that I don’t totally love that cheeky feeling of deja vu, but it’s almost seven o’clock, so could you two please get those randy arses of yours in the car? We're going to be late...”

An hour later, they pulled up to Potter Cottage to find a small line of parked cars waiting out front. Every light in the house was on, and Mr. Potter's front garden was in full bloom. They were met at the door by Mrs. Potter, who smiled as she kissed James and Sirius on either cheek.

“*Arey*, Remus, *beta,* you get taller every time I see you," she said, after settling on a warm hug. "Oh, Lily—come here, darling… And Peterbird, you’ve brought Moira! Welcome, welcome. *Jai shri Krishna*. Come inside, all of you. Everyone’s waiting… And we have such wonderful news to celebrate!”

Fashionably late for their own party, the Marauders walked inside to find a sea of family and friends waiting for them. Marlene and Dorcas were there, along with Lottie and Roger, fresh off their Spanish honeymoon. Simeon was even chatting up Mary in the salon; only Mr. Pettigrew had stayed away, leaving his wife to make excuses for how he was needed in the office that evening. No one bought it, but Peter had put on a brave face anyway, somehow determined to make the most of his good news despite his father’s disapproval.

Effie had pulled out all the stops in her cooking, having converted the dining room into a massive buffet-style spread of all the quintessentially British foods they'd be missing while abroad. "I hope you boys brought your appetites," she said, while loading Remus' plate up with several layers of wellington and chicken biryani. "Mind the raita now, and make sure you leave space for pudding! Jenny's made Banoffee pie."

It was grand. Not to be outdone, Lottie had even found the time to have shirts made, which the girls and Mr. Potter sported around the house gladly. On their front was a large red ‘M’ surrounded in the same tiny footprints Peter had hidden in their band poster, and on the

back—*Marauders' first American (back up) Tour '79*.

"Kinda bummed I didn't get one," Simeon said, observing the girls from his spot along the parlour wall. Remus was with him, having stuffed himself to the bursting point with supper. Now he was just trying not to feel nauseous every time he glanced at the heaping trays of canapés still scattered about the room.

"Lottie did say that she had a few more in the boot of Roger's car," he said, after burping quietly into his fist.

"Did she? I'll have to snag Rog's keys." Simeon smirked into his glass of champagne. "All packed then, Lupin?"

"Mostly. I don't have a lot of clothes. Probably for the best... Sirius keeps sneaking things into my bag."

"Ah. And I suppose this means you officially don't have any plans for university then?"

"Not in this lifetime."

"You sound smug."

Remus shrugged, swallowing the nausea and feeling *smug* indeed. "This your attempt to talk us out of it then?"

"Me? Never." Simeon finished his champagne, 'ah-ing' the way people often did when they were working themselves up for some big reveal. "Don't tell Peter, but you four have got me feeling particularly inspired these recent months."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means..." And Simeon tilted his face toward Remus'. "That I'm dropping out."

'Surprised' wasn't quite the word to describe it.

"You're dropping out of Oxford?" Remus echoed, careful not to let anyone overhear; "*Christ*—why?"

"Didn't I just say? 'Cause of *you*." Smirking, Simeon set his glass down on an empty canapé plate. "I haven't told anyone apart from you, to be honest. Might just not... I'm sure my parents would prefer thinking I was living neat out in Oxfordshire anyway, going to school like a good little boy."

"And where is it you'll really be?"

"Just New York."

"Wow."

He shrugged like it was nothing. "A friend of mine's a photographer. Anyway, he knows a guy who works for some fancy scouting agency over in America. He sent him my photos, and now his boss wants me to meet them in New York."

"To what, like—be a model or something?"

"Think I couldn't?"

Remus looked him up and down, skeptical, then; "Er... Never mind."

"Ah, Lupin, you always were a charmer. Here, hold on." Slipping away for just a moment, Simeon returned with two beers; one he handed to Remus before knocking their rims together. "You can blame Sirius," he said, going in for a swig. "He gave me the idea actually—something he mentioned at the wedding. Figured he was taking the piss, but since he usually has such great ideas, I just thought that—*well*."

"You think your parents are gonna like it?"

"Oh, not a chance! But they've got Lottie, she'll make 'em proud. And hey, Petey will too, in his own way… I'm glad he's blazing a trail with you though. Makes me feel a bit braver." Simeon leaned back into the wall, his blonde hair offsetting the dark wallpaper. "I dunno, Lupin... It's like, I used to think that it was enough to just be clever, right? By an average bloke's standards, a clever mouth might as well make you extraordinary. But here I am, all clever mouth and still just... ordinary."

"We never thought you were ordinary," Remus said. "Not for a second."

"Aw. That's sweet."

"Dick." Remus kicked him lightly on the shin, and Simeon's eyes began to wander.

"Hey, Sim?"

"Mm?"

"You should know that Peter—" Remus hesitated, before sighing. "Look, I know he's never really said it or anything, and the two of you have this—I dunno, weird brotherly-rivalry thing going on that I'll never understand, but he looks up to you, Sim—*really*."

"You think?"

Remus shrugged. "Well... Yeah. Reckon all he's ever wanted was to be you actually."

Simeon chuckled. "And look at us now, Lupin."

Together, the pair of them glanced across the room in the direction of where Peter and Moira were sitting tight on one of the lounges. It felt wistful, maybe, but at least Simeon smiled, and afterwards knocked the tip of his shoe into Remus' ankle.

“Thank you by the way, Lupin. For always keeping my secrets.”

Remus clinked their beers together.

“Anytime, Sim.”

Not long after Simeon’s confession, Remus found themselves busy relaying the tour schedule to Mrs. Pettigrew, who insisted on repeating everything he said with an air of surprise—*“Twelve weeks? Twenty-five cities? Over forty shows?! Oh my…”*—when they all overheard the doorbell ring. Like a good host, Mr. Potter went to get up from his sofa chair to fetch it, only to be rebuffed by James.

"Nah, don't worry, Dad. I got it."

"Who could that be?" Peter asked, just before James returned with a giddy smile on his face.

“Moony! Oi, Moony, you’ll never guess…”

But Remus didn’t have to guess. He’d invited them after all.

“Take this, would ya?” Tomny said, tossing the nappy bag at him as he tugged his boots off. He’d gotten good at balancing the baby carrier in one hand while he did so, a talent that less than year ago would’ve had Remus falling over in shock.

“Hello, luv’,” Skylar said, pecking Remus on the cheek as she shrugged off her coat. Remus barely had time to return the hello; before he knew it, the Potters had emerged from the parlour with James and

Lily close on their heels.

“You must be Tomny,” Mrs. Potter said, “and Skylar! Welcome, welcome—you are most welcome. I hope you found the house alright.”

“Hard to miss, innit?” Tomny said cheekily, but his smile said everything. He carefully handed Remus the baby carrier and shook James and Mr. Potter’s hands before allowing Mrs. Potter to pull him into a hug as though they were old friends. Over her shoulder, he winked at Remus, then pointed toward the carrier.

“Best watch out, Lu. Little bugger’s only jus’ stopped crying.”

Remus looked down. Emma was sucking on a dummy, staring around the new place with big brown eyes. They’d been blue like Tomny’s when she was born, but now at nearly eight weeks, her eyes were as dark as shoe leather. It was not the first time the two of them were being introduced; Remus had been there for the christening, just like Tomny and Skylar had wanted. He signed his name on the baptism certificate, and afterwards Tomny gave him Emma to hold. She was so small, Remus had been afraid of hurting her, and most of the photos had him looking like he was one small jostle away from throwing up all over the church floor.

"Remus," Lily chided, "won't you invite your friends inside?"

"They want to see the baby," James clarified, looking to Tomny.

"Have at 'er, mate. I'd keep edgy if I were you, though. One 'a her farts sure can clear a room."

After guiding Tomny and Skylar into the parlour, the Potters celebrated their new arrivals with another grand round of introductions. The girls were instantly enamoured with Emma and sat cooing around her carrycot while Mr. Potter broke out several fresh bottles of wine. He offered the first glass to Skylar, who appeared happy enough to indulge in a glass after nine months of forced sobriety. Tomny, however, abstained, citing a need to drive at the end of the night. Secretly, Remus was proud of him.

"Should probably step outside for one of these though," Tomny said, raising his cigarettes. Mr. Potter stopped him.

"Good idea, son. Smoke's no good for the baby, but I only wondered if I could tempt you..."

Mr. Potter offered a box of his Cuban-leaf cigars, to which Tomny answered with an impressed arch of his brow.

"Shit. Don't mind if I do."

“Oh, aren’t you just the *cutest* thing?” Mary moaned, as she leaned down over Emma's carrycot. Marlene and Dorcas stood behind her, each of them sporting a beer and a red ‘Marauders’ t-shirt of their own.

“Thought you hated babies, Macdonald?” Dorcas asked sceptically.

“Only when I have to take care of them.” She glanced up at Skylar. “May I?”

Skylar waved her on. “Let me know if she needs a nappy change.”

“Aw no,” Mary went on cooing, as she scooped the baby up. “You’re just darling, aren’t you?”

Just then Lottie appeared in the parlour doorway, having stepped out to powder her nose. "No one told me there was a baby!" She shrieked, rushing forward to tug pointedly on Mary's sleeve. “Go on, Mary, hand the *pwecious wittle thing* over.”

“Wait your turn, Lot. I only just got her, and just because you went and got yourself hitched doesn’t mean you get to call bags on every toddler from here to Andalusia.”

Lottie pouted, but eventually got her turn and one-by-one the girls passed the baby around for a cuddle each. Emma was patient with them for the most part, sucking happily on her dummy and only grabbing hold of a fistful of Mary’s hair when one of her curls fell into her face.

"Yeah, she's a bit grabby," Skylar said, helping untangle Emma's fingers as Mary moaned; *ow, ow, ow!* "Doctor's saying she's advanced for her age. Most kids don't even start grabbing things 'til twelve weeks."

Already on her second turn with the baby, Lottie wasted no time in beckoning her husband over.

"Rog! Rog, come here! Come see how *adorable* she is."

Roger, who'd been previously engrossed in a work-related

conversation with Mr. Potter, sighed as he meandered over.

"Yes, very cute."

"Here, try holding her."

Roger didn't appear all that eager, and had to be reminded to mind the baby's head on two separate occasions. To her credit, Emma did not immediately begin to cry, however it only took a few seconds for her to decide that she was done being held, and subsequently spit up all over the front of Roger's fine grey suit.

"Oh, shit—sorry!" Skylar rushed forward, while Roger began to gag into the palm of his hand. The room erupted into giggles despite of this, and Mrs. Potter was kind enough to come forward with a towel to help clean the big-shot up.

"Now, now. No use in getting all fussy, Roger Penrose," she chided. "You're going to have to get used to this, you know."

"Lottie," Mrs. Pettigrew interrupted, "take Roger next door to ours, he can borrow one of your father's suits for the meantime."

As Lottie herded her disgruntled husband out, Remus overheard Peter mutter something to Moira about how if Lottie was smart she'd put off having kids until she was thirty. Moira didn't reply, and eventually Mr. Potter stood up to break the tension;

"Anyone feel like some music?"

He put on a folk album, to which Skylar happily announced that she knew. Humming along, she kept her daughter balanced in one arm while she sipped from her beer, content enough until Lily offered to take Emma off her hands so she could finish her drink.

"N-No, it's alright," Skylar replied, looking suddenly worried.

"You're sure? I really don't mind."

Skylar glanced between her daughter and the beer, before nodding pensively.

"Well, just for a little bit then..."

A 'little bit' turned into a good half-hour, with Lily rocking Emma right to sleep on one of the Potters' fancy ottomans. James had sat down behind her and was whispering things into Lily's ear to make

her laugh. Remus could hear it now;

Whaddya think, 'Prongs Jr' for the middle name?

As if, Potter.

“There you are," Tomny called, sauntering up to Remus in the corner of the room. He had a Coke in one hand, courtesy of Mrs. Potter, which he sipped from generously. It was probably a very difficult thing—being sober in a room full of people who had never had to think about where their next drink was coming from, much less all the things they'd do to get it.

"How was your cigar?" Remus asked.

Tomny mimed sucking one back. "Rich. I forgot you aren't supposed to suck 'em into yer lungs. Spent all of ten minutes coughing into the pavement."

"Idiot."

"Met one of those friends 'a yers though. Simeon? He's... posh."

Remus grinned. "Yeah, well, you missed all the fun in here. Your daughter threw up all over Roger. I'll wager he's bent over the pavement right about now too."

"Ah." Tomny sipped from his Coke, looking pleased. "I guess you finally found someone who’s more popular with the ladies than you."

"You mean Emma? Yeah, you should talk, wanker. But I still remember Cheryl, and Donna." He began counting them off on his fingers; "And Tracey, and Libby, and Veronica—”

“*Alright, alright*—not so loud. I’m a committed man now, I’ll have ya know. Though… suppose you are too, seeing as how Lover-boy hasn’t stopped glaring at me since we got ‘ere.”

Remus glanced across the room, to where Sirius was sitting with Peter and Moira, presumably trying to play nice. It would’ve been more effective had he been actually listening to whatever Moira was going on about and not turned halfway around in his seat to stare pointedly in Tomny’s general direction.

“What can I say, he’s cute when he’s jealous,” Remus replied smugly. He watched as Tomny gave a cheeky wave, and Sirius responded by

not-so-subtly scratching his nose with his middle finger.

Remus nudged his friend. “Thanks for coming, Tom.”

“Any time. That Simeon bloke sure had a lot to say about you. Is there anyone here you haven't kissed?"

"You—? Simeon and I *never* kissed!"

"But you wanted to, didn't you?"

"Ha. Prick!"

Tomny laughed, nudging Remus with his shoulder. "Right, my bad. But I *am* glad we came. Honestly it was just a relief to get out of the house for a while. Don’t tell her I said so, but I think Sky was going a bit stir-crazy. Emma cries a lot.”

“Aren’t babies supposed to cry?”

“Sure, but Emma cries all the time. We thought she had colic, but the doctor just thinks she's fussy. Mostly it's whenever—"

On cue, Emma gave a wail loud enough to drown out Mr. Potter's second folk album. She was being held by Dorcas, who was quick to pass her back to Skylar, but even as her mother cooed little assurances to her, Emma kept on balling.

“Maybe her godfather should have a go,” Lily suggested, already standing at the ready with her camera. Remus highly suspected she’d conspired with Emma to plan it.

“Aw-right! Can’t wait to get a load 'a this,” Tomny said, as Skylar stepped up and practically dumped her daughter into Remus’ arms. Emma blinked twice, another wail hovering on the tip of her tongue, and then—

Nothing.

“Fuckin' hell,” Peter said, before covering his mouth for the curse; “Sorry. Only meant—she stopped crying.”

“Always does wiff ‘im,” Tomny said, jutting a thumb in Remus’ direction. “I call it blatant favourtism.”

“Who would’a thought it,” Marlene sniggered; “Remus Lupin, the baby whisperer.”

“What? No, I only—” Remus glanced down at Emma, who’d started playing with the chain necklace around his throat, her eyes still damp with tears. For someone who barely had control over her own tongue, she was mighty quick to ham-fist the plastic guitar pick hanging on its very end and shove it into her gummy mouth.

“Oi, don’t *swallow* it.”

Nearby, Lily raised her camera. “Look here, Emma, darling. *Smiiiile*, Remus.”

KA-CHSSH!

‘She ain’t got no money,
Her clothes are kinda funny,
Her hair is kinda wild and free!
Oh, but love grows where my Rosemary goes—
And nobody knows like me!’

Once everyone had gobbled down their share of salty canapés and fizzy champagne, and Emma had wowed everyone by blowing a snot-rocket onto Remus’ shoulder, Mr. Potter turned down the music and invited the room to share in a toast.

“I have to be honest, boys,” he started, “when James came to us and said that he was going to give this band stuff a try instead of going off to university—well, a part of me thought it was a mistake. I was worried for your futures, all of you. But you made a promise and kept to your word, and for that alone, we could never be more proud. So to James, Peter, Sirius, and Remus—I only have one thing to say, and that’s cheers to you.”

Everyone raised their glass;

“ ‘CHEERS!’”

“I have some good news of my own too!” James added keenly. “Lily is —”

“OHMYGOD—She's pregnant!” Mary burst out. Turning beet-red, Lily smacked her with one of the sofa pillows as she fumed;

“No, Mary! God, you are so full of it!”

“Geez, alright. One of these days I’m gonna be right though...”

Only looking slightly frazzled, James tossed a sincere look at his mother before clearing his throat;

“What I meant to say… is that Lily’ll be joining us on tour! Once she finishes her term in June, of course.”

The girls gasped in delight, and Roger—donned in a fresh suit—leaned over to smack Peter keenly on the shoulder. “Brilliant! And Moira too, I’ll expect?”

The chatter died a bit.

“Actually I’ll be spending the summer in the Isle of Skye,” Moira answered stiffly. “My grandparents have a house there."

No one said anything, and Moira rushed to clarify;

"But they’ve said that Petey’ll be able to call me from the road. Isn't that right, Petey?”

Peter sipped his beer, nodding firmly. Meanwhile Roger turned to Sirius and gave him a fond shove on the shoulder.

“Suppose you two lads’ll be having the time of your life then,” he said, gesturing to Remus. “You know, plenty of American girls to go around and all that.”

Barely a second had passed before the entire room had burst into laughter.

“Oh yeah, birds aplenty!”

“Getting it in every night!”

“Proper menaces, they’ll be!”

Simeon dropped a hand on his brother-in-law’s shoulder while Lottie pinched her forehead, leaving Roger to look around himself in bewilderment.

“What? Lottie, what’d I say?”

Everyone was still caught mid-guffaw by the time Sirius stood up. “Moony and I appreciate the vote of confidence, Rog,” he said humbly, while reaching into the inside pocket of his oversized leather

jacket. “Luckily for us, you’re not the only one who expects big things.”

Withdrawing his hand, Sirius held up a small paper album sleeve, which happened to hold a single red-pressed vinyl EP. It was titled *Marauders*, and it was their very first.

“Got this from Spectre,” he told everyone. “It’s one of the ones he’s gonna distribute to the radio stations during our tour. But I got him to make an extra, just in case we fail terribly."

"Which you're not gonna!" Said Marlene.

"Of course not! But we all thought to ourselves, who better to have it than the fools who believed in us. So, Mum—Dad… this is for you.”

With a flourish, Sirius dropped down onto one knee and presented the vinyl disc to Effie, who accepted with happy tears in her eyes. Remus watched on proudly, smiling until Emma tried to shove a fist into his mouth.

Eventually the parlour got to be too stifling, even with the windows open, and Mr. Potter opened up the patio doors so that the party could migrate out into the back garden and appreciate the early-evening air. The music carried through the open windows, and Mary had managed to convince Marlene and Dorcas to dance despite not being nearly drunk enough. It was mostly disco, that was until Sirius boldly put on their own EP. Even more shocking—they knew the words.

" 'Hey, have you seen my friends around?
Oh, I swear they’re pretty hard to miss!
One’s yay-high with flowers in her hair—
And the other you’d likely kiss'!"

"Are you ever going to tell Mary you wrote this song for her?" Peter asked.

"Not me," Remus replied. "This one was all Sirius."

Moira took Peter's arm. "Come on, Petey, let's dance."

There was no arguing with her, and so Peter went, and on and on they danced. Even Tomny was up there, Skylar's arms wrapped around his neck as they swayed. It was a bit of a mind-fuck to see them dance

along to “Midnight Dancer”, but Remus told himself that it was enough for just to see them enjoy it. This one was *his*, after all. And he wanted them to be happy.

“You’re so lucky, you know,” he whispered to Emma, as he rocked her on one of the Potters’ wicker garden benches. She blinked at him for a while, and finally answered by knocking the dummy from her mouth with her tongue. Remus was just fitting the rubber nipple back into her mouth when Sirius dropped down beside him.

“Still stuck on baby-duty, huh?"

"Yup."

"And here I was about to ask you to dance. Should we offer Lottie another turn?”

“Can’t. She cries whenever I put her down.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes. “That sounds like a lie.”

“Oh? Shall we test it then?” Remus held the baby out to him, and Sirius instantly veered away. Emma’s chubby legs had only been hovering in the air for a moment before she started to gurgle and whine.

“Take it back—take it back!”

“Told you.” Remus settled the baby back into his lap, adjusting her rubber dummy while Sirius looked on contemptuously.

“*Eugh*—must mean she just likes you.” He pointed a finger softly at Emma’s nose. “Don’t think I’m not watching you, girl. I know your game. Just ‘cause you think you’re so cute…”

“You’re jealous of a baby now, Pads?”

“For your information, it’s called being smart.” Sirius tapped his head; “Women always have good intuition—even as babies.”

In answer, Emma made a little hiccuping noise that might've been a laugh were she not so fresh out the womb. Then she reached out and grasped Sirius' finger with her tiny hand, and Remus knew it was purposeful.

“Ugh—don’t do that,” Sirius scoffed. “Don’t act *cute*. You and me—we ain’t friends. You’re only here to take my man away, I know it.”

Emma pushed the dummy out of her mouth, coming as close to a smile as a seven-week-old human could. Sirius kept squinting at her, but did not pull his finger away.

“Have you spoken to Regulus at all?” Remus asked, watching as James spun Lily around the patio like a music box ballerina.

“A bit. He's agreed to watch the flat while we’re gone.”

"Cool. Guess that means he doesn't have any plans to go back to your parents' place then?"

At that, Sirius matched Emma's smile.

"He said he wanted to work. How did he put it... To 'do something for himself for a change'. I think he's just rebelling, myself.”

"About time."

They shared a laugh, and Remus knocked him fondly with his knee.

“That’s good, Sirius. Really.”

Sirius nodded, gently rocking his finger as Emma clung to it. “You all ready for America then? … Flight’s in a few days. I dunno—maybe it’s just me looking into things, but you seem sorta… off.”

“And if I say it is just you?”

“Fine, I *know* it’s not me. You’ve been… quiet, Moons. Like this morning when you—”

"Yeah, I know," Remus said, finishing Sirius' sentence for him. He took a moment to fit the dummy back into Emma’s mouth again—*baby tongues, weird*—before nodding. “I’ve just been doing a lot of thinking lately.”

“*Ohhhh* no.” Sirius leaned down toward Emma. “Watch this, kid—this is the part where he does something stupid.”

“Yeah, you would call it stupid…”

After making a few friendly fish-faces at the baby, Sirius sighed and straightened up again.

“Alright, what is it then? Is it redemption? Are we asking Lee to be our roadie or something? Personally I don’t think he’ll accept but if

you're looking for someone to get you in shape for the tour then I'm sure he wouldn't mind going for a few rounds in the boxing ring."

"It's not Lee," Remus replied grimly. "But it is a redemption of sorts."

"Wanna spell it out for me then? I don't actually know what it is you're thinking all the time, you know."

Remus swallowed thickly.

"I just think it's time I go home, Sirius."

"Home like… the flat home?"

"No."

"Oh, good. 'Cause I sorta promised Mary I'd let her show me that eyeliner trick before we leave on tour."

"Sirius—"

"*Fine*—I asked her if she'd show me. But if you're really tired then I'm sure Effie wouldn't mind if we—"

"Not the flat." Remus took a deep breath. "I mean, I think it's time I go speak with my father."

"… Oh."

"I keep thinking that I should say something to him before I up and leave the country. And there's Giles… Guess, I've got a few people to visit."

"Right."

Remus looked down at Emma, ashamed. "You think it's a bad idea."

"No! S'just… ugh." Sirius reached a hand up to the side of his neck, rubbing it like it was giving him grief. "I just didn't think there was all that much to say to the guy. It's not like his opinion matters."

"Yeah, but he was still my dad for seventeen years."

Sirius pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek, looking forlorn and distraught. That, perhaps, was the one way they differed when it came to their own respective parental troubles. Sirius wanted to let go —to throw it all away and be done with it. For Remus, hating

something had always felt better than hating nothing.

"If you think it's stupid then I'll—"

"No—no. You're right, I get it," Sirius said, dropping the arm from his neck. "To be honest, Moons, I've been thinking about it a lot too. Going home, I mean."

"You mean you...?"

"Not literally." Sirius gave a dry chuckle. "Shit, I ain't ever doing that again… No, it was the safe actually. You know, the one in my father's office. It opened when I put in my birthday—not Reg's, *mine*—and I dunno. I just couldn't stop thinking about it. Dad and I never got along, see? Even without Mum. So like, did he really mean to do that? To remind himself of me every time he… Or shit. Could he just not be bothered to change the fucking code?"

"I wish I had an answer for you."

"Yeah, me too." Sirius looked up at him, smiling haggardly. "It's stupid anyway. I'm not ever gonna know now, so what point is there in killing myself over it?"

Remus nodded.

"But I suppose… that it's not too late for you to get some answers."

It took a moment for Remus to understand what Sirius had meant. Was that he wanted then—answers? He imagined it was hard to get answers without any real questions, but still—if this was supposed to be their new life, then he supposed making peace with his old one was the best way to go. And if not peace, then at least remission.

"So you'll go with me then?"

"You mean to do this one last entirely stupid thing that might not make any difference in the long run anyway?" Sirius shrugged. "Hey, you know me—I'll get the keys."

Feeling comforted, Remus leaned down to kiss the top of Emma's head. Across the patio, his friends were still swaying; Tomny and Skylar were holding each other close, mouths pressed to each other's ears as they giggled and shared whispers.

Remus smiled into the wisps of Emma's hair.

“Thank you, Sirius," he said. "For everything.”

Next to him, Sirius took his hand.

“You’re welcome, Moons.”

* * *

There are places I remember,
All my life though some have changed;
Some forever, not for better,
Some have gone and some remain;

All these places have their moments,
With lovers and friends I still can recall;
Some are dead and some are living,
In my life I’ve loved them all…

* * *

In the twenty-six minutes that it took them to get from Victoria to Blackheath Hill, Remus had almost asked Sirius to turn the car around three separate times. He was sitting in the passenger’s seat, ripping the skin around his nails to shreds while the radio played its Top Hits. Eventually Sirius reached over and clasped one of Remus’ hands in his to help ease the worst of it, but the thoughtful show of devotion did little to quell the apprehension brewing in Remus’ gut.

He couldn’t help but feel like he was making a mistake.

Perhaps it would’ve been better to just disappear into obscurity, as he’d been doing all year. Let whatever relationship he and his father had fizzle out to nothing. But he was going away. This tour could very well be the first of many nights spent away from London, and he knew that saying nothing would hurt Giles—especially after so many months of silence. Shit... Remus knew what he had to do. If he was going to accept Spectre’s offer of a lifetime, then it was probably time to face his demons head-on.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Sirius asked when they’d pulled to the top of the estate’s long driveway.

Remus didn't answer at first. He couldn't stop picturing the surprise on the gateman's face. He'd done a double-take when they'd pulled up in their rusty purple Volkswagen—a few more months and he might not have recognised him at all. Would he still be Lyall Lupin's son then?

"No," he answered eventually. "I think this is something I have to do on my own."

Sirius tapped his hands along the steering wheel. "Alright. But I'll be right here when you're finished."

Turning around, Remus leaned and left a gentle kiss on the very corner of Sirius' mouth.

"Be right back."

He slammed the car door shut just as Sirius was lifting the sunglasses from his eyes.

"Oi! I love you—you hear me?"

Remus smiled, waving as he started up the estate's steps. A high-pitched honk followed him, and for a second he felt hopeful. But that all fell away when he was faced with the towering front doors of the Lupin estate. There was a tremor in Remus' hand when he knocked, but he was thankful for the familiar face that answered. It was Giles, a little more creased at the edges, but still wearing his favourite waistcoat and cap.

"Hi, Gil."

The old driver looked torn. He probably didn't know whether to embrace him or put him over his knee. In the end he opted for a scolding.

"You—You *cheeky—!* Do you even know how long it's been?!"

"A while. Give or take a few days."

Giles' nostrils flared the way they always did when he was full of rage. Then he swallowed it. "You… You look different," he grunted stiffly. "You're taller. More—More… Well, you look like a man."

Remus' chin dipped, suddenly bashful. It made Giles chuff lightly, and he grasped Remus around both shoulders as if to admire him.

“Christ—you look like a rock star! You’ve grown… Oh. My little bugger.”

Remus smiled back at him, feeling a sting in the corners of his eyes.

“Speaking of grown, has your nose gotten bigger by any chance?”

Giles clapped him upside the head. “Watch your mouth,” he warned, before taking a deep breath. “Look at me pissing about—come in. We’ll get you settled in for a drink and you can tell us all it is that you’ve been doing this *long* while.”

Remus was grateful. He knew coming back would be difficult, but he’d underestimated just how happy he'd be to see his old friend again. The house still felt empty; the ceilings too high—the rooms too big. The vastness made him feel small, like he was nine years-old again and being sent to his room on Christmas morning.

After following Giles into the parlour, Remus sat down and allowed the driver to pour him a glass of whatever Spanish brandy he had on hand.

“Here. Since you’re such a big ‘man’ now.”

Remus thanked him. “I shouldn’t stay long though, I’ve got a friend waiting in the car.”

“The dark-haired one. I recognise him."

Remus nodded.

"His hair looks better long," Giles said as he handed him a glass of brandy. "Not all short like it was the first time you brought him here."

It took a second.

"The first time?"

"You remember. That summer you smuggled him into your bedroom."

Remus nearly dropped his brandy. "Giles, you knew?"

"Of course I knew. You may be sneaky, but I'm the one who raised you. I know all your tricks, bugger—there ain't a single thing you can hide from me."

It was humbling, surely, and Remus ran a hand through his hair as he

raised his glass. "Fuck—cheers, I guess."

The brandy was foul. It tasted like the stuff Peter used to lift from his parents' liquor cupboard during their Christmas holidays. They used to choke the stuff down in James' bedroom, telling themselves that it was all worth it for the buzz.

"Glad to know you're not fully grown yet," Giles remarked after watching him grimace. He took a seat in his old armchair before starting; "So! Where is it you've been all this time?"

Remus traced the edge of his brandy glass.

"Oh, you know… around."

"Likely story."

"We rented a flat. We... we work."

"Fine. And where is it you're hoping to go *next*?"

"That's what I've come to tell you actually."

Giles began to stroke his stubbly chin, and Remus knew there was no point in beating around the bush anymore. Sitting forward in the chair, he readied himself for the grand reveal.

"I'm going to America, Gil."

Instantly Giles' entire body fell slack. If he had anything to say, he never got the chance. Before either of them knew it, a loud bark echoed through the parlour, and the door was nosed open by a single scruffy, speckled hound. If Remus had been standing, he would've barrelled him over, but as it was, all Dusty could do was fling his entire body up into his lap.

"*Oh f*—DUSTY! Jesus—down, boy! Down!"

"Looks like I ain't the only one who's been wondering where you've been," Giles called. Dusty continued to bowl into Remus, pinning him to the sofa chair as he slobbered kisses up and down his face and neck. As jarring as it was, Remus was no less than delighted. It was Dusty, his *oldest* friend.

"I'm sorry, Dusty," he said, making sure to hug the dog tight. "I'm sorry."

“He’s been waiting for you,” Giles said, however fondly. “You should be glad you came. Had a bit of a scare a few months back, but the doc’s said he’s in the clear now. ‘Course he’s never slowed down… Wilder than a march hare, that one. Your influence, I expect.”

Capturing the coonhound’s long face in his hands, Remus held their heads together, staring into his dog’s deep brown eyes.

“You good, boy?” He whispered. “You alright? I’m so sorry I made you wait.”

Dusty threw his hands off, and celebrated with another frothy kiss. It took a while for Remus to get him off the chair, and afterwards the happy dog laid down by his feet, panting with his tongue out and accepting no less than many—*many*, head scratches. With his free hand, Remus wiped beneath his nose, sniffling.

“I’d like to take him with me, if I can. I know our place isn’t exactly ideal—it’s got a busy road and a shit garden, but there’s room. I already talked to the landlady. And... well, I’d feel bad leaving him here again.”

“Of course you should take him,” said the old driver sceptically, “but I’m not sure how well a dog like Dusty would do on a plane to America.”

“I can sort it,” he said earnestly. There was Regulus or Mary—and it was just for the summer! But… “Unless you think he’d be happier here with the other dogs…”

Giles shook his head. “Nah, he’s your dog. About time you took responsibility anyway—you know I was just looking out for him while you were gone. And home is where the heart is. It’s why I understand why you’re going off to America in the first place. I’m sorry, Remus, I didn’t realise you’d found him.”

It was like piecing together a puzzle without knowing what the picture was first. It took a while, in which Dusty barked several times and began gnawing on his shoe, but then Remus remembered what Giles had told him while standing on the pavement outside King’s Cross Station.

America—home—found him.

Giles thought he meant he was going to his father. His *real* father.

“It’s not that, Gil,” Remus said earnestly. “It’s my band—we got a deal. Or—we got this opportunity anyway. There’s a producer. We met with him and he’s agreed to put us up as an opening act for some other band. We’re going to tour America and play our music. We… We leave next week. I'm not just chasing false hopes.”

Giles slouched back into his chair. “Well, I’ll be…”

“I know it sounds crazy, but it’s real, I swear. We’ll be in San Antonio starting next week, and who knows—if we do good on this, maybe next it could be us touring the country on our own.”

“And just who’s driving?”

“Well, I… we’ll be on a tour bus, I reckon.”

Giles nodded thoughtfully. “And I expect you’ll be enjoying yourself on the road?”

“What d’you mean?”

“I’m old—I ain’t ancient! I know what those rock stars get up to in their spare time. All the drinkin’ and the drugs and the women. I’ll bet you’re just *sooo* excited to get up there and have those girls throw themselves at ‘chu.”

Apparently there were some secrets he could hide from Giles.

"Why does everybody keep saying that?”

“Remus John Lupin, if you dare get a girl pregnant out of wedlock—”

Remus threw both hands up; “Gil—trust me, you have quite literally *nothing* to worry about.”

“Taken a vow of chastity, have you?”

“Something like that.”

“Huh. I always knew that religious school was gonna be a good influence.”

Remus couldn’t help it; he broke down laughing until he’d fallen back into his chair and Dusty was nosing about to get into his lap again. Just then the parlour door opened for a second time and a man wearing a dark suit and a business-style tie poked his head in.

“Bloody dog,” he was grumbling, “Dusty—here! Heel!”

Remus sat up, holding his dog close by the collar. The man noticed him straight away, and jumped in surprise.

“Giles?”

The driver said nothing in reply, and quickly the butler stepped out.

“That’d be Carsten,” observed Giles gratingly.

“I remember him.”

“He’ll be going straight for your father to tell him you’re here now.”

“That’s alright. Dad and I have some unfinished business. I only came back because I couldn’t go away knowing how we’d left things. And to sort out my responsibilities, I guess...”

He'd started patting Dusty on the head. Across from him, Giles lifted his brandy glass, pointing it in Remus’ direction.

“Careful, you’re almost starting to *sound* like a man too.”

Remus tipped his chin down again, and went on patting Dusty’s ears.

Not five minutes later, Giles had walked him over to the west wing, where he knew he’d find his father’s office waiting at the very end of the hall.

“Behave,” Giles told him, “and if you can’t behave then—”

“Be good, I know. I remember.”

He left him with a warning smile, tottering off with Dusty in tow.

Remus hoped Sirius wasn’t boiling himself alive in the car. It was getting warmer these days—supposed to be even hotter in America. Peter had already spent days talking their ear off about that one time he’d visited New York with his family, (Remus still hadn’t told them about Simeon,) and James was excited to see the Grand Canyon. *It’s almost two thousand miles long!* He’d said. According to Sirius, a big hole in the ground wasn’t all that much to sneeze at. The real prize was Los Angeles, where one could surf and play and party from sunrise to sunset. Remus wasn’t sure what he was most excited for. The music probably. He wanted to see some phenomena.

At the end of the hall, the office opened and Sandra stepped out in a sleek white pantsuit. Remus wasn't surprised; he'd been expecting her, and tried not to react when she dropped the door handle and rushed toward him.

"Remus! Oh, I'm so glad you came. Look at you, you're so…" She sighed, squeezing his shoulders. "How have you been? You look healthy. How are your friends?"

"Send him in, Sandra."

It was his father, for once saving him from having to reply. At the sound of her husband's voice coming through the crack in the door, Sandra looked up and gave Remus a warm smile.

"We'll talk after," she cooed, petting his hand. "Go ahead. He's waiting for you."

Remus was half-sure he'd rather hear her say that he was clear to join a bomb disposal squad than know that Lyall fucking Lupin was ready to see him. Still, he picked up what was left of his courage and trudged on. He hoped all the pain was in the anticipation—like ripping off a plaster. But of course, Remus knew better than to count on a hope.

It was bright inside the office with all the curtains open, and there he found his father waiting for him behind his heavy desk. He'd been scribbling something in a leather day-timer and went on with his scribbling even as Remus thudded over the expensive carpet in his heavy boots.

"Remus." Lyall turned the page in the day-timer. "I didn't realise you were coming."

Opposite to him, Remus fit his hands into his pockets stubbornly. "Yeah. Just wanted to drop in… See Giles, y'know."

A moment passed, and Lyall slowly set the pen down, snapping the day-timer shut. "I'm glad you did," he replied stiffly. "It's been too long, son."

And then Lyall Lupin did something Remus was not expecting; he came out from behind his imposing desk and set a hand on either of his son's shoulders.

"You've grown."

Like Giles, Remus didn't get the feeling he meant 'you got taller'. Unsure of what to say, he ground the tip of his boot into the floor until Lyall inevitably cleared his throat and drew away.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

"No, I'm not staying long."

Lyall set out two glasses anyway, surprising Remus again when he loosened his tie and casually leaned back against the front of the desk. He'd left the whisky next to him like an offering, but Remus could still taste the brandy and he felt ill.

"So what is it you're doing now? Are you working?"

"I was," Remus replied, unwilling to admit to having been fired from his minimum wage job at the music shop. "I'm taking some time off now. Me and the guys—we're going away for a while."

"Is that so?" Lyall sipped his whisky. "And where is it you're going?"

"To America."

Whatever recollection he'd missed in Giles' expression, he now saw reflected back at him in Lyall's. He considered letting him believe it, but in the end his pride won out.

"It's for my band. We got offered a contract—er, sorta. But now we're gonna be touring the states. We… Well, shit—we did it."

It should've felt gratifying. *We did it*—all of it—*without you*. Except his father wasn't looking at him. Instead Lyall had wandered over to the window, one hand tucked into his trouser pocket while he absentmindedly swirled his whisky tumbler and stared out over the back garden. Remus kept expecting to hear a dog bark, but there was nothing. They were alone.

"I wish you luck then."

Remus scoffed, torn between anger and disbelief.

" 'Wish me luck'—that's all you have to say?"

"I'm being pragmatic. Would you rather me jump for joy?"

Maybe I would, thought Remus bitterly. Or maybe he just wanted him to be angry, to start going on about how he was throwing his life

away. It'd certainly have made it easier to shout and scream like he was used to.

"I'm going to America," Remus repeated, as though his father hadn't heard him properly the first time. "We're all but signed to one of the biggest agencies in the country—the Potters threw James a bloody party!"

"And is that what you'd like, Remus?" Lyall turned around. "A party? Here I was, under the impression you didn't enjoy such frivolous things."

"What would you know about the things I enjoy?"

Lyall didn't answer, and Remus felt his fists clench at his sides. He would *not* break.

"I'd be enough just to hear that you're proud of me. I mean, honestly—couldn't you have ever told me just once, 'good job, son', or 'I'm proud of you, son.' Was nothing I ever did worth that much?"

"Remus, You're only eighteen—"

"*Nineteen*."

His father faltered then, and Remus might as well have been a starving hound suddenly presented with a steak dinner.

"Remus, I am proud of y—"

"Oh, come on! You just stand there and lie to my face now? Say what you really mean."

Pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation, Lyall crossed back to his desk, where he picked up his pen and began scratching more notes into the old leather day-timer. It felt like a dismissal, even as he mumbled under his breath;

"You know nothing, you don't understand."

"No," Remus growled. "What *I* don't understand is why we can't ever talk about it. It's always the same—I'm going to walk out that door with nothing. Only this time, I'm not coming back. You're lucky you have Sandra now, because otherwise you'd be alone and that's on you! So just tell me… Tell me the truth, Dad!"

Lyall sagged back into his desk chair, looking haggard as he squeezed

his fist around the gold-plated pen. “You won’t be satisfied.”

“You think I came here to be satisfied? Man, I’m giving you *one* chance to set all this straight. If you don’t want it, then tell me to piss off and let’s be done with it.”

But despite all the anger and animosity they’d hurled at each other over the years, Lyall did not tell him to go. Instead he set the pen down and clasped his hands over his stomach.

“You have to understand. I cared about your mother—”

“Yeah, I’m sure you did.”

“Do you even want to hear this?”

Remus clenched his jaw to avoid a reply, and returned to grinding the toe of his boot into the rug. Lyall watched him for a moment, but must’ve decided it wasn’t worth the effort.

“Your mother was eleven years younger than me when we got married,” he started. “She left her parents in Saint Asaph and came to live with me here. I knew she had no one, but thought she got on well enough. We never really had that much in common, but she was… vibrant. I could hardly keep up. Some days it was like living with two different people. For a while I thought to myself, ‘this is just how she is—get used to it’. I had no idea what it actually meant. Her mind, she...”

“Bet you blamed her for it.”

“I never blamed her—not once. Not in the beginning.”

“Did you know then?” Asked Remus. “That she was in love with someone else?”

“I knew before we’d even met. At the time it hardly mattered. I needed a wife, and she needed a husband her parents approved of.”

Remus almost asked what about Tad could’ve been so appalling that his grandparents wouldn’t approve, but in the end, he held his tongue —too worried it might derail whatever truth Lyall was finally permitting him.

“I discovered your mother was having an affair a year before you were born,” he went on, turning back to the day-timer with that bloody

pen. “She used to take trips out to see her best friend from school—I believe you know the one.”

“Sheila.”

Lyall hummed—*scritch, scritch.* “Eventually I began to get suspicious, so I hired a private investigator to follow her. You can imagine my surprise when she did not board a train to Glasgow. Instead she took a car to Notting Hill.”

“Why didn’t you do something about it?” Remus demanded. “Why didn’t you just divorce her?”

“It was too late. By the time I was considering the option, Hope was already pregnant.”

It was not the answer he’d wanted.

“That tells me nothing!”

“I would’ve assumed it made perfect sense.”

“But you knew! Even then—you knew I wasn’t yours!”

Lyall stood up from the desk; “Is that right?”

“Yes, of course you knew! You wouldn’t hate me so much if you didn’t.”

“I never asked Hope for a paternity test.”

“Why not?”

There was no reply. Lyall had returned to the liquor cabinet, where he uncapped the decanter and poured himself a second glass. After tipping that back, he poured a third.

“Remus, you’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think I do. You did it to save face, didn’t you?”

He stoppered the decanter sharply. Remus seethed.

“You couldn’t stand the idea that someone else had gone under your nose! That your own wife loved someone else in a way she could never love you. Admit it, you wanted to divorce her but you couldn’t stand the idea because the truth is, *you’re too afraid to be alone—”*

Lyall spun around.

“I didn’t divorce your mother because *SHE ASKED ME NOT TO!”*

His chest heaved, and Lyall sipped the whisky with shaking hands;

"*She* asked me not to..."

“How could you expect me to believe that?" Remus threw a hand up. "You fought all the time—I heard you!”

“Believe what you want, but I am telling you now, whatever you *think* you know about that man is *wrong*. This is not some fairytale—your mother was delusional! She threw her fits and made me into the bad guy because *I’m* the one who was here. And when he found out about you, it was over. Just like that—gone!”

“But he sent me Christmas presents.”

“And I suppose that would make him father of the year?”

Remus turned his face away, torn between shame and his own ego.

“You have no idea what it was like,” Lyall spat; “dealing with her.” He paused again to sip from the whisky, still breathing hard. “I told her I would agree to the divorce if it was what she wanted, but that she could not keep you from me.”

“So that’s it—you held me hostage.”

“I kept my family together! I *kept Hope safe*—me! Even during all the times she’d deluded herself into thinking that a relationship with that bastard would ever work. He couldn’t take care of her, and you were too young, and so I stayed. I stayed because she was my wife, and because you are *my son*!”

“Then why did you do it?” Remus wailed. “Why did you keep me from going to her funeral—why did you push me away at every possible moment? Was it because I looked like her? Or because I look like *him*?”

“You are my son,” Lyall repeated, “you will always be my son.”

“Ain’t that the fucking miserable truth.”

Neither of them said any more after that. More-so out of spite, Remus finally picked up the glass Lyall had set out for him and downed it for

all that it was worth. He slammed the cup down;

“I have spent so much of my life being angry with you. Even when I’d thought I’d let it go, it was always there—burning me from the inside out. But not anymore… No, ‘cause I have everything now—everything! And after today, I’m going to walk out that door and I won't be angry anymore, do you hear me? Not because I’ve somehow found it in my heart to forgive you, or because your story made any difference, but because I forgive *myself*. So yeah, Dad… I love my life—and maybe I love it because of some of the things you gave me, but it’s *mine*. And I’m going to start living it for me, and I don’t care if you think that’s selfish.”

“It is all I’ve ever wanted for you, Remus.”

Liar.

Liar—liar—liar!

You don’t care—you don’t care!

Remus clutched at his head. *Not now*—christ, not now! It’d been ages since he’d felt himself slipping back into the old habits—the meltdowns. The thoughts and memories always came like lightning, but stuck around for hours like tape caught on a loop. He’d been doing good for so long. His friends’ influence, probably. And Sirius… always Sirius. That’s who he thought of now.

I love you.

Oi! I love you—you hear me?

Eventually Remus was wiping the sweat from his palms on his trousers. Lyall had been very quiet, studying him nervously out of the corner of his eye. Remus knew what he saw.

“Don’t,” he said, “I’m not broken.”

Lyall’s mouth opened, but with nothing to say that would change things, it eventually fell shut again. And so Remus figured he'd gotten what he wanted—answers to the questions he didn’t know he’d had.

“I leave for America next week,” he said to his father. “Just wanted to let you know.”

There was no objection as he turned to leave, but when Remus’ hand

came to rest on the office door handle, Lyall Lupin spoke once more.

“Remus."

He stopped.

"You should know that I loved your mother."

He waited for it—the *liar!*

"Very much."

It did not come.

“Good.”

The door shut behind him with a soft click.

* * *

Sandra was waiting for him by the front door, along with Giles and a woman Remus assumed must’ve worked in the kitchens. They stood close together, acting fond, while Giles kept hold of Dusty’s leash and wrung his cap in both hands. Of them, it was Sandra who approached him first, looking cheerful despite her nerves.

“Giles filled me in,” she whispered kindly. “America—how wonderful. I’ll bet you’re excited.”

“It’ll be interesting, for sure.”

“You’ll make sure to be careful? It's a big place.”

“I'll be careful.”

“Well, at least you’ll have Dusty to take care of you now.” After glancing at the dog, she smiled and quickly kissed Remus on the cheek. “And Remus, you know that you will always have a home here if you want it.”

He nodded, but got the distinct feeling she already knew how this would go. With a tight squeeze, Sandra released his hands and Remus was free to make his way along to Giles.

“Suspect you’ll be needing some of this,” the driver said, gesturing to

a large bag of dog feed at his feet. “And Gladys here, fixed you up some leftovers to take with you, as I’m assuming you’re still not much of a cook.”

Remus rolled his eyes, but thanked Gladys as she handed him the food in a paper bag. Afterwards Giles passed him Dusty’s leash, finishing by poking him in the nose.

“Take care of yourself, son. And don’t you be smoking so much.”

“How do you know I still smoke?” Remus queried. “I could’ve quit.”

“Yeah, and I’m the Queen of Sheba.”

They shared a matching grin.

When it was time to go, Dusty was the first out—yanking Remus down the stairs as he struggled not to lose hold of the heavy bag of dog kibble. There they found Sirius, casually leaning up against the side of the van with that morning’s crossword in hand.

“You made it out alive,” he cheered, tucking the paper under one arm and the pen behind his ear. He raised his sunglasses up onto the top of his head next, making Remus’ heart give a little jump. Sometimes it actually escaped him just how devastatingly handsome Sirius was.

“You ready to go, Moons?”

Remus nodded; “I’m ready.”

Sirius stared at him a moment, and then glanced up at the house and gave his arm a little touch—as if to say *I’m here*.

It was enough.

After Remus had loaded Dusty inside, Sirius smacked the body of the van and ran around to the driver’s seat. “You’re gonna love Reg, boy!” He said to the over-sized dog. “He’s house-sitting the whole summer, and he just *looooves* dogs.”

Dusty barked as Remus clicked his seatbelt into place. Up above, he could see Giles and Gladys standing arm in arm, waving them off as Sandra blew a kiss. Remus waved too, and didn’t feel the least bit bad about it.

“Music?” Sirius offered. “I’m thinking music.”

He flicked the radio on before throwing the van into reverse. There was a crunch as the tires ground across gravel and stone, and just as Sirius began to veer back down the driveway, Remus spotted a person standing in one of the windows that ran along the side of the house. Again, he didn't feel bad, more like… at peace. Lighter.

Bye, Dad.

Sirius was speeding already—the gateman had just enough time to haul the gates back before they were flying through, the windows down and warm summer air whipping at their faces.

"I'm proud of you, you know!" Sirius hollered. "Now you can be whatever you want to be!"

"You mean that?"

"Sure!"

Remus paused.

"And what if I just want to be your Moony?"

Sirius bit his lip over a smile. He noticed the radio at the same time, and shouted ecstatically;

"Ooh, I love this one!"

"Not exactly hard rock, is it?"

"Who cares? Just turn it up, Moons!"

He did.

'Little darlin', the smile's returning to their faces,
Little darlin', it seems like years since it's been here;

Here comes the sun, doo-doo-doo-doo,
Here comes the sun, and I say,
It's alright…'

"Have you given any thought to it at all?" Sirius yammered on. "Like, what happens if this tour doesn't work out, and we all gotta go back to being like one of those regular cogs in society's system?"

“No. You’re far too mental to be a society cog.”

“And just what’s that supposed to mean?”

Remus shrugged. “You’ve said it yourself, Padfoot. Mental makes art.”

“Oh, shit! Heh—I’m a fucking genius. You could put that in a song, you know! Might have to kick it up a notch though. More like… mental makes love? Nah, needs an 'm'... More like... mental makes magic? Oh shit—yeah, that's it!”

“No way, that’s so cheesy.”

“Wha—? Nah. Dusty don’t think so, do ya boy?”

‘Woof!’

“Told ya.” Sirius leaned over, shoving him fondly. There was sun in his hair, turning it a shimmering shade of silver. “Hey, Moons?”

“Mm?”

“Nothing. Just—love you.”

Sirius winked at him, before dropping the sunglasses back down over his eyes. Already grinning into his palm, Remus mouthed the words back.

Love you.

“What was that? Didn’t quite hear you.”

Remus turned his smile to the window.

“Eyes on the road, Sirius.”

Here comes the sun, doo-doo-doo-doo,
Here comes the sun;
It’s alright,
It’s alright…

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys <3

So that's the end. Insane, actually. Never in a million years would I have imagined we'd be here, seeing an end of Cadence. I want to keep this short and sweet but to all of you who have embarked on this journey with me and Remus, thank you. We've tackled so much in this story and seeing the characters grow as they have has been such a life-changing experience. Really.

For those of you curious about the fate of Part 2, I still fully plan on writing it. However, I have no idea when that will begin, so I'm kindly requesting that you to refrain from asking 'when'. I have other projects I'm going to be working on before I start writing Part 2, so if you're interested those, please feel free to subscribe to my ao3 page.
I also am going to ask that you don't ask me about the ships of Part 2. Like Cadence, it'll be told entirely through Remus' POV and will be a central wolfstar fic. (Other questions/curiosities are totally welcome!)

Someone on Tumblr asked me to compile a list of the songs I have written for the fic so here it is. Some are unfinished and will probably stay that way. I'm still really proud of them.

I have one last epilogue chapter to post and that will be happening this Friday, Feb 24th. This chapter is the END of Cadence, but I couldn't leave a few precious questions unanswered. I'm not going to say anything else about it, except for the fact that the chapter is not told through Remus' POV.

So that's it for now. Hope this was an ending you can cherish. Thank you for all of the comments, kudos, and messages you've sent over these past two years. I couldn't even come close to replaying all the love you've given me, but please know that I'm thankful for every single one of you.

Until next time x
- mot

Note: 'Arey' is a Hindi word often relating to surprise. Depends on connotation. In Gujarati, 'Jai shri Krishna' (or 'Jaishree Krishna') is a Hindu greeting used to wish someone well. It can be translated as "May Lord Krishna bless you." To any readers who might know better, please let me know if I have misused it or if you have a more correct definition!

Chapter 108: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Raven-haired
Midnight dancer
If I could give you everything
Would you ask for me?

I debated for a long time whether to include this chapter as an epilogue or a b-side, but in the end decided that it was better off here. She was the heart of the story for a long time. And that'll never stop being true.

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes strong references to: attempted sexual assault [not shown], child abuse [including neglect], domestic abuse [not shown], age gaps, under age sex [not shown], drug use/addiction and [minimal] withdrawal, and the mention of bulimia [in a character off-screen].

Please do NOT read if any of this is at all triggering to you. This epilogue is not central to the understanding of Cadence's ending, it's simply for those who fell in love with her the same way Remus did.

(there's probably gonna be mistakes in the French x)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If you see her, say hello,
She might be in Tangier;
She left here last early spring,
Is livin' there, I hear;

Say for me that I'm all right,
Though things get kind of slow;
She might think that I've forgotten her,
Don't tell her it isn't so…

During a particularly nasty wind storm in April of 1956, Cherie Anne Roberts gave birth to a healthy baby girl in a tiny council flat in the north end of Brighton. She was fifteen. She'd only known she was pregnant for eight weeks.

After the baby was born, Cherie's mother agreed they could stay on the condition that—should anyone ever ask, the baby was adopted. She was only a distant cousin, a friend of the family's—there would be no out-of-wedlock babies in her house. No cheap whores here, no sir.

Torn by guilt, Cherie stubbornly refused to give the baby a name. Or maybe she couldn't. With nothing else her mother called the girl "Ruth." Cherie called her "Baby." This went on for two years, until Cherie's mother died of a sudden heart attack and Cherie and Baby were left on their own.

Evicted from their flat and without a roof over their heads, the pair traveled further into the city, where Cherie would end up moving in with a man named Jack Riley. Jack worked construction, building council estates for the poor just like the one they'd been evicted from for being too poor. He also dealt drugs on the side, and would prove a good enough father to Cherie's baby until 1961 when he was put away for involuntary manslaughter after one of his usual deals had gone sideways.

Following Jack's incarceration, Cherie moved in with another man, also named Jack, who pimped her out to help pay the rent. During this time Cherie had fallen down two flights of stairs outside their building and broken her collarbone. A neighbour who had been partaking from a late-night cigarette on his balcony could've sworn she'd been pushed, but Cherie was adamant that she'd tripped. The nurse then told her that she was nine weeks pregnant, and had subsequently miscarried in the fall.

Six months later Cherie was pregnant again. She was excited for this one—more than willing now that Jack II had agreed to marry her and take the child on as his own. But it was not to be. Despite all Cherie's efforts, the baby was born already an angel. A blessing, in hindsight.

Of all Cherie's children, only the first would remain stubborn enough to make it through early childhood. It had taken some time but eventually Cherie had named her Grace, after her mother—though there had not seemed to be much point to that either.

At six years old, Grace had fallen into a bush of stinging nettle outside

their council estate and had to be dragged home by a neighbour when they discovered her hours later, playing in the street while covered head to toe in flaming red welts. The woman had much to say; how could someone let a child get this filthy? Are you even feeding her?

Embarrassed, Cherie stripped her daughter bare in the entryway of their home and spanked her. She called her stubborn—too stupid to cry. Then she washed and fed her.

After the incident with the stinging nettles, everyone inside the estate began to call Baby Grace “Nettles” and Nettles she remained until one day in early spring when the girl that was once a stubborn baby too stupid to cry packed a small suitcase and climbed out the bedroom window, never looking back.

She was two weeks shy of her fifteenth birthday.

In the beginning she’d still gone by Grace. Not after her grandmother, but after Grace Kelly, the beautiful American actress turned princess of Monaco. Ms Kelly had married her prince in April of 1956, the very same month and year Nettles had been born. On April 19th to be exact, but Nettles had been born on the 15th, four days too early. It was her first life-long disappointment.

After becoming Grace again, Nettles moved to Littlehampton, where she started going by the name Tracy, after the glamorous socialite Grace Kelly had played in the 1956 film, *High Society.* There she dreamed up all sorts of stories for herself; how she was born in St Petersburg to a loving mother and father, but had tragically lost both in a plane accident when they were on their way to Tibet for her father's research on Buddhist monks and their choice to undergo monastic silence. She was then taken in by an evil aunt, who only cared for the inheritance and would lock Tracy in the attic every time she spoke or did something out of turn. Some bought it, while others tried calling her bluff—it didn't matter. She was Tracy Lord from *High Society,* and they were little people from Littlehampton.

Littlehampton would end up being 'home' for seven months before she ultimately hopped the rail to Portsmouth, leaving behind both an abusive boyfriend and Tracy Lord. It went like that for a while—new city, new boyfriend, new name. In Southampton it was Amy—*High Noon.* Swindon, Frances—*To Catch a Thief.* Birmingham, Georgie—*The Country Girl.* Eventually Nettles had run out of names and cities. She’d been in and out of London for months. Fucked over and used by more boyfriends than rats in St Pancras station. She needed a change. And

then it hit her.

Paris.

Maybe she couldn't be princess of Monaco, but surely France was the next best thing? Still, she couldn't be Grace in Paris. And she *certainly* couldn't be Nettles. She needed to be someone new.

As it turned out, the name 'Tonya' came to her while she was sleeping in the doorway of some pub in Watford. She'd missed the last train and a drunkard was wailing out for his wife, begging the night streets to help him win her back.

Tonya! Tonya! Tonya! I love you, baby! Tonya, baby, come back to me!

With her new name, Tonya hitchhiked down to the port of Dover, where she spent her final few quid on a one-way ticket to Calais.

Growing up she used to have a tape recording of this woman singing in French. She had no idea what she was saying or what the songs were about, and the tape was bootlegged so it didn't have a name or a cover, but there was a little bit at the very end where the woman said something in her pretty accent. Tonya (then Nettles) used to imagine it was a dedication to some lover—that that was who the entire album was for. She could do that, she told herself, all she needed was the accent.

Walking up to the ticket booth, the girl that was Tonya but used to be Georgie who used to be Frances who used to be Amy who used to be Tracy who used to be Nettles who used to be Grace who used to be Baby, put on what she hoped was the best French accent the guy working the counter had ever heard. She held up the line with her sob story of how she'd lost her passport to a pickpocket in Upper Clapton and did her best to sprinkle in the few French words she knew—*oui, non, bonjour, poufiasse!*

To her luck, the guy bought it. Either it was the end of his shift and he couldn't be arsed to call over a supervisor, or he was just stupid enough to buy the 'poor whimpering French girl' act. He was filling out the form for her ticket when he asked her for her surname and every thought of idiot ticket guys and French love songs flew out of her head.

"Oi, girl. I need your full name."

She looked up, mouth ajar, only to find a realtor's advert pinned to

the nearby noticeboard.

Call Benson and Barlow, everything we touch turns to SOLD!

Barlowe, she told him, with an ‘e’. Because that was sophisticated.

He stamped her ticket without thinking twice.

Paris wasn't so bad, once she'd gotten there, that was. She'd managed to stow away on the back of a dairy truck from Calais to Lille and from there was picked up by a band of French hippies that looked about four years too late for Woodstock. Their weed was shite and the guy she was sitting beside kept pretending to fall asleep on her shoulder so he could sniff her hair, but it beat walking. They arrived on the outskirts of the city that evening and from then on it was *hustle, hustle, hustle.*

Not that she wasn't used to it.

The French are arrogant but they've got big egos. All it took was a few nice words and boom—she had a sofa to sleep on for the night, maybe a shower and something fun to help her not think for a while. That's how she met Alain. He found her passed out on the floor of some strangers' *salle de bains* after one sleeping pill had turned into one too many sleeping pills. When she woke up, the first thing he said to her was;

"You know, that's how Jim Morrison died."

Actually he said it in French, but she was too busy vomiting a mixture of red wine and Vasparex over his shoes to care all that much.

Despite the vomit, Alain took her home. It was a reasonably nice flat in the Charonne Quarter of Paris where she would end up living for the next nine and a half months. It didn't escape her—afterwards—how nine and a half months was just enough time to have a baby. If it weren't for the wannabe bulimic prima-ballerina living one floor above them who preferred to trade her birth control for laxatives, Tonya could've ended up exactly like little fifteen year-old Cherie Roberts, giving birth alone on the floor of her one bedroom flat.

Nah, she had to give Alain more credit than that. He was a drunk with a bit of a mean streak (who wasn't) but more than that, he was an artist. Three nights a week, he and his band would perform down at some fancy jazz club often frequented by celebrities and all the finest the City of Love had to offer. Some nights Tonya would stay behind,

smoking skinny cigarettes while flipping through French magazines (she still enjoyed the pictures) and listening her way through Alain's massive collection of American jazz and rock and roll. He had everything, and was very knowledgeable about it too. Plus he never made Tonya feel like an idiot for not knowing the name of *this* album or *that* guitarist. Sometimes Alain would act irritated by her inability understand him in French, but he knew enough English for the both of them, and often Tonya would get the feeling that Alain liked knowing she depended on him for more than just drugs and a roof.

On the nights Alain agreed to bring her down to the club for his gigs, Tonya would sit at the bar and order three dirty martinis with two olives each. No one in Paris drank a martini that wasn't just sweet vermouth over ice, but eventually she got good at convincing the bartenders to make her little American cocktails and let her live her little Parisian dreams while her boyfriend stood on stage and sang about fucking other women in a language she did not understand.

She was painting her toenails by candlelight one evening (between Alain's drinking and her candy habit they sometimes didn't have enough money to pay the electrical) when Alain asked;

"Hey, Tonya, how old are you again?"

Eighteen.

"... *Hein*."

She asked how old he was.

"Twenty-eight."

Huh.

She'd lied of course. She wouldn't be eighteen for another fourteen months.

Tonya would eventually leave Alain the same way she'd left home; pack a bag, slip out the fire escape window, never look back. Just like back then there wasn't any singular trigger—no big fight or bruise to nurse while lamenting over what to do next. She simply woke up one day and decided that was that. The course was run. Time to move on. She wasn't sure when Switzerland had become the goal. It probably had something to do with it being the closest. Plus the country's reputation of neutrality didn't hurt.

Can't tag me, I'm Switzerland!

Tonya realised her mistake too late when the guy at the border turned her away for not having a French passport. He might've had her arrested as an illegal had she not welled up with tears, claiming to have left it at home. Up until that point, Tonya hadn't considered just how much she'd come to rely on Alain's satisfactory English-speaking skills, and so with nothing else to do she turned around and hopped the first train back to Paris with her tail between her legs.

Never look back, my arse.

She told herself that Alain would believe a story of her getting lost on the subway and spending a few nights at a friend's. (Anyone could be a friend—that bush over there could be a friend.) She even considered telling him she'd been kidnapped but had escaped after kicking her captor in the balls when he attempted to lift her out of the trunk of his car; only, she never made it as far as Paris. Halfway through her train journey the ticket inspector sorted out that she had not exactly paid the fare for entry, and Tonya "Barlowe with an e" was unceremoniously ejected from the train at the nearest station.

She slept on the station bench, and woke up to a woman nudging her shoulder. She was not high this time, and this woman was not some long-haired singer-songwriter with a Jim Morrison fetish. This woman was a nun—a French one, complete with the white collar and black veil and everything.

"Est-ce que ça va, mon enfant?"

Tonya struggled to recall any French she'd picked up from Alain. In the end she managed to tell her that she was cold and hungry and had nowhere to go. The nun said something else in a soft voice, and just like that three more of them appeared. They had a car and they were willing to take her with them. Tonya couldn't fathom a reason to decline.

The nuns belonged to a small convent just outside of Provins, France. They were almost entirely self-sufficient, growing most of their own food and even running a small winery off of the grapes they grew on one half of the church's land. They sold the wine to local restaurants in nearby towns and villages, and even had their own pop-up stalls at a local market. That was what they were doing when they found her; she'd been saved, and all because of a few bottles of Cabernet.

The one who'd found her was called Sister Hélène. She was well-

educated, supposedly the only daughter of a good family before she joined the church, and—as it turned out—was quite fluent in English as well. She listened to Tonya's confession—the drugs, the drinking, the men she'd said no to, the men she'd said yes to, her hatred toward her mother for always failing to protect her, her hatred toward the world for failing to protect little Cherie Roberts as well. And afterwards, when Tonya had cried so hard she felt like throwing up, Sister Hélène held her and told her she could stay.

It wasn't easy. The nuns got up early seven days a week and they were only allowed one glass of wine at suppertime. The only man who frequented the convent often enough to be called a regular was an old farmer by the name of Monsieur René who brought them beef and pork in exchange for fresh eggs and a share of the nuns' successful potato crops. Even if Monsieur René was twenty years younger and looking for a quick shag, he didn't speak a word of English. Nor did most of the other sisters.

By her third week at the convent, Sister Hélène decided that all communication in English had come to an abrupt end. It frustrated Tonya, who already struggled to communicate in her own language and was about ready to strangle someone for a fucking cigarette. Sister Hélène squawked sharply at her every time she asked for something in English, reminding Tonya of the chittering jay birds that lived in the beech trees that lined the churchyard, but eventually her French did get better. And the more she spoke, the more her world opened up.

She was not the only woman at the convent who had yet to take any vows. Others dropped in unannounced looking for refuge or a warm bed and meal for a night or two. There were mothers, daughters, friends, and strangers. None stayed as long as Tonya, but all were just as grateful. It was a wayward home. Tonya wondered when exactly it was that she'd started to refer to it as such.

Now it was summer, almost half a year since she'd arrived at the convent strung-out and hopeless. The air was sweet and her hair was shorn short to the scalp, making her neck appear even longer than normal. On the days when they were feeling playful, the sisters called her pet names like 'Mademoiselle Hepburn' and 'Jean Seberg'. When they were scolding her, they called her ‘odd girl’, and ‘mon cher cœur’. When it rained they did chores, and on the days the sun shone they chased each other and took turns playing rounds of croquet on the lawn. They frolicked like they were little girls again, and at night they showed her all of their girlish secrets. A photo of a past lover, a

scrap of fabric from their mother's wedding veil, even—under sworn secrecy—a few Camel cigarettes to hold beneath the nose and enjoy on a blue moon.

She never knew what had made them like her so much, they always refused to say. But they'd welcomed her like a stray cat with unwavering devotion, and no matter what she did she would never have earned it. The girls adored her stories, especially the ones she made up, and she had never enjoyed eating apricots in the garden as well as when she was with them.

Perhaps there was something to be said for mothers and sisters after all.

On her fifth month of nun-ified respite, the boy came. He was nineteen—Monsieur René's son, sent on an errand for his father who'd fallen in the field while checking on a newborn calf and had unfortunately injured his back. The boy's name was Françoys, and he was *beautiful*. By their second meeting they were sneaking off behind the tiny barn to snog each other in between bales of hay. Of course they were discovered, and Françoys was promptly run off property by the offended sister as though she'd just caught Tonya breaking her vows to God.

She'd never agreed to be a nun, she howled. She'd made no vows of chastity. And so in a fit of embarrassed rage, she shoved her few meager belongings into the same rucksack she'd arrived with and announced her leave. Sister Hélène watched with no small amount of disappointment, flitting back and forth like the jays.

"*Arrête*! Sister Mary Celeste was merely shocked to find you in such a state. There is no need to run off."

'A state'? She was only kissing a boy. At least this one was finally her age.

Hélène sighed and set both hands on her shoulders. "*Ma chere, calme-toi*. You will explain yourself to Sister Mary Celeste, and all will be as it was."

She pushed the sister's hands away. No—

I think it's time I go.

It was always gonna happen eventually.

Forgive me.

And so she left; back to Paris where she sought out Alain. She only made it as far as the corner street adjacent to his flat before turning around. After that she wandered, considering what her new name would be. But she liked Tonya. People cried out at night for Tonya—missed her and marked the days until she would return to them. No, Tonya wasn't finished, although she did change her surname; 'Belova' after some Russian glamour model she saw on a paper advert for Paris's red light district.

The winter was rough. People tended to be more stingy with their sofas and showers when it cost that much more to heat them. The Summer of Love was over, and Alain had a new girlfriend anyway—an American. No way she was older than sixteen, she looked like a fucking baby doll version of Twiggy. Seeing her should've made Tonya want to claw Alain's eyes out, but all she felt was a familiar seed of self-loathing. She was almost nineteen now—too old to ask for a stranger's pity without expecting to give something in return. Alain was gone, and whatever bridge that had led her to the nuns was now burned. Her fault.

She'd run out of love in Paris, and so with nothing left, she hitchhiked back to Calais and bought a one-way ticket home.

Walking up that familiar path, she wasn't even sure what she'd find. Most of the street had been bulldozed to make way for gentrified city flats and a public rec centre. But she found it. And she found her, sitting outside the front steps of the council flat, smoking the same brand of cigarettes she'd smoked when Tonya had left.

Hey, Mum.

Cherie Roberts had gotten old. She had lines on her face where lines ought not to be, and her body was sunken in so much it looked like her collarbones might punch right through her skin like paper. Tonya wondered if she'd look like that one day; a washed up beauty queen with overgrown roots and dull gold band on a single narrow finger.

"What are you doing here?" She asked, arching a thin brow.

It was obvious wasn't it?

She'd come home.

"Home, huh?" Cherie inhaled her Kim Slimsize cigarette, smoke

gliding straight up her nose. Finally she stood up from the steps.

"If you're staying, you're gonna work for it. You ain't just gonna have the run 'a the house no more, you'll have to pay your own way. You hear me, Grace?"

Actually her name was Tonya now.

If Cherie had heard her, she made no indication of it.

The flat was the same. Small, with fading yellow wallpaper and a crack in the bathroom window that turned any condensation to ice in the wintertime. The first thing Tonya had noticed was that in the four and a half years she'd been gone, Cherie had been blessed with another child. Rebecca, a cute little girl with a button nose and curly brown ringlets, spent most of her time in front of the television set, playing with off-brand Barbie dolls and rubbing her snot into the shag carpet. Cherie worked the front desk at a local nursing home and was sometimes called in to do double shifts when they were short nurses. On these days she often left the toddler locked behind a baby gate in the living room, occasionally coming home on her breaks but only if she got one that day.

It wasn't so bad at first. Cherie refused to call her Tonya, but had agreed to let her stay on the condition that she watched over her sister during the day. Rebecca had Tonya's old room now, and with her return the two had started sharing a bed, meaning that Tonya was the one who woke up when Becky started fitting from a nightmare. She would sit and rock her until she stopped crying, feeling the snot seep into the thin fabric of her t-shirt.

Shhh, baby, shhhh. It's alright.

It felt nice to know that someone was calling out for her again.

"I'm pulling a double today so you're gonna have Becky until eleven," Cherie called. Standing in front of the stove, she scooped out the eggs just before they could burn and left the steaming plate on the table while she ashed her cigarette in a leftover coffee mug from the day before. Rebecca immediately reached for the eggs but Tonya distracted her with little bits of toast, wiping her small face with a flannel before any peanut butter could get up her nose.

"Grace? Gracie, you hear me?"

My name is Tonya.

Cherie stuck a second cigarette between her lips. "You gotta watch her today."

But the off-license down the road was hiring. She was going to see if they'd give her an interview.

"As in *today*? What the fuck—no. I need you to watch Becky, I only took this shift because I knew you'd be here."

There was always Dom. Why not him?

"It ain't Dom's fucking responsibility, it's your responsibility." Cherie lit the cigarette, slapping the lighter down on the kitchen counter as she gestured sharply at the two girls with her long nails. "We agreed when I let you come back here—you watch your sister. Ain't Dom's problem... you hear?"

Yeah. She heard.

"Good. And for Christ's sake, eat something. You're too fucking skinny."

"I think she looks great," said Dom, as he came striding into the tiny kitchen with his boots on. "Not as great as her mother 'a course... Good mornin', darlin'."

"Hi, baby."

They kissed, in which Dom held her mother against the counter top and Tonya did her best to get Rebecca to eat a piece of sliced apple. Cherie had to practically beat him off—giggling like a school girl all the while—and as she rushed off to get ready for her shift, Dom smacked her ass and took a seat at the breakfast table.

"And how are the rest of my girls, huh?"

Dom tugged his plate of eggs toward himself. He pat Rebecca on the head, but the baby girl didn't react. She never did. Hardly even spoke. Not around anyone but Tonya anyway.

Giving up on getting the four year-old to eat, Tonya wiped her hands and stood up from the table. She asked Dom to watch Becky while she showered.

" 'Course, princess. You go on. Oh and—" He took her by the arm, shoving several rumpled notes into her palm. "Buy yourself something

nice today, eh? On ol' Dom."

She thought of Rebecca when he smacked her ass, and did not react.

The situation was always bound to break down eventually. Dom was straighter than any guy Cherie had ever been with (as in—he'd never been arrested or charged) and even ran his own garage on the south side of town. He wasn't Rebecca's dad but he put food on the table. And he had friends. Resourceful friends. Cherie's drug of choice had always been the drink, but when Tonya asked him to get her some painkillers Dom had come back with a hundred milligrams worth of hydrocodone. She asked him what he wanted for them, but Dom only smiled and kissed her hair. Anything for one of his girls, right?

But all generosity had its limits.

That night he'd been drinking, but Tonya knew enough to notice the signs. Men like Dom were cowards. Confront them with their own failings and they'll crumble like a stale dog turd on the pavement. When Dom came into the bedroom she shared with Rebecca, Tonya screamed and screamed—threw shit and cursed him bloody. He was already running when she picked up the baseball bat Cherie kept near the front door for the local boys who sometimes came looking for a window or two to smash. She didn't care which neighbours poked their heads out to see; Tonya slammed that bat into the headlights of Don's crappy 1971 Ford Pinto and meant it.

"Crazy bitch! You crazy bitch! You're gonna regret this!"

Go! Get out of here!

Rebecca cried for hours afterwards, but at least Dom was gone. And when Cherie got off her double shift later that night, Tonya came out into the living room fully prepared to tell her everything that bastard had tried to do.

Only... she hadn't expected Dom to drive out to Cherie's work to humiliate her by wailing on about her psycho daughter and subsequently dump her in the middle of the parking lot.

"You little whore! You came onto my man—I did everything for you, I sacrificed my body for you! Let you grow in me like a tumor—you whore! You whore! *You whore!"*

There was no staying after that. Even if Cherie could see sense, there was no way she'd ever go back. Maybe she should've taken Rebecca

with her... But how could she? Tonya wasn't her mum, she could barely take care of herself. She just hoped Rebecca could forgive her someday.

Things got better when she met Tomny.

Of course she never took him seriously. He was just some goofy kid—younger than her by almost seven months and therefore completely unfuckable. But she had to hand it to him, he was...

Charming.

No, that's a lie. He was more than charming. She liked him from the very first moment they met. In another life she probably would've married him.

Sorry.

* * *

Late June 1979

If there was one thing she'd learned, it was that train stations were the same everywhere. London, Paris—no matter the day, now matter how pretty the architecture, all of them still smelt a bit like piss. It was one of life's greatest ironies; you could build a beautiful thing, fill it with all sorts of great promises, and yet even beauty had to yield to the ineffable flick of the cigarette.

It took seven months to sort out her passport. One thing they don't tell you about being born: you need a piece of paper to confirm that you were, in fact, *born*. Conceived—birthed—shagged into existence. According to this silly little thing called the law, it's not enough to just appear somewhere and say 'hey, I'm alive'. It's enough to die though. You die—someone finds the body—and they write the proper documents right up. How's that make any sense?

In the time it took for the British Consulate of Paris to sort out that she was not a Russian spy (shot herself in the foot choosing a name like 'Tonya Belova', honestly) and instead just a silly girl who'd gotten good at finessing the ticket attendants at her local Port of Dover,

Tonya could've *almost* had another baby. She didn't, of course, which was a good thing considering she spent half that time coming down from her worst withdrawal yet.

Eighteen months she'd spent loving Tomny, and there was not a single day she regretted. She was drowning in herself, and Tomny was the lifebuoy keeping her afloat. But Tomny couldn't be the one holding them up for air *all* the time. Tomny needed a buoy too. And Tonya was a sinking stone.

She needed to learn how to float.

'If you get close to her... —iss her once for meee. Always re... —spected her, for doin' what she did 'n... gettin' free—'

"Ugh, damn thing!"

Bang! Bang!

"*Vas-y, encore une fois. Peut-être que la radio s'excusera*."

She huffed, looking up. "You need a new radio, Sister. This one's a piece of crap."

Sister Hélène smiled, and Tonya slowly set the broken radio aside.

"Have you gathered all your things?"

"*Oui*."

"And you have your ticket?"

"I'll buy it at the station."

The sister nodded. "I have this for you. Sister Marianne picked it up in town. It's in English. Just something for you to read on your journey."

She passed her the magazine, and then cupped her face. She cried—she couldn't help it. They'd taken care of her a second time—*une étrangère,* their odd girl. Their little runaway.

"S'il vous plaît écrivez-nous, ma chère."

Please write.

“Que Dieu veille sur toi.”

May God watch over you.

Until that moment, a small part of her had wondered if she might stay with those sisters forever. But she had never been so close to God, and she had plans now. She wanted to see all the places she'd lied about. Find 'home' again, and again. Maybe she still didn't know how to float, but she knew one thing; if you've never gotten to spend a summer living at a nunnery in the French countryside, sipping hand-pressed wine and eating apricots under the shade of the fruit trees, then you really haven't lived at all.

Standing in line ahead of the ticket booth, she began flipping through her English magazine. She read the names of all the rock stars Alain had told her about, and the ones she'd come to know on her own. She ogled their photographs, compared stops on their tours, wondering if she could catch a show or two—and it was there, in that little French train station, that she saw it.

It was the photo that caught her eye. She'd never have missed that brooding face anywhere. He was handsome now. Almost a man. He’d probably insist he already was, but that was just the stubborn in him. Oh, how she missed it.

THE CIVIL-MOUTHED YOBS!

THE ROUNDHOUSE, LONDON – “ROCK IS DEAD in Britain”, says Gaz Spectre, Head of Spectre Records and producer for the potential new rock band, MARAUDERS (pictured below), as he stands in the back of the famed venue watching his newest gamble bear it all to a crowd that didn’t know whether they wanted to be punk or rock. The new band, comprised of four members each hailing from London-town, have been slotted into an all-American tour where they’re to support LA-based heavy metal group Saints of the Grave on their third Headlining tour. Without so much as a debut release, Marauders come on the scene as virtual unknowns—a gamble Spectre says he and his company are willing to take.

With Marauders in tow, Saints of the Grave are set to kick off their all-American tour at the Rock Island nightclub in Detroit, MI starting SATURDAY JUNE 20TH. We expect the Marauders to have us all by the balls by the time they reach Hollywood in late September, and according to lead singer Sirius Black, they aren’t letting go until we can sing the words back to them twice as well.

ALSO in your PAGE 24 NME: U2 tease new release with CBS Ireland.

Oh Remus.

Look at you. You're all grown up.

My sweet, sweet love.

“Bonsoir, Madame. Comment puis-je vous aider?”

She looked up, surprised to find that she’d reached the front of the ticket line so quickly.

“Uh... *Un billet,*” she told the man behind the counter, quickly tucking the magazine away. She smiled; "*S’il vous plaît.*"

“Bien sûr. Et où irez-vous ce soir?”

Where will you go?

She thought. *Anywhere. Anywhere.* It made her playful again.

“Ce soir? Mmm… Zurich. Demain? … Qui sait.”

“Je vois…” The attendant raised a brow at her. “You are American, yes?”

“Dieu non. Is my accent really that bad?”

“Non, c’est très joli,” he chuckled. Friendly for Paris. “Where are you from, madam?”

She shrugged, flicking lazily through her handbag.

Brighton. A tiny council flat. My mother’s c—

“St Petersburg originally, then nowhere. Then London, and then nowhere again. Most recently, a tiny convent *en Provins*.”

He eyed her clothing; the white t-shirt that lacked a brasserie, the jeans that hung low on her waist. Lips that had touched many, and surely would touch many more.

“You are a—eh… a nun?”

“If you say so, monsieur.”

She handed him Grace Roberts' passport.

"One ticket to Zurich, please. I'm meeting someone."

Can't tag me!

I'm Switzerland.

“Everything seems to be in order, Mademoiselle,” said the attendant, as he stamped the dead girl’s passport. “If you do not mind my asking, who is it you are meeting? Your husband?”

“Husband? Oh, no.” She took the passport and the ticket, and tucked both back into her tiny handbag. “Actually I'm looking for someone.”

“Who?"

“I'm not sure." She smiled. “But won’t it be so wonderful to find out.”

END OF PART ONE

Chapter End Notes

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Completed: Feb 24th 2023.
Do not post to Wattpad or any other site. This includes Goodreads and the like.

Works inspired by this one

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